

GENDER STRUGGLES

Practical
Approaches to
Contemporary
Feminism

CONSTANCE L. MUI
JULIEN S. MURPHY

Kathryn Pyne Addelson • Sandra Lee Bartky • Susan Bordo • Rosi Braidotti
Jan J. Brison • Judith Butler • Drucilla Cornell • Deirdre E. Davis • Nancy Fraser
Evelynn M. Hammonds • Nancy J. Hirschmann • Eva Feder Kittay
Sharon Marcus • Marsha Marotta • Iris Marion Young • Linda M. G. Zerilli

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Edited by
Constance L. Mui and
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Gender Struggles

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Introduction

Constance L. Mui and Julien S. Murphy

With the turn of the millennium, feminist philosophy enters its third decade. Our thinking about gender struggles has evolved within the larger context of a crisis in philosophy that has developed since the 1980s. It is a crisis that centered on the debate over the end of philosophy, a debate that echoed speculations in the scientific community about whether an end of science, or at least of scientific discovery, is near. Specifically, critics have challenged the nature, role, assumptions, and disciplinary boundaries of philosophy, and questioned whether philosophy can continue to hold itself up as a mirror of nature and arbiter of truth. Has philosophy, which, from Aristotle to Husserl, has been hailed as “The Science,” “the science of all sciences,” and “the all-encompassing science,” come to an end because the search for absolute, objective truth is no longer thought to be possible? Does philosophy then amount to a special genre of literature at best? At the forefront of this debate is Richard Rorty, who sets out to dethrone philosophy by piercing the myth of the philosopher king. Putting philosophy in what he takes to be its proper place, Rorty characterizes it as nothing more than a style of writing or storytelling. This view has quickly attracted a following both inside and outside of philosophy, including many feminist theorists who see philosophy’s heavy reliance on hard-core, analytical reasoning as a form of exclusion. As French feminist Michelle LeDoeuff proclaims, the hegemony that institutional philosophy has enjoyed over the ages is no more!

To be sure, postmodernism has played a major role in this crisis. By postmodernism, we have in mind the collective strategies of influential thinkers whose works have defined the prevailing paradigm of the past two decades.

Besides Rorty, these thinkers include such prominent French figures as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, along with the new French feminists Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva. Like Freudianism or Marxism before it, postmodernism (including poststructuralism) has become the dominant theoretical construct against which other philosophical positions are assessed and critiqued. These days, regardless of where they stand on the "end of philosophy" debate, and whether they accept or reject the main tenets of postmodernism, most philosophers would concede that Western philosophy on the whole has actually benefited from the postmodernists' relentless and often devastating attacks. If nothing else, such criticisms compel philosophers to take up the long-overdue task of questioning and rethinking the most basic philosophical assumptions about truth and objectivity, about knowledge and reality. Furthermore, feminists, including even those who do not identify themselves as postmodernist, have found postmodern critique especially useful in affirming their experience of Western philosophy as the philosophy of privileged European white males.

Even in the midst of a crisis over the past two decades, or perhaps precisely because of it, philosophy has undergone many positive developments due in large part to postmodern challenge and influence. Its disciplinary boundaries have become less rigid as the canon has been opened up substantially to include the voices of women as well as non-Western, non-European thinkers. In this spirit of openness, the feminist call for interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism is generally perceived not as a threat but as a valuable asset to philosophy. With the process of questioning and rethinking the entire philosophical enterprise come new ways of critiquing traditional assumptions and new models of understanding. All told, what we have been witnessing, as we stand at the threshold of a new millennium, is the radical reexamination, reconceptualization, and recontextualization of many important philosophical categories that form our basic frame of reference. Of these categories, gender, power, and speech most prominently stand out as central themes that have engaged the imagination of many feminist theorists. In these chapters, we offer an examination of the interplay among these categories, reconceptualized and recast in the more recent feminist philosophical writings since the 1990s, in an attempt to assess their new significance for our understanding of many concrete issues related to gender struggles. In this way, our book is set apart from other feminist anthologies, particularly those that provide general historical surveys of feminist philosophy, or represent a broad selection of essays spanning three or more decades, or adopt the usual political categories of liberal, socialist, radical, and the like as an organizing principle. But there is one other mark of distinction we hope to have achieved, and that is the reintroduction of an emphasis on practical feminist issues amid the rich, dis-

cursive framework of contemporary feminist theory. These are issues that resonate immediately with all those who are immersed in the matters of daily life.

“PRACTICAL” FEMINISM AND FEMINIST THEORY

Postmodernism, like the long tradition of philosophy before it, tends to place its emphasis on theory. In its attempt to pull us out of our modernist theoretical frame of reference to challenge modernist assumptions, postmodernists stretch the elasticity of language to scrutinize the nature of language itself. In so doing, they compel us, sometimes unwittingly, to think about the limits of theory and the future of philosophy. Such musings are valuable in themselves, as they may continue to play a significant role in shaping the course of philosophy for some time to come. But what is less known about contemporary feminist theory and postmodernism is that they have also left their mark on how we think about practical matters, such as the old and new forms of gender struggles that many women confront in their daily lives.

To bring out this point, we have put together this volume to address some relevant questions: What is practical feminism in a postmodern world? How has our thinking about practical gender struggles been shaped by the larger context of a crisis in philosophy? How does rethinking old categories affect the way we understand practical issues that we confront daily? What new forms of freedom, autonomy, subjectivity, social welfare, motherhood, public and private space, and political resistance have emerged from that? Together, the chapters in this volume represent many different voices of feminists who boldly take up familiar, everyday concerns from many unorthodox vantage points within new conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The authors take up practical issues, such as those associated with our choice, our work, our home, our bodies, our family, our identity, and our speech, and invite us to think about them differently, in new paradigms that break with tradition.

Indeed, when we speak of practical ethics or practical feminism or even practical matters, we should put quotation marks around the word “practical” to call attention to the ways in which it has become problematized by postmodernists. By “practical feminism,” we do not mean to invoke any artificial dualism between theory and practice—that is, between thinking and doing, between the abstract and the concrete, between what’s speculative and what’s relevant, and so on. The danger of any dualism of this kind is that it misleads us into thinking that “theory” and “practice” can be divided neatly into two separate, independent, self-contained realms of “reality.” But can they really be so divided? Like the postmodernists, we suspect that rigidifying such a

split could only limit and distort our understanding of the world around us. As we have often pointed out to our students, even a committed dualist like Plato had declared at the start of philosophy that daily practices are thoroughly imbued with theoretical assumptions, just as tables and chairs participate in formal structures. And yet, in the scholarship we have surveyed, we find that the mechanical split between “theory” and “practice” can be subtly and inadvertently reinforced by feminist philosophy that is not directly tethered to the concerns of everyday life. With this in mind, one of our main focuses in this volume is to emphasize the inherent connection and reciprocity between “theory” and “practice.” Our objective is to show how feminist rethinking or “re-visioning,” to borrow Linda Williams’s term, of traditional theories about power, language, rights, gender, the self, the body, and so on, is invariably translated into positions and actions we take in our everyday struggles against violence, harassment, inequality, and restrictions on freedom. At the same time, our personal engagement in gender struggles also gives us unique perspectives from which to reconceptualize our own reality. In bringing to light these recent writings on gender struggles, we strive for a more complete picture of the contributions of contemporary feminist philosophy, one that provides a more comprehensive assessment of both the influences of postmodernism itself and what it has to offer in the way of “practical” ethics.

In rejecting an artificial dualism of theory and practice, we also reject any assumption of relevance that privileges the practical over the theoretical. Under such an assumption, practical matters concerning, say, our work, our choices, or our interpersonal relationships are considered to be more relevant and important because they are regarded as the products of direct experience rather than theoretical speculation. But just as the historian Joan Scott has used postmodernism to challenge our notions of direct experience, so too must we scrutinize critically traditional notions of relevance that place experience over thought. In as much as the chapters in this volume demonstrate the two to be fundamentally and inextricably intertwined, any attempt to privilege one over the other is misguided.

Finally, when we speak of practical feminism in a postmodern world, we do not mean to imply that postmodernism is prevalent in every corner of the world, or that it is the only viable theory that is shaping contemporary feminist writings. However, like many of our contemporaries, we believe that postmodern thought at once emerges out of and reflects major changes surrounding postindustrialization and increasing globalization, changes that have left a considerable impact on existing gender struggles. While we do not yet know which direction postmodernism will take from here on, we can at least pause at this juncture and assess the initial transformations it has sparked for feminist philosophy. With this in mind, the chapters chosen for

this volume revolve around four prevailing themes in recent feminist writings on gender struggles: reconceptualizing basic feminist categories, deconstructing women's and men's work, examining the language of gender violence, and carving out new, strategic spaces of resistance. While not all of our authors would label themselves as postmodern, each in her own way invites us to think about gender struggles in a new sphere, beyond the boundaries set by conventional categories and paradigms. Thus our volume represents an overall feminist re-visioning of a wide range of issues in gender struggles, from the more familiar ones that, for the past thirty years, have been the mainstay of feminist scholarship, such as motherhood, beauty, and sexual violence, to new topics inspired by postindustrialization and multiculturalism, such as the welfare state, cyberspace, hate speech, and queer politics, and finally to topics that traditionally have not been seen as appropriate subjects for philosophizing, such as adoption, care work, and the home.

RECONCEPTUALIZING FEMINIST CATEGORIES

Feminists have assessed women's historical exclusion from the public sphere as a problem of self-representation. According to them, since the devaluation of everything labeled as feminine, and thus the relegation of women to the second sex, are part of the patriarchal construction of 'woman,' it is up to women themselves to reconstruct that reality. Thus, a common thread that runs through contemporary feminist philosophy is the need for women to reconstruct their own reality. Now to reconstruct their own reality is to challenge the restrictive parameters of choice as well as the warped perceptions of women's worth based on the existing ideology of femininity, which is an important first step toward making practical changes in women's lives.

But since reality is, for the postmodernist, never a given but is always and necessarily constructed, women's struggle to reconstruct their own reality must be carried out on the basis of their specific situation, culture, and history. Because situations, cultures, and histories can and often do vary from individual to individual, there is not a single "women's reality" that would represent all women. Indeed, there is no 'woman' as a natural or universal category, no 'subjectivity' as a sovereign, unified consciousness. Each woman can reconstruct her own reality only from her own unique perspective and on the basis of her individual, concrete experience. Maintaining that women do not make up one voice but many different voices (hence the value of personal narratives), feminist theory in the last decade frequently employs the term 'feminisms.' Its antifoundationalist assumptions about reality have fostered an atmosphere of openness to diverse views and experiences, with-

out rendering any experience to be more valid than the others. It should be stressed that, even though the postmodernist position on 'woman' as social construction is by no means original (Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir, for example, have made similar antiessentialist claims, from the perspectives of liberalism and existentialism, respectively), it is postmodern feminists who insist that such concepts as 'woman' and 'women' are by no means monolithic. Indeed, after the 1990s, we now use those terms quite critically and cautiously as we understand social construction in terms of traditional hierarchies and historical exclusions.

Observing such problems surrounding the very concept of woman, we begin with two chapters that are devoted specifically to the reconceptualization of two central, basic feminist categories: namely, gender and autonomy. In chapter 1, Linda M. G. Zerilli takes up the question of whether feminist praxis is possible in view of the postmodernist rejection of 'women' as a viable philosophical category. She begins by asking whether it is possible to engage in feminist political activism without first positing a subject, and whether that can be done without exclusion. Don't we have to lay down foundations about knowing who "we" are and what "we" want before acting politically to improve women's lives? To assess this problem Zerilli examines the conventional foundationalist categories of 'women' and 'men.' From early childhood we have acquired what Monique Wittig calls the "straight mind": a basic mind-set of sexual dimorphism that has a powerful hold on our subjectivity and our actions. Zerilli argues that the feminist project is not to refute or to reconstruct this pervasive "straight mind" via philosophical arguments. It is, as Irigaray insists, to establish another "syntax" altogether, one that seeks to create a new "space" beyond our familiar world-picture in which we can apply our imagination and our actions "to see differently what is there all along." Zerilli believes it is only in such a space that we can make political claims about "what women want" without adhering to some foundationalist, straight-mind notion of 'women.' In this new syntax, 'women' is not a fixed category, but its meaning for each person in each context would be "a matter of who speaks (when and where) and to whom."

A second challenge to gender struggles in daily life has to do with how we conceptualize autonomy in the context of patriarchy. All too often feminist efforts to improve women's lives are stymied by a simplistic appeal to individual choice, which basically holds that certain practices, no matter how sexist feminists find them, are acceptable so long as women themselves have chosen to accept them. The notion of choice is thus understood categorically as an absolute. In chapter 2, Nancy J. Hirschmann employs the social constructivist model to examine the complexity of women's personal choices. According to this model, human beings are socially constructed. In patriar-

chy, this means male domination is and has been an important part of that construction. Men have created external barriers to women's freedom by setting up restrictive laws, customs, and social rules. This social reality, to the extent that it has been instrumental in shaping women's self-definition, preferences, and desires, in turn becomes part of women's psyche, creating an internal barrier, as it were, to women's freedom. Hirschmann thus observes that "men create an entire cultural context that makes women seem to choose what they in fact are restricted to." To understand the complexity of women's freedom, one needs to see the reciprocity between external factors and inner feelings that form the overall context in which women choose.

One problem with the social constructivist model is whether it is possible for feminists, who are themselves products of patriarchal constructions, to conceptualize alternatives to the existing reality, to talk about "women's freedom," or even "women," outside of patriarchal language and knowledge. Hirschmann finds a way out of this dilemma by adopting a poststructuralist understanding of language and knowledge. For the poststructuralist, every discourse, including patriarchy, has aporia within which exist alternative discourses and counterdiscourses. Like Zerilli, Hirschmann recognizes the need to create a new context that will enable women first to generate from patriarchal language and epistemology a set of countermeanings, and then to form a critical perspective on patriarchy on the basis of such countermeanings. Hence, the emphasis on language and discourse is important not only in post-modern theory but in all contemporary writings that address gender struggles.

DECONSTRUCTING WORK

Besides the category 'woman' and the concept of autonomy, recent feminist philosophers have also taken up the task of reconfiguring notions of social welfare in relation to women's paid and unpaid labor. This has involved deconstructing the sexual division of labor in light of the changing structures of the family. For the most part, women's unpaid work includes primarily the work of dependent care for children, ill or disabled relatives, and the elderly. Hence, deconstructing work invariably involves reconceptualizing notions of dependency and dependent care that underlie much of women's unpaid labor. In the next two chapters, Nancy Fraser and Eva Feder Kittay offer provocative analyses of women's work. Fraser looks at wage labor in relation to new models of social welfare that reflect important changes in society. Kittay examines the often neglected area of dependency that arises in caring for severely disabled children. Both authors raise the possibility of a viable feminist con-

ception of social welfare and the notions of interdependency that such a conception might require.

In chapter 3, Nancy Fraser uses an imaginative approach to analyze the economic implications of the collapse of the family wage in Western societies. The family wage was a model that grew out of the industrial nuclear family structure in which the husband-father was the primary wage earner whose earnings were expected to buy the subsistence of the entire family. Historically, this justified the inequity in earnings between male and female workers in the marketplace. But in recent decades we have seen significant changes both in the family and in the workforce: women are increasingly single heads of households occupying a wide variety of positions in a labor market that has become more technological and diversified than ever. All these changes demand a new model for wage labor. Observing the value of feminist theory in envisioning a truly egalitarian view of social welfare, Fraser explores various possibilities for wage labor in postindustrial capitalism.

In a typically postmodern move, Fraser stretches the meaning of wage labor to include psychological, social, political, and historical factors, making it apparent that gender equity involves much more than simply the struggle for fair wages. In keeping with this elaborate notion of gender equity, Fraser maintains that any new model we construct would have to take into account at least seven normative principles: antipoverty, antiexploitation, income equality, leisure time equality, equality of respect, antimarginalization, and antiandrocentrism. Furthermore, and again in a postmodern vein, Fraser cautions against the wholesale application of any of these principles to 'women' as a homogeneous group, and proposes a nonpatriarchal, feminist model of work, one that transcends the boundaries set by preconceived notions of men's (paid) work and women's (unpaid) work.

In addition to challenging the sexual dichotomy between wage and unpaid labor, many contemporary feminist theorists discern that deconstructing work also requires reexamining marginalized forms of labor that are often not recognized as labor insofar as they are uncompensated in the labor market. Indeed, no other form of work requires feminist revisioning as much as the traditional work of parental caregiving. This all-consuming role, with its endless tasks and responsibilities, is made all the more difficult in cases involving children with disabilities. In chapter 4, Eva Feder Kittay gives us a personal narrative on a subject that feminists rarely touch upon: parenting a child with severe mental and physical disabilities. Kittay describes the experience of raising her daughter Sesha for nearly thirty years, revealing the daily hardship of meeting her needs and attending to her many medical problems, as well as the considerable cost of her care and the limitations placed on the family's mobility. But on the positive side, Kittay also writes about the tremendous

joy and reward in raising a child who has a boundless capacity for love and happiness. Sesha's affectionate and trusting ways have made it easy for her caregivers to form strong and lasting bonds with her. Mothering Sesha has made Kittay more acutely aware of two issues. First, her choice to raise Sesha in a loving home environment rather than in an institution reflects her class privilege, which she calls her "moral luck." Second, raising children with special needs requires parents to carry out the task of "distributed mothering" with reliable, long-term careworkers who could share in the intimacy of bonding with and caring for them.

To be sure, Kittay makes the same point that Fraser makes in arguing that society has a communal responsibility in raising children. Both philosophers reconfigure social welfare in such a way that broadens the conventional meaning of parenthood. Although Kittay does not, strictly speaking, fit the label of a postmodernist, her piece is especially effective in demonstrating why postmodern feminists have found narratives valuable. The use of the subjective voice that is inherent in a narrative allows Kittay to create her own space, away from "objective reason," in which to philosophize about a profoundly personal issue. Also evident in Kittay's narrative is the power of speech: constructing an open, critical, and thoughtful reflection on one's lived experience to share with others has the powerful effect of validating that experience. Her coining of such terms as 'dependency workers' and 'distributed mothering' represents an attempt to redefine traditional notions of work and motherhood in a new paradigm that transcends the rigid, artificial distinction between "real work" and care (work), between "real mother" and babysitter. Kittay demonstrates that care is "real work" and that dependence is a particular type of carework. Finally, Kittay's treatment of reason and rationality represents a break from the modernist or Enlightenment view. In regarding Sesha as a worthy, fully human person, Kittay effectively challenges the orthodox view of rationality as the determining criterion for personhood, a view that has dominated most of the history of philosophy. On a more personal level, Kittay reveals that writing such a narrative has also challenged her own assumptions, in light of her training as a philosopher, about the centrality of reason in human agency.

Together, the two chapters on deconstructing work reflect new ways of envisioning social relationships in the workplace, the family, and the community. Fraser and Kittay have redefined the concepts of work and motherhood beyond their traditional and rather limiting boundaries by centering them on women's experience. Indeed, the challenge that these philosophers posed to the conventional understanding of such concepts leads us to the larger issues about language and the structure of society.

THE LANGUAGE OF GENDER VIOLENCE

Much of contemporary feminist theory has centered on the language of the body. This can be traced back to its roots in existential phenomenology, in which the body is seen as that dimension of our being that is firmly situated in the world. Using this as their starting point, postmodern feminists have seized upon the body as a site of political discourse about gender struggles, such as the fight for reproductive rights and the fight to end violence against women, and so on. Thus, in the late 1980s, we have seen many signs in the feminist movement that marked a postmodern shift in connecting the body with gender struggles. For example, in the 1989 Pro-Choice March in Washington, artist Barbara Kruger's famous work, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*, represents an effort to redefine the abortion debate on women's terms. In sharp contrast to the antiabortion poster featuring only a uterus housing a fetus, Kruger writes her bold message on an image of a woman's face to remind people that the woman facing a reproductive choice is not a uterus but a person. This image, along with the military metaphor of the body as a "battleground," makes explicit the body's connection to language, gender, and power.

In chapter 5, Kathryn Pyne Addelson shows how the postmodern spin on the language of the body can radically transform the abortion debate. Instead of refining abortion rights arguments, Addelson suggests that feminists consider how abortion has come to be a public moral problem in the first place. Following Bruno Latour, Addelson invites us to consider the fetus as a "character in a story," in an effort to recast the abortion issue in the metaphor of a script in which the fetus is "a participant in an ensemble case along with other participants." This highly unconventional approach to abortion allows Addelson to analyze the issue without having to reenter the debate about the personhood of the fetus, thus circumventing all philosophical and scientific assumptions about its status. These are assumptions that have, on Addelson's view, "polluted feminist discussion of the public problems involving fetuses." Like any postmodern script of public discourse, the abortion script is based on history, politics, and personal narratives; its "truth" is constituted from different angles by different social participants. Recognizing that, Addelson explores early scientific "truths" about the fetus and the historical purposes served by this rhetoric, such as the need to control immigration or to discipline doctors. In describing how abortion emerged as a public moral problem, Addelson shows the inseparability of theory and practice: understanding the abortion debate as a script constituted by different social participants allows feminists to see the importance of their own role as key political participants in that ongoing script.