

LOCAL FEMINIST PRACTICE?

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Angela Miles' paper on the new integrative feminism is a stirring, closely argued call for the frank recognition of the specificity of feminist values and their role in a universal liberatory politics. The historical basis for her claim she situates in "a powerful and central tendency of the woman's liberation movement for almost twenty years". The theoretical basis for this affirmation of feminist values she finds in the new feminist scholarship — principally that of Mary O'Brien and Nancy Hartsock — which situates female difference materially and historically in the process of reproduction. How are we to interpret the timing of such a call for a "universal, utopian feminist perspective" — a vision which Miles proposes as a heady alternative to the narrow and faint-hearted negativism of those feminists who refuse to recognize specifically feminine values?

Miles herself foresaw many of the possible objections to her presentation of integrative feminism and she details these critiques towards the end of her paper (p. 25-29). Rather than responding to these arguments with the same care with which she exposes them, Miles seems to consider that they fall into the category of "resistance" to the integrative vision. "They are all essentially arguments for a narrowly defined feminist politics. And they represent resistance to the early stages of the emergence in practice of a universal feminist politics." (p. 30) The critiques merit, however, considerably more attention.

Why indeed impose one aspect of sexual identity — reproduction — as the site of women's common experience when, as Miles notes, it is not assumed by all women; why generalize feminist theory before local practices have had a chance to develop fully; why seek on the part of feminist theory a claim to

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completeness and universality, a smoothing over of contradictions? And, even more fundamentally perhaps, why assume that there is a necessary link between the common experience of women — wherever that common experience may be located — and a specific moral vision?

Seeking to construct integrative feminism on the widest possible base, Angela Miles provides a historical account of the women's movement in North America which makes little provision for historical, geographical or generational specificities. In the same way, Miles presents the future of integrative feminism as a global, "universal" project. Surely in using the term "universal" Miles did not have in mind the kind of cultural imperialism which we now know to be embedded in that notion. "Universal", we suppose, is to mean universally applicable, referring to a body of feminist ideas and practices which can be exercised outside the limited arena of feminist issues.

It is easy to sympathize with this desire to demarginalize feminist activities. Feminist studies and publishing, for instance, suffer a great deal from such marginalization. But the difficulty of course becomes the basis on which such a universal feminist politics would be based. What would be the *programme* of such a politics? Miles' assumption that there is now within the North American women's movement — and among women in general — the basis of a consensus for action can be supported only if some overwhelming conflicts are denied. The most important of these differences is the current debate on sexuality and the issue of pornography.

Beyond the conjunctural difficulties which emerge through the unity and diversity of practice, one is led to question the very enterprise of attempting to locate the definitive source of women's commonality and therefore of a common definition of the future. Current debates within the North American women's movement, growing recognition of the specificity of women's experience in other cultures, indicate that there is hardly an easy or automatic unity to be found in feminist values. And surely that's the way it should be. Feminism is not a redemptive vision or an essentialist definition of selfhood. It provides above all an understanding of power and domination — an understanding which is contingent and not absolute. Feminism can be a powerful machine for revealing the power which is in knowledge, but it cannot provide the content of a solution to every issue.

In a recent article¹, Alice Echols undertakes a review of the history of the last 15 years of feminist thought and practice which is similar in spirit to Miles' essay. She also attempts to reclaim the "radical" spirit which was so important to early second-wave feminism. Echols' characterization of "cultural feminism", which equates women's liberation with the nurturance of a female counter culture and the valorization rather than the elimination of gender differences, shares some important similarities with Miles' definition of integrative feminism. If Miles equates integrative feminism with the original

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radicalism of feminism, however, Echols defines it as quite the opposite.

Focussing on the issue of sexuality, Echols criticizes cultural feminism "and the anti-pornography movement which is its extension" for "foreclosing on sexuality". The original vision, she reminds us, "joined sexual liberation with women's liberation." "Whereas radical feminism represented a rebellion against the mother in which identification with the mother was suppressed, cultural feminism represents fusion with the mother in which differences between mother and daughter are suppressed". (p. 66)

It is this (strategic?) suppression of differences which is so striking in integrative feminism. At a time when the focus on sexuality has the immense merit of showing how women's struggles have been historically circumscribed and damaged by a very limited perspective on sexuality², it would hardly seem appropriate to impose closure on a very productive debate.

Angela Miles' essay certainly recognizes the social and political diversity of women's practice, but it seeks to subsume these differences within a larger, unifying vision which has its basis in the identity of female experience and the negation of equality as an ultimate goal. Is it fruitful to think in these terms? Are we really seeking a unified feminism which pursues a unified vision of social change? It seems to me, as to many others³, that perhaps a more useful approach to theory would consist in discovering new ways of manipulating the concept of difference within a feminist perspective. Theory, then, would more accurately articulate the distinct and local forms of feminist practice.

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Notes

1. Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist sexual politics, 1968-83", in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring female sexuality*, Ed. Carole S. Vance. Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston, 1984.
2. See particularly Judith Walkowitz, "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain" in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. A. Snitow et al. Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983; and Eileen Manion, "We Objects Object: Pornography and the Woman's movement" in *Feminism Now*, ed. Marilouise Kroker et al. CultureTexts, Montréal, 1985.
3. One example: Andrée Yanacopoulos, "Des féminismes", in *Spirale*, mai 1985, p. 3.