

## IS THERE LIFE AFTER SPECIFICITY?

*Mair Verthuy*

In 1984, or to mark 1984, a large proportion of the Western World was (re)reading George Orwell's book of the same title. They would have done better, I contend, to (re)read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which offered a much more realistic view of the direction our society was moving in.

Angela Miles has offered a very thoughtful historical overview of some of the major developments in recent North American feminism and made a convincing case both for the existence and the revolutionary value of a radical integrative feminism still in its birth pangs but growing apace. As a feminist, I wish to reveal my bias: Angela is to me one of the most important thinkers in feminist/political circles and I am in basic if not total agreement with her position. Having said that, I can now address a few at least of the points in her monograph to which I reacted.

The first of these is technical. The word "universal" liberally (so to speak) scattered throughout the paper needs clarification. Without that, such a loaded expression invites misunderstanding, encourages the reader to think in terms of expansionism and not, as must have been intended, in terms of a broadly encompassing political theory not confined to "women's issues".

One of the most important aspects of integrative feminism as described in the article must surely be the emphasis on dialogue with women's groups of various kinds, feminist or not, the recognition that there is a possible solidarity across the differences. Two examples come to mind. Real Women, a group that one considers to be totally opposed to anything we as feminists might stand for, are not so far removed from us as we might think in their analysis of many problems confronting women. It is their solutions that are different. We

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have, nevertheless, a basis from which to start a discussion that could prove most fruitful. We have certainly nothing to lose.

The other example is that of the nurses' organizations in Ontario. When the unexplained children's deaths at the Toronto Sick Children's Hospital provoked a minor witch hunt (heaven forbid that DOCTORS — male — might be suspected of involvement), the support that Ontario feminists were quick to offer encouraged the nurses to see the witch hunt for what it was and stimulated a real feminist consciousness-raising that will have far-reaching results.

The process of reestablishing links with our female past must also be considered exciting. The oppression that our foremothers knew, we must reject. We should never, however, have allowed ourselves to be robbed of all their knowledge and all their strengths. Not for nothing was commonsense traditionally known in English as "motherwit". Let us restore that concept as we redevelop our bonds with our ancestresses, reevaluate their contribution to humanity, learn to appreciate their positive values.

Other issues I wish to address are, perhaps, more basic. Angela points out (p. 14) Adrienne Rich's emphasis on patriarchal dualism and the efforts made by integrative feminists to overcome it. Elsewhere she quotes Mary O'Brien on the subject of women's reproductive consciousness. It is women's sense of continuity, of having been borne, of being able to bear, that distinguishes them from men and "integrates their biological, emotional and intellectual capacities" (p. 19), whereas men must mediate the alienation of their seed. Again we meet the idea that feminism can overcome patriarchal dualism.

Herein, it seems to me, lies the truly revolutionary nature of the movement. Western culture, or what passes for such, i.e. high white wasp male culture, has been characterized, since its "official" beginning, by dualism, a dichotomous and manichean world view, that must of necessity see everything in opposing pairs: good, bad; male, female; spirit, flesh; mind, body; friend, enemy; dualism, monism; reason, emotion; etc. Our priority must be to return to pre-Pythagorean concepts, to *unthink* (to engage in *das Udenken* as Giuseppina Moneta says\*) the metaphysics that condition our perceptions, to *re-think* the world from the beginning, to arrive at a new knowledge and a new experience. Our history is filled with revolutionary movements like Christianity and Marxism. They have all failed to take the integrative leap. They have all failed. It is essential then to pursue our struggle against dualism.

It is equally important, nevertheless, to point up a major flaw in Mary O'Brien's (and I address her theory in particular only because I know it better than that of Nancy Hartsock) vision of a world in which women are freed by contraceptive technology to transform relations between humans, and be-

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tween humans and nature. It is both Utopian and unconnected with current reality.

If, in fact, as Mary O'Brien states, our consciousness is "continuous and integrative for it is mediated within the reproductive process" (p. 19), if our sense of continuity is what allows us to envisage combating patriarchal dualism, then she would do well to reflect not so much on contraceptive technology as on reproductive technology. We have become a bio-society without even noticing it. Genetic manipulation is a daily event in our universities, in industrial laboratories, in military installations. Reproductive technologies are listed on the stock market.

Women have indeed always stood out and up for continuity, for linking, for networking. When Sophocles wrote *Antigone*, he showed how a young girl defended her sense of "genetic coherence and species continuity" (p. 19) against the encroaching state in the person of Creon. The state always prefers to deal with citizens and/or slaves who have no support networks behind them. Antigone stood for that alternate loyalty to family and friends, for that continuity that dictators must break. Her struggle against centralizing authority is archetypal.

Such actions may soon, however, constitute an endangered privilege. As the use of reproductive technologies becomes more widespread, we may find that the sense of continuity disappears along with other aspects of our specific female being. In my generation, as I pointed out in a recent interviews in *La Gazette des femmes*, we fought for — an unsuccessful battle, alas — free abortion on demand, but my granddaughter may have to fight for the right actually to bear children. Already female fetuses are aborted in greater number than male; femicide is a fact of life in China; work is being carried out to predetermine the sex of the foetus; lactation can be developed in males; artificial placenta exist; it will soon be possible to implant an embryo in any abdomen: male, female; animal, human.

Plato wrote that the highest love was that between two males; women were only good for procreation — a feat denied to men by nature. Now men can procreate. The issue is not whether men should also bear children and thus share our sense of continuity. The issue in a patriarchal society is whether men will allow us to continue doing so, whether indeed they will even simply allow us to continue. They may in fact have found the "final solution" to one form of dualism: male, female, by eliminating one half. We shall have to act quickly if we are to solve their problem and therefore ours in a more constructive manner.

That is a question which the integrative feminism of the late 1980's must address NOW if we hope to have a future in the Brave New World.

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