

Notes

This issue of Radical Philosophy appears in a situation where the interests of both its writers and readers are under threat. Not only is philosophy being threatened as a result of the economic crisis, but the philosophical frameworks used by radical groups over the last decade are directly under attack: the Open University is accused of 'Marxist bias'; the Gould report calls for a McCarthyite purge; the 'nouveaux philosophes' receive wide acclaim as the pall-bearers of socialism.

Now is the time for a radical journal to heighten our sense of urgency and encourage the production of relevant work. The News Section shows our attempt to bring Radical Philosophy closer to its readership, and make it more responsive to readers' needs; it implicitly argues for a closer connection between Radical Philosophy groups and the journal than the loose and almost coincidental alliance that has existed in the past.

The articles published in this issue are congruent with these moves. John Mepham's review in RP16 opened with a paragraph later re-printed in Spare Rib's regular column of sexist adverts etc, 'Tooth and Nail'. We publish a response to this paragraph by the Cambridge 'Women in Society' collective, Mepham's reply, and their rejoinder. Peter Dews' reply to Roy Edgley's article in RP15 defends Colletti's position that contradictions occur in thought, not in its objects. Rip Bulkeley's article on Mao, 'On On Practice', critically examines a text that has been used as a classic in the philosophic education of radicals. Andrew Collier's article again raises the question of the transformability of the analytic tradition; he uses concepts and methods from this tradition to produce a positive and critical notion of 'freedom'. This is especially timely as public debate comes to focus on 'individual rights' and 'human freedom'.

This issue also carries details of the next Radical Philosophy conference, to be held in Brighton 6-8 January 1978.

Sexism and metaphor: an exchange

Dear Radical Philosophy Group,

We object strongly to the opening paragraph of John Mepham's review, "Goodbye to all that?", in Radical Philosophy no. 16. His choice of metaphor - a woman being fucked (or is it rape?) by successive giants, and enjoying it - to convey his scorn for the British academic left, betrays his careless and uncritical participation in the worst sort of sexist ideology. Presumably this is his attempt to escape from the aridity he attributes to the left, if only in style! You may find it interesting that the National Front used just such imagery to convey their disgust of the Left, in a leaflet distributed in Cambridge last year.

The Women's Liberation Movement, in its struggle to combat such derogatory and all-pervasive ideas about women and about sexuality, expects more support from a Journal which purports to be critical and politically radical. Hopefully this letter will prompt some Editorial discussion on the issue - apparently you do take up issues related to women's oppression (at the abstract level only?)

Our bodies are our own, so get off our backs, Mr Mepham, and look elsewhere to titillate your readers intellectual senses!

Up yours,
'Women in Society' Course Collective
58 Kimberley Road, Cambridge

Dear RP comrades,

Something must have gone badly wrong with the writing of that first paragraph of my review of Perry Anderson's book, because the "Women in Society" collective are not the only ones to have read into it completely the opposite of what was intended. They are quite right that the image with which the review opens is a sexist image. It is so blatantly sexist that one would have thought that it was obvious that its rhetorical purposes was not to express or endorse a sexist attitude but to expose one. In other words these readers have misunderstood the point of the image, its function in the text. The point was inten-

ded in fact to be a critical one; the intended meaning was absolutely the opposite to that read into it by the Collective. Its purpose is not at all 'to convey scorn for the British academic left' but to criticise the political-cultural policy of the New Left Review. In other words this deliberately and manifestly sexist image was used in order to make an anti-sexist point.

As I tried to explain in the review the NLR diagnosis of the feebleness of British socialist culture led them to adopt a particular policy in an attempt to rectify the situation. They adopted the policy of exposing British socialist intellectuals to the major works of the 'Western Marxist Tradition'. This policy is open to all kinds of criticisms, some of which I made explicitly in the review and some of which the editor of the NLR seems now to accept himself (although he fails, characteristically, to do so in the manner of open self-criticism or political analysis of the history of the NLR). One particular criticism of that policy is that it is phallogocentric; it is this that that first paragraph was trying to express not directly, not via theoretical analysis, but rhetorically, by means of the disputed metaphor. This was meant to be read as saying: 'The manner of the NLR's cultural intervention has been phallogocentric because it has thought of its audience as being passively excited and grateful for being serviced by the Great Men of Europe, whose bodies of thought were being made available in translation'. I was saying that this is how they perceived us. Perhaps this makes the irony of the metaphor more clear. It was certainly used in a rather clumsy way.

Now, is this a fair accusation to throw at the NLR? I do myself think that the style of at least some of those 'great texts' is indeed phallogocentric. This is a function of their dogmatic, system-building method,

Note from the production group. We regret that part of John Mepham's review, column 2 on page 41 of RP16, was laid out back to front. The column should be read beginning from the words 'and the great intellectuals', 20 lines from the foot of the page. We apologise to John Mepham and to RP16 readers.

their oppressive obscurity, and the way they have of laying down the law. I also think that the style of the NLR's presentation of the works has been open to criticism. They have over the years often changed theoretical allegiance, and they have at different times adopted positions which are in total contradiction with each other. And they have done this with no public explanation, no self-criticism, but always with the most strident self-assurance and insistence, i.e., as if from a position of mysterious omnipotence and authority, too remote to be open to dialogue or criticism (and I think that the book by Anderson which was under review suffers from exactly these same faults). This posture of authority seemed to me to add up precisely to the classical Freudian figure of the Phallic Lawgiver, i.e., to be phallic rather than just 'oppressive' or 'elitist' in some more general or vague sense. But this was merely an unworked-out intuition on my part; I did not think it through thoroughly nor give it a theoretical analysis. I find that Michèle Le Doeuff's article 'Women and Philosophy' in RP 17, which I have subsequently read, brilliantly captures some of what I was trying so inadequately to get at.

So I think that the 'Women in Society' Collective's reaction to that first paragraph is based on their having misunderstood the rhetoric. Whether this is more the fault of the writing or the reading is not important as long as it is now clear.

But there is one more thing I would like to say. The last two columns of the review are, as they stand in RP, totally incoherent. This is not at all the fault of the writing. The argument would have been quite clear, I believe, if only the RP production team had not cut up the text into several pieces and then glued it together again all in the wrong order. The depressing thing is how few people seem to have noticed that this has happened.

Fraternally,
John Mephram
41 Colbourne Road, Hove, Sussex

Dear John Mephram,

Thank you for your letter explaining your intention in using the disputed metaphor. I'd like to take up our criticism of it in more detail, given that our first letter was intended chiefly as an expression of the feeling of assault and anger which we experienced on reading it. We felt it important to convey that anger. One of my points is precisely that male and female readers would not read your metaphor in the same way, and I'm not at all sure that either would read it in the way you intended. I think it unlikely that your male readers would have identified with the feminine, derided position in your metaphor, as your intended meaning of it would require. They might participate in the first part of this, i.e. 'NLR has talked down to me as passive/feminine' but given men's desire not to be in that feminine place, I think their response would be an indignant 'no I'm not', which achieves what you want - anger at NLR's patronizing attitude - but leaves the metaphor itself unchallenged.

Obviously we think it's both possible and necessary to subvert sexist imagery by using it incongruously or ironically, but we don't think you succeeded. In its more outrageous form I think it is a weapon more likely to succeed in the hands of the group oppressed by such imagery - women. The weakest point about your metaphor, to me, is that it is the opening paragraph of the review and is read in a vacuum, without

any immediate markers to jolt the reader out of assimilating it in its conventional sense.

Another criticism feminists have of much male writing, which your metaphor seems to illustrate, is the emphasis on style above clarity. In your letter you say: 'This was meant to be read as saying...' and go on to explain very clearly what the metaphor left obscure. Perhaps it would have been preferable to put it this way in the first place. To us it seemed like an attempt to entice the reader to the review by the use of strong, sexual imagery - in that sense we felt women's bodies were being used in an intellectually titillating way, whether it was your conscious intention or not.

On the point of our misinterpreting the metaphor, we did in the sense that we saw you as scornful of NLR for 'prostituting' itself to one body of European thought after another. This doesn't seem inconsistent with your description of NLR's often-changing theoretical allegiance.

I hope this has made our position clearer.

in sisterhood,
Valerie Binney
(for the Women's Paper Collective)
58 Kimberley Road, Cambridge

Critique of Anthropology

Vol. 3 Nos. 9/10

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Contents:

Rayna R. Reiter: The Search for Origins

P. Aaby: Engels and Women

Maxine Molyneux: Androcentrism in Marxist Anthropology

John Moore: The Exploitation of Women in Evolutionary Perspective

F. Edholm, O. Harris, K. Young:

Conceptualising Women

Research notes: Barbara Bradby on the Non-valorisation of Women's Labour and Victoria Goddard on Domestic Industry in Naples

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