

## SEXUALITY AND INTEGRATIVE FEMINISM

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### **Universal Politics**

Both Mair Verthuy and Sherry Simon caution me, and correctly so, on the use of the term "universal politics". I left the definition implicit, to be picked up as one reads, rather than explaining it explicitly as I have done elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> This is a serious weakness because it is an important concept in my argument and because there is a growing awareness among feminists that we must not deny differences among women and must not arrogantly claim the last word. The term "universal" is very liable to be misunderstood as representing just such an imperialist homogenizing intention.

In fact, I use the term in a very different sense, to differentiate a full politics with a self-conscious alternative perspective on the whole of society (a universal politics) from a limited pressure group approach which presumes to speak only to women's issues. This distinction between a *politique entier* and mere pressure is central to my analysis because I am concerned to argue that only a specific set of values (what Alain Touraine calls an "alternative rationality") can provide the basis for a full fledged social movement with a full politics. And I try to show that a recognition of women's specificity is essential in order for such values to be articulated. It follows from this that any of the varied feminisms based on arguing simply women's sameness with men will be essentially partial and reformist whatever the intention or self-definition of its practitioners. Only a feminism which can encompass the apparently contradictory claims of women's equality and women's difference can be truly radical. These two essential aspects of women's existence must both be recognized in and contribute to radical practice. In the process they transform

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each other. Equality becomes something different when women's specificity is recognized and women's specificity must be reconceptualized when equality is recognized. Contrary to Sherry Simon's suggestion, this is to posit a transcendence, not "negation of equality as the ultimate goal" of feminism.

In the context of feminist struggle for equality, the recognition and valorization of women's difference is not a reification of that difference that supercedes or contradicts the commitment to break down sex barriers and sex differences. It is rather an essential aspect of that project.<sup>2</sup>

I will have to struggle with the word "universal" and decide whether in the future the risk of misunderstanding can be adequately avoided by a fuller explanation or whether I should drop it altogether. I am reluctant to adopt the latter, apparently simple, solution because I think the term "universal" has a ring that communicates well the huge claims that I (and other feminists) are making for women and for feminism.

### **Radical Integrative Feminism**

On the other hand, the phrase "radical integrative feminism" used by Mair Verthuy in her comments solves a terminological problem I have been struggling with for some time and I am indebted to her for it.

In arguing that the major political division within feminism is between feminisms which transcend equality as their defining value and those that do not, or, put another way, those that are involved in articulating specifically feminist values that can sustain a full politics and those that are not, I am identifying a division which cuts across all established categorizations of feminism. There are some radical, socialist, marxist, anarchist and lesbian feminists who accept the larger project, and some who do not. I had therefore to use an entirely new term to refer to a tendency that included all categories of feminist radicalism but fully encompassed none.

I coined the term integrative feminism to refer to the tendency of feminism that, in recognizing both women's difference and equality, is beginning to articulate specifically feminist values and therefore (I would argue) represents, sometimes actually and explicitly and always potentially and implicitly, the most radical and politically significant expression of women's activism in this period. The term integrative feminism seems appropriate to indicate a feminist politics:

- which integrates the claims of equality and specificity
- which tends to stress integrative values grounded in women's reproductive activity such as caring, cooperation and nurture rather than such dominant separative values as competition and individualism
- whose project is coming more and more clearly to be understood in terms of, as Mair Verthuy says, "combating patriarchal dualism."

Radical feminists are among the foremost proponents and opponents of in-

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tegrative feminism as I have defined it. It would utterly confuse the issue to use the term. Nevertheless, I have regretted its abandonment. The clumsy alternative "feminist radicalism" used in the title of my monograph, clearly refers to numerous categories of feminism but does not in any way indicate the specific nature of the politics referred to. The term radical integrative feminism seems to do both tasks very well and at the same time suggest a valuable political continuity with radical feminism.

### **Biologism**

Elsbeth Probyn raises an important question when she takes issue with what she perceives to be my claim that the values expressed in integrative feminism are rooted in "women's biological capacity to reproduce" and are hence possessed by "all women, in all times and all places." She points out, in opposition to this supposed biologism that "our capacity to bear children ... has always been socially appropriated and defined (to the point) that it becomes very difficult to actually pinpoint which experiences of motherhood are generated by the very biological process itself and to what extent the feelings, and for Miles, values associated with reproduction are mere social interpretations." In fact, if I have a quarrel with her formulation it is that she does not stress the social enough. For I do not believe that there is any human biological experience that is unshaped by the social, and I would argue that the distinction is a false one.

My argument is not that feminist values are "inherent in women through their function as nurturers" or are women's "by nature" any more than Marx's argument was that working class consciousness is innate in workers. Doubtless women are shaped partly by their lack of power and do share characteristics with other powerless groups. In fact, this point was central to earlier radical feminist theory which sought to acknowledge women's difference from men without granting inherent or innate difference. But women, like the working class that Marx wrote about, cannot adequately be characterized by powerlessness alone. It is not only the subordinate status but the full and rich life activity of both groups which provides the basis for alternative perspectives on the world from the dominant one.

The alternative values and rationality embodied in feminism must be forged in a collective political practice through which women gradually win the power to define their own needs and interests. Women's particular life experience, life work and structural position in society provides a material basis for this essentially *political* consciousness, it does not make it inevitable and does not mean that all women will agree.

Once the material reality of reproduction and reproductive activity is recognized one can acknowledge particular female characteristics and concerns as

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a basis for a developing politics without fearing the biologism earlier radical feminists feared and Elspeth Probyn thinks she has found.

### **Suppression of Difference**

Sherry Simon suspects that my identification of an integrative feminist political tendency may involve a "suppression of differences." In fact, my aim is the clearer articulation and more accurate understanding of political differences within feminism. My claim that there are self-defined radical, socialist, lesbian, marxist, anarchist and other feminists whose politics are integrative is not meant to suggest that all feminist radicals can be contained within this category or that there are no real divisions among feminists. For there are also feminists in each of these and other categories who oppose integrative feminism. In defining integrative feminism I am defining a tendency of feminism, with a distinct perspective different from other tendencies.

The importance of this definition is not that it creates unity or uncovers an existing and *automatic* unity among feminists, but that it helps us understand more clearly than established categorizations do, the essential political differences among some feminists, and the bases of unity among others, where they exist.

### **Feminist Debates: the Case of Sexuality**

Sherry Simon mentions that I detail many objections to integrative feminism and criticises me for not "responding to these arguments," but, instead, simply claiming that they "fall into the category of 'resistance' to integrative feminism." All these debates are important, of course, and are engaged widely among feminists. What I was concerned to do in the article, however, was to illustrate how underlying political principles link apparently diverse issues and to show that an integrative feminist approach (though not position) can be clearly identified on each issue. The presumption that feminism is a full politics and represents a commitment to build a new world shaped by specifically feminist values leads to a very different approach to issues than an essentially pressure group stance which denies a specifically feminist vision. The fact that it is possible to understand such diverse debates as whether feminists should be involved in the peace movement, international development activity and the anti-pornography movement as refusals or defence of integrative politics seems to me to be extremely significant evidence that this is a useful way of conceptualizing feminist politics. For my purposes in the article it was more important to illustrate this and to define integrative feminism with regard to a number of issues than to engage any single issue in depth.

However, I do think the concept of integrative feminism can be very useful in helping us understand the political implications of issues, and on occasion

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can transform our way of seeing debates. The issue of sexuality which Sherry Simon and Elspeth Probyn both raise specifically is an interesting case in point. The women's movement has been deeply rent recently by debates between what are known (I think misleadingly) as anti-pornography (or anti-sex) and anticensorship feminists. These debates have generated a disproportionate number of conferences and speeches and a surprising amount of published work and media attention. They are always heated and painful and in certain instances also destructive.

The real divisions in this debate go much deeper than the empirical question of whether pornography harms women or the tactical question of whether censorship is a useful or adequate or dangerous means to attack pornography. These have been the central articulated question in the debate. Yet the dividing lines do not fall neatly around these questions; many feminists, for instance, are against both pornography and censorship. And the mood of the debate has been far more acrimonious and sectarian than seems warranted by these issues alone. Enormous confusion has resulted. Feminists who do not see an easy place for themselves in either camp are appalled at the unsisterly bitterness of both sides who call each other anti-feminist and condemn each other for being in bed with the Right or the porn industry as the case may be. I think the kind of analysis I have developed can help explain these things by providing a better understanding of the underlying political divisions represented by this debate.

Anti-porn feminists hold a wide variety of positions on, among other things, how to define pornography, whether one can distinguish erotica from pornography as a separate category of sexual representation, the role pornography plays in women's oppression, how best its negative effects can be countered, whether state involvement in the issue should be welcomed, how much it is possible and desirable to work with non-feminists around the issue, how best to help women working in the sex industry, and so on. They nevertheless all accept that the feminist project should include a struggle to build a new world in the terms of values, which are not automatically given or known finally (and may never be), but which we must consciously and critically forge in our practice. The struggle to consciously recreate our sexuality and sexual relationships as positive, self and other affirming, non-objectifying and fully human relationships is a necessary part of this larger project.

Anti-censorship feminists also differ in the specifics of their positions, but share a narrower sense of feminism as critique, refusal, analysis which poses no such alternative values. Where anti-pornography feminists see critical discussion, even heated debate about sexuality as a necessary part of the collective process of developing common values and a new sexuality and new world, anti-censorship feminists see this same discussion as an attack on individual freedom and an attempt to impose narrow and rigid standards and to

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prevent women's full exploration of their true sexuality. For these feminists sexuality is a natural area of life potentially gloriously unshaped by society, politics, and values. Their project is not to consciously and collectively create a new more human sexuality in tune with feminist values, but to discover and release an innate true sexuality from the limits patriarchy has placed upon it. There is real biologism here in the presumption that this part of life can, unlike all others, ever be free of social construction. And it leads these feminists to perceive those who attempt to develop a political and moral practice around sexuality as repressive and anti-sex and to accuse anti-pornography feminists of "foreclosing on sexuality" as Sherry Simon mentions.

In fact, the real debate about issues of sexuality and the struggle about means and ends, what should be done and how, in personal and political terms is going on among anti-pornography feminists, or, perhaps more accurately, anti-anti-censorship feminists (some of whom support censorship, some of whom do not). The anti-censorship position as it is articulated by its main proponents attacks not just censorship as a tactic but the very presumption of most feminists to critique existing forms of sexuality in terms of our values and vision of a new more human world and relations. Anti-censorship feminists, while claiming to leave sexuality open to discussion, have in fact defined this discussion out of the feminist project by condemning any critical perspective based on articulated values. It is this anti-censorship refusal of sexuality as a ground of collective political and moral practice that forecloses debate, not the anti-pornography willingness to criticize existing sexual practices in political and moral terms.

If the difference I have identified between feminist pressure politics and a full feminist politics is the most significant political division within feminism today, some of our debates over issues and tactics will be *within* a shared framework/perspective while others, such as the anti-censorship/ anti-pornography debate (or the sexuality debate as it is sometimes called) will be *between* perspectives or between feminisms. Anti-pornography feminists presume to articulate alternative values, anti-censorship feminists do not. Therefore, the very nature of feminism is at issue in this debate. The charges from both sides that the other is not truly feminist or is betraying feminism, result not from the participants' intemperate personality traits or inadequate training in sisterhood, but from the depth of the political issues involved here. A clearer articulation of the underlying issues won't make them go away, but it can help us gain much more benefit from the debate in developing and clarifying our diverse positions.

Sherry Simon is hence mistaken in believing that I presume an easy "unity of feminist values" or "consensus for action," and her criticism that there is no integrative feminist programme is beside the point. The term integrative feminism identifies a *perspective*, not a *programme*, and provides no ready

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position on any individual issue. In fact, integrative feminists differ on all issues. What they share is a presumption that feminist politics is about all of life and society and a commitment to develop an active and critical practice in all areas, shaped by values which may never be finally articulated but which we should attempt, and can expect to express ever more clearly and fully in our practice. Many feminists disagree. It is that division which underlies the sexuality debate and that an understanding of integrative feminism can clarify.

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### Notes

1. See "The Integrative Feminine Principle: Value Basis of a New Feminism," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* IV, 4(1981): 481-495.
2. See my article: "Feminism, Equality and Liberation," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* I, 1(1985):