

# Feminism: History and Morality

*Jean Grimshaw*

Janet Radcliffe Richards' book *The Sceptical Feminist* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, £12 hb) is an attempt to extricate feminism from what she sees as ideological commitments that are not essential to it, and serve merely to confuse feminists themselves, and alienate potential supporters. The image of the feminist movement, she says, is 'unattractive'. And it is understandable why people tend to dislike feminists so much, since some of them have, she thinks, gone out of their way to make themselves unattractive; what is more, they have tended to go in for polemics and dogma at the expense of careful reasoning. What they should do is learn to argue clearly and rationally with their opponents, and learn to separate out what is essential to feminism from what is inessential to it.

There can of course be no question that feminism, like any other movement, has bred its fair share of bad arguments, poor reasoning, and dogmatic and ill considered pronouncements; and I have no wish to quarrel with the value of arguing soundly, although in some circumstances argument may be pointless and not the best strategy. Demonstrating incoherence in the arguments of those who oppose feminism, for example, can be a very useful thing to do, as opposed to simply accusing opponents of bias, or ill-will or indoctrination. (One reason for this is that the stereotype of female irrationality is still a very powerful one, and anything that will help to counter-act it is worth pursuing.)

We need however to consider what conception of 'argument' we are operating with. If we look at many issues with which feminists are concerned, we find that they are often presented as a conflict about 'values' or 'morality'; and that these 'values' themselves tend to be presented as if they had no history and bore no relationship to social processes or structures. Thus the debate about abortion, for example, is often presented as if it simply involved philosophical or moral arguments about the 'right to life', or whether a foetus should be regarded as a person. This may sometimes serve to conceal the fact that other issues are involved in the abortion debate, which have much more to do with questions of power and domination and a particular ideology of the family.

In her book, Radcliffe Richards aims to present feminism as just such a set of arguments about 'values', which she thinks can be divorced from questions about 'facts'. The consequence is, I think, that despite the value of many of the specific arguments that she offers, her 'feminism' is ultimately

an enfeebled and unviable thing, which capitulates at crucial points to some of the very things I think feminists should be fighting against.

## The Essentials of Feminism

Her definition of feminism is as follows. The essence of feminism should be seen as simply the belief that women suffer systematic social injustice because of their sex. She recognizes that this definition would be regarded as inadequate by many feminists themselves, and that it does not tally with many popular conceptions of what feminists do and believe in.

Feminists are, at the very least, supposed to have committed themselves to such things as participation in consciousness raising groups and non-hierarchical organization, to the forswearing of femininity of appearance and demeanour, and to belief in the oppressiveness of families, the inherent equality of the sexes (or the superiority of the female) and the enslavement of women as the root of all oppression.

(p.2)

Radcliffe Richards, on the other hand, wants to define feminism as a movement concerned with the elimination of sex-based injustice; it therefore turns out to be a movement which is neither specifically of women, nor for women, even though in practice most sex-based injustice is suffered by women.

Why does she want to redefine feminism in this way? There are, I think, two reasons. The first is expressed as follows:

The conflation of the idea of feminism as a particular ideology with that of feminism as a concern with women's problems means that people who do not like what they see of the ideology (perhaps because they are keen on family life, or can't imagine a world without hierarchies, or just don't like unfeminine women) may also tend to brush aside, explain away, sneer at, or simply ignore all suggestions that women are seriously badly treated. Resistance to the feminist movement easily turns into a resistance to seeing that women have any problems at all.

(p.3)

So the first reason is really a matter of strategy; feminism is, she thinks, losing supporters by its doctrinaire insistence on things other than just a

very general belief that women are treated badly by society.

The second reason is not just a matter of strategy, and it is brought out in statements such as the following:

Feminism has come to be associated with particular theories about what kind of thing is wrong, and whose fault it is; how it came about and what should be done to put matters right.

(p.2)

This Radcliffe Richards believes to be wrong, and not just as a matter of feminist strategy, but as a matter of logic. Throughout the book she urges that it is possible to be a feminist - to have a general concern about the position of women and believe that they are unjustly treated - without this necessarily implying any particular beliefs about why women are unjustly treated, and without implying any particular political views. Thus, she says:

It is ... very important to separate the question of whether anything is wrong with the situation of women from questions about whether there is any justification for particular ideas of ways to put matters right. Most people, including most feminists, take what conspicuous feminists say about political policy and social theory as integral to the whole cause. However, the question of whether anything is wrong is clearly separable from that of what to do about it....

(p.269)

Similarly:

The most important thing is that our ideals should not commit us to any details about the kinds of social arrangements which will be found in the ideal society. They should involve only general principles which provide criteria for deciding when one society is better than another; principles like, for example, 'The ideal society is one where there is the maximum total happiness'.

(p.33)

She does not merely believe that feminism is something which involves no specific political commitments, or commitments to particular forms of social change. She also believes that it is compatible with any (or no) beliefs about the 'natures' of men and women, and with any (or no) beliefs about the particular causes of women's oppression. Thus she says:

We need to know about the nature of the world we are dealing with, to as great an extent as possible, in order to proceed with our programme of change with any hope of success. Nevertheless the knowledge we have of the natures of things in no way dictates what use we should make of the raw material.

(p.64)

Feminism, she argues, does not depend on 'matters of fact'.

Of course, if feminism really did depend on beliefs about matters of fact, and those turned out to be mistaken, we should simply have to accept that feminism should be abandoned. We must certainly take that attitude to any specific feminist demand whose justification depends on the truth of particular propositions.

(p.42)

Fortunately, however, she thinks, feminism is a question of values and of moral opinions about justice, so it will not fall hostage to facts, not even if the facts turn out to be not what we had hoped. Thus, when she is discussing the issue of (supposed) male dominance, she says that 'Feminism,

as it happens, by no means stands or falls according to whether women are inferior to men, or equal to them, or superior to them, in any or all respects' (p.43). Suppose, she suggests, that it *were* the case that men were in some sense naturally dominant?

Even if men are naturally inclined to dominate it does not follow that they ought to be allowed to run everything. Their being naturally dominant might be an excellent reason for imposing special restrictions to keep their nature under control ... one of the functions of society is to protect its weaker members.

(p.44)

Now this begs the issue of what is meant here by 'natural', since in most theories of 'natural' male dominance (e.g. that put forward by Steven Goldberg in *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, or by Tiger and Shepher in *Women in the Kibbutz*), it is held that men will *inevitably* end up dominant, since their dominance is firmly rooted in their biology, and the effects of culture in modifying this can at most be ephemeral.

More generally though, the sort of separation that Radcliffe Richards envisages between 'feminism' as a question of values on the one hand, and explanatory theories or political proposals on the other, is fraught with problems.

Imagine for a moment an analogous theory about racism. If Radcliffe Richards had written a book about racism, or opposition to racism, that was like her book on feminism, she would have said something like this. If we want to attack racism, what we really have to concentrate on is the moral question of what is fair and just in the dealings between black and white people. This is what is essential, and this right in no way depends on the truth of any 'factual propositions'. Questions about whether or not blacks are really inferior to whites are irrelevant to the problem of social injustice. If they really are inferior, then that is all the more reason for making sure that they get fair shares by some policy of positive discrimination. And the fight for racial justice in no way depends on any particular analysis of things like colonialism and imperialism, or any understanding of, say, the history of British immigration policies. We can shelve, or be agnostic, about that, and still fight for racial justice. Those who hold radically different theories about why there were riots in St Pauls or in Brixton, and those who have no theories at all, can sink their differences and agree that the really important thing is fairness and justice.

Now firstly it is very curious to suppose that the fight against racism does not intrinsically involve an attempt to understand the causes and psychology of racial oppression. Secondly, there are theories around which argue that it is *impossible* to achieve social justice or harmony between different racial groups, since human nature, the biological makeup of human beings, will not allow it. There are political parties whose beliefs are incompatible with a belief in or a fight for racial justice.

As I have just pointed out, there are theories, such as that of the biological inevitability of male dominance, which imply the impossibility of ever realising many feminist demands, and these are ignored by Radcliffe Richards. She argues that the fight for 'sexual justice' does not imply or depend on any particular understanding of the causes of sexual injustice or oppression; the goals of feminism are in no way dependent on 'facts'. Presumably therefore, *qua* feminists, our main concern should not be with understanding the causes of sexual oppression, but with the moral fight for 'sexual justice'; since only the latter is essential to feminism, our goals as feminists do not depend on such understanding.

Such a separation between moral goals or aims and attempts at understanding the causes of oppression seems to me to be quite untenable. For example, it has often been pointed out that it is not enough to challenge things like educational or job discrimination at the legislative level; women are oppressed by social institutions, by language, in their very psychology, in ways that legislation cannot touch. Radcliffe Richards herself recognises this, but promptly shelves the question. But such a recognition *depends* on insight into and understanding of some of the causes of women's oppression; and its consequence will be that both the goals and the strategies of feminism will be changed. The importance, for example, of consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement has depended on insights into the psychology of oppression; it was not something that women just decided arbitrarily to try. The importance of the issue of child care is necessarily related to discussion of the nature and role of the family, and of women within the family. And so on.

It is perfectly true, of course, that feminists disagree about many aspects of particular analyses of the nature and causes of women's oppression; and at this point I imagine that Radcliffe Richards might object that the point she is trying to make is that feminism can survive the discovery that any particular theory about the causes of women's oppression is false. Thus, she suggests, suppose we discovered that the view that capitalism and the family were of crucial significance in women's oppression was wrong, and it was something else instead, or else we had no idea what it was; this would not stop us fighting for sexual justice, or asking whether it was fair that women should do all the child care, and so forth.

There seem to me to be two things that are badly wrong with this argument. Firstly, it implies a very curious view of social causation, and of theories about the causes of oppression. Radcliffe Richards writes as if we were faced with a list of discrete or separable possible causes of oppression, such as 'the family', and as if the task of theory was to try and eliminate them one by one, until one arrives at the real cause or causes. But it seems to me to be absurd to suppose that something like 'the family' can be isolated in this way, as if one could answer yes or no to the question of whether it is responsible for oppressing women. The question is not *which* social institutions oppress women, as if one could arrive at a neat list of those which do and those which don't, but rather *how and in what ways* things that are oppressive to women permeate the whole social structure.

Secondly, Radcliffe Richards writes as if the fight for justice was the goal of feminism, and all other things are simply means; such that it is an open question whether or not they will actually lead to justice - whether it is the family, or traditional sex roles, or conventional femininity or anything else that is the object of our attack. If we discover, for example, that traditional sex roles *don't* lead to injustice, then we must give up our attack on them. This implies that we *first* have to know what we mean by 'justice', and *then* look at social institutions to see if they are just; and the process of finding out what we mean by justice is simply one of armchair philosophical argument. This in turn implies that there is such a thing as a conception of 'justice', which is totally decontextualised and ahistorical, and whose validity has ultimately to depend on the moral intuitions of right-minded people, who have done a sufficient amount of clear thinking. I do not believe that such a conception of justice is adequate, or that one can abstract from each other in this sort of way the task of saying what justice means or what it really is, and the task of looking at the history of injustice or oppression and the reasons why parti-

cular forms of these have predominated. The problem is that if you try to turn feminism into an abstract fight for 'justice' and 'fairness', which you conceive of in this ahistorical sort of way (or if you try to discuss 'femininity' without any discussion of the history of the notion, or the uses to which it has been put), then what you say will have an in-built tendency merely to recapitulate features and values of the current social order, and to lapse into an eclectic and uncritical common sense. This is precisely what I think happens in Radcliffe Richards' book; and I want to illustrate this from two chapters of the book, the chapter on sexual justice, and the chapter entitled "The unadorned feminist", where she discusses the common feminist rejection of 'femininity' of appearance.

## Sexual Justice

Radcliffe Richards relies heavily on John Rawls' theory of justice. She starts off by saying that justice is about sharing out the good things of life. 'Having determined what the good things in life are, the next problem is to determine how they should be shared out' (p.90). (She does not discuss the problem of how, except by abstract moral argument, we are to arrive at our conception of what the good things in life are; nor does she ask whether or not 'sharing them out' does not itself depend on an ideological conception of the good things in life being rather like a cake of which everyone should have fair shares.)

Like Rawls, she denies that justice is synonymous with equality, and she defends a principle which is basically the difference principle of Rawls - that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they may reasonably be expected to be to everyone's advantage.

The criterion of justice is not equality of well being, but something like the difference principle; a just society is one in which the least well off group is as well off as possible.

(p.96)

Rawls said that the inequality between men and women would be justified if women were better off under the present arrangement than they would be under one of greater equality. Radcliffe Richards points out that this is highly tendentious, since it simply assumes that women are to be inferior to men in such an arrangement, but nevertheless with this qualification she accepts what Rawls says.

Most of the rest of the chapter on justice is devoted to a discussion of selection discrimination, and to asking whether it is ever fair or just that women should be discriminated against on grounds of their sex when applying for jobs etc. Radcliffe Richards recognises that many feminists argue that it is not merely that women tend to lose out when they are competing with men for specific things like jobs, it is rather that the basic social structures put women at a disadvantage in competition with men. She says, however: 'It is extremely difficult to prove the truth of the vague proposition that the structure of society really does work against women' (p.99), and says no more about the subject, but simply passes on to discuss the problem of selection discrimination.

What does she say about selection discrimination? Her central point is as follows:

Discrimination on grounds of sex is counting sex as relevant in contexts where it is not, and leads to the rejection of suitable women. It is not discriminative on grounds of sex to reject women who are not suitable, even if their unsuitability is *caused* by their being women.

(p.99)

Now that as it stands would make it appear open to anyone to reject any woman for anything, since it does not specify any constraints whatever on the sort of grounds on which women might be regarded as 'unsuitable'. Radcliffe Richards does recognize this; and she goes on to offer arguments against some interpretations of it. Thus, for example, she argues that one cannot rationally defend the view that women are naturally weak and in need of protection, and that therefore jobs should go to men; or that women in general are inferior in ability, and that therefore men should have priority; or that it is in the best interests of society as a whole that women should stay at home and be mothers. There is nothing wrong with her arguments as far as they go; thus she points out, correctly, I think, that arguments about the *general* inferiority of women miss the point, unless they accept the implausible proposition that all women are inferior in ability to all men; since the point is whether the *particular* woman or women in question are more able than the particular man or men concerned. She also argues that some 'reverse discrimination' can be legitimate - that is, appointing a less able or qualified woman, even if there are better men candidates around, if the aim of this policy is to improve the general position of women.

But her arguments do not go far enough. The reason is that if one tries to arrive at a conception of 'the socially just way of going about things' (p.104) without some form of analysis or critique of the sorts of social processes that have produced current 'injustices', one is almost bound to reify current notions like 'suitability', 'fair shares', 'equal competition', and so on, as if they provided a sort of moral package to which one can appeal in a completely unhistorical way to provide answers to tricky questions like those about justice, and as if the answers merely lay ultimately somewhere in our moral intuitions. In fact, however, notions such as 'fair shares' or 'suitability' simply do not have a universal clear meaning which we can settle once and for all; - as if we can, in chronological order, *first* define our terms, and *then* look at social reality to see if it measures up to our definitions. Rather, the definitions are themselves part of current social reality; they have a history; they are tied to sets of social practices and institutions; and they may sometimes be implicitly used to support or buttress these, or to prevent critical questions being asked. It is not that we should stop bothering about whether our arguments are sound, and simply look at their history; it is rather that unless we take this history into account we are liable to fall into the trap of supposing that current 'common sense' dictates not merely the solutions of problems, but also the terms in which they are to be discussed. An essential task of feminism should be not simply to provide 'answers' to problems posed in commonsensical everyday language, but to look critically at that language itself, and trace its relationships to the sort of social and historical conditions that have led to its use. And this sort of criticism is not and cannot be politically neutral; or uncommitted to some attempt at explanation and analysis.

## Feminism and Sexuality

I want finally to illustrate again the way in which Radcliffe Richards' dehistoricized approach to feminism leads her into an uncritical acceptance of common sense categories by looking at the chapter entitled 'The Unadorned Feminist'.

Feminists, says Radcliffe Richards, have rightly criticised the amount of time, money and anxiety that women have been expected to put into their personal appearance. This she says she would agree with. But, she goes on to say, this does not account for

the 'deliberately unfeminine' style of dress adopted by many feminists. They treat traditional feminine dress not as something to which one should simply devote less effort, but as inherently pernicious; because the idea of feminine dress is associated with the idea of trying to attract men, or being regarded as 'sex objects'. Some feminists, she says, even aim deliberately to be unpleasing to men; either because they reject association with men as far as possible, or because they want to be loved 'for themselves', and not because of their beauty or attractiveness or the way they are 'improved' by their clothes.

This attitude of deliberately rejecting concern about one's personal appearance will, says Radcliffe Richards, get rid of men who have the '*wrong*' attitude to women. The trouble is, she thinks, that it may also get rid of the ones who have the '*right*' attitude as well, and this is a pity, unless it happens to be your aim to get rid of men altogether.

Certainly it will get rid of the men who are interested in women only from the point of view of sensual pleasing, but it is bound to affect at the same time not only them, but also the ones with excellent senses of priority; the ones who value character, intelligence, kindness, sympathy and all the rest, far above mere sensual pleasing, but nevertheless would like that too if they could get it as well as all the other things. ... The best judging man alive, confronted with two women identical in all matters of the soul but not equal in beauty, could hardly help choosing the beautiful one.... A man who would not change his woman for any other in the world might still know that she would please him even more if she looked like the centre fold from the latest *Playboy*.  
(p.189)

So, she continues, if feminists persist in making themselves deliberately unattractive,

... they are not only keeping off the men who would value their more important qualities too little, but are also lessening their chances of attaching men who care about such things at all. If they think that is a good thing to do, they must be prepared to argue that it is positively bad to care about whether people are sensually pleasing or not; that if you do not care at all about people's beauty you are morally superior to someone else....

Beauty and the sensual enjoyment of sex, she says, may often be of low priority, but they are not actually *bad* things. So if sensual pleasing is important, why not be feminine and wear pretty clothes?

I find this cluster of arguments rather extraordinary. Firstly, I do not know of *any* feminist who has found anything inherently wrong in the sensual enjoyment of sex, or has even regarded sex as of 'low priority'. It is true that feminists have talked about celibacy as a viable option for women if they want; and they have rejected ideas about marital duty and so on. But most feminists have urged women to rediscover and explore and celebrate their sexuality in new ways, free from the old tyrannies of reproduction, marital duty, or the assumption that only heterosexuality is legitimate. If there is sometimes a streak of puritanism in some feminist attitudes or writings, this is not where it is to be found.

Secondly, note the way in which Radcliffe Richards writes. Men are said to be 'choosing women for their qualities'; a man 'would not change his woman for any other in the world' ... this is the sort of language in which one might talk about cars or other commodit-

ies. The old banger may have a lot of dents and be a bit rusty, but it's been a good friend and its reliability outweighs the dents, just as character and intelligence may outweigh gap-teeth or being rather overweight. If you use language like this, women appear, not so much, in the hackneyed phrase, as 'sex objects', but as *commodities*, whose qualities you can list in relation to the function they are going to be expected to fulfil. Note furthermore, that Radcliffe Richards says that if feminists make themselves 'unattractive' they will not 'attach men'. It is this sort of *language* in which some women's magazines discuss the issue of 'how to get your man'; and it is precisely this sort of way of describing relationships between men and women which ought to be one of the targets of feminist attack.

Thirdly, note the way in which Radcliffe Richards tends to conflate terms like attractiveness, beauty, sex, sensual enjoyment, sensual pleasing. She displays minimal recognition that one might want to draw *distinctions* between, say, conventional 'femininity' of appearance, and the notion of sensual pleasing; that these are not necessarily the same thing. Nor does she seem to recognize that there may be *contradictions* between these notions in the way that they sometimes currently are socially used.



Some aspects of conventional femininity of dress, for example, may militate *against* sensual enjoyment or sexual pleasure, particularly of women (think of women who feel compelled to get up early to make up their faces so that their husbands don't see them without makeup, or suffer agonies in case their hair style is being ruined). Radcliffe Richards would presumably reply that this is an instance of *excessive* concern about one's personal appearance which should of course be rejected; the trouble is that this sort of eclectic commonsensical reasonableness is incapable of exploring the contradictions such as that mentioned above, of understanding the function and historical emergence of current ideas of femininity, or of articulating a coherent critique of them.

Fourthly, note the way in which she sees sex and sensual enjoyment as having a rather low priority compared to things like character and intelligence or the virtues of the soul. True, she is at pains to stress that she does not see sex or beauty as bad in themselves; nevertheless what we have here is simply a modified version of the old split between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, or between the sensual and the spiritual, which has been extremely influential historically in justifying the oppression of women. It underlies the 'double standard' for men and women; the view of women as divided into two categories, those who are 'pure' or 'virtuous', and those who are not (the ones you marry and the ones you don't). It underlies the constant reiteration in the press during the reporting of the 'Ripper' killings that there was *more* cause for concern and anger when he attacked 'respectable' women. Now I am sure that Radcliffe Richards would not want to agree, say, with this distinction between the victims of the Ripper. But the point is that the sort of language that she uses is precisely that which *is* used by those who *do*

want to make the distinction; she accepts uncritically so much of the current language in which sexual relationships are described, and current connotations between sensuality or sexuality and conventional femininity of appearance, that her criticisms are vitiated or rendered weak and ineffectual from the start.

Radcliffe Richards' defence would be that it is just a (cosmically unfair) fact that some women are more beautiful than others, and that men will tend to prefer these women rather than the ugly ones; and that no amount of argument about different standards of beauty in different cultures can sensibly deny this. It is just a hard fact of life that if you are born deformed or ugly, you will have a harder time of it, and it is pointless expecting men all suddenly to become so idealistic and altruistic that they will cease to care whether women please them sensually or not. And there is nothing wrong in trying to improve yourself, including your appearance, if nature hasn't done a very good job to start with.

But this again misses the point; which is not that of whether we should expect men as individuals to be more or less altruistic. The point is rather that at no stage does Radcliffe Richards challenge current definitions of femininity and their relation to relationships between men and women, or suggest that they need to be challenged. She simply argues that, relative to other things, we should perhaps devote a bit less time and effort to the achievement of a feminine appearance. In fact she argues that really the question of how much effort one should or should not put into the cultivation of 'beauty' or of one's appearance is not really anything to do with feminism at all (p.196). This is because feminism is, as we have seen, to be defined as essentially only to do with sexual justice, so the proper feminist concern turns out to be only that women should have to put no more effort into working on their own personal appearance than men do, and that men should demand no more of women in this respect than they are willing to give themselves. Both sexes, she says, should be able to allow themselves 'the luxury of being able to choose a beautiful partner' (p.196). After all, if we care about beauty in other aspects of our lives there is no reason why we should not care about it in the personal appearance of other people, just so long as this affects men and women equally.

This of course offers no critique at all of current ideas of feminine beauty and its relation to sexuality and relationships between men and women. The only alternative to this total lack of any critique Radcliffe Richards sees as a blank cultural relativism, which merely harps on the fact of differences between cultures. She offers no conception that a critique of femininity might involve more than an appeal to commonsense categories on the one hand, or an appeal simply to cultural differences on the other; that it might need to involve a *historical* account of the emergence of the modern concept of femininity; that this might involve looking at the ways that women's roles and women's lives have changed under industrial capitalism, and at the role that the family plays in this. Shorn of this historical and critical dimension, feminism is so enfeebled that it is hardly worth the name.

In the last section of the same chapter, Radcliffe Richards does try to rehabilitate sexuality and save it from the designation of being 'lower' or less worthy in itself than other activities. To this end, she suggests that there is nothing wrong in principle with selling sex, or with pornography or strip shows; it is merely that in the course of pursuing these activities, men do not treat women properly. She argues that 'What feminism really needs is ... women who are very desirable to men, but who will have nothing to do with any man who does not treat them

properly' (p.204), and she suggests that really feminism has fallen into the old puritanical trap of saying that sex is wrong unless it is purified by the presence of other emotions and feelings. Why should this be so, she asks, and why should relationships based on anything else except sex not need this special purification?

But I do not think that most feminists would want to express their objections to things like porn shops and strip shows or the Miss World contest in these sorts of terms. I think that most of them do not see sex as a special case in this sort of way at all; and one does not have to believe that sex should be sanctified by finer feelings in order to object to porn shops and the sexual exploitation of women, or the predatory way in which many men think of sexual relationships. The point is not that sex is a special case, but that sexual relationships often provide an extreme and striking example of the *general* 'commodification', as one might call it, of the relationships between men and women, in which women are expected to play the role of servicing men, whether it be sexually, or as secretaries or sock-washers, with little regard to their own human needs. (It is also of course true that the denial of humanity in relationships and the reduction of relationships to that of mere functions affects men as well as women, in all sorts of ways; but the ways are not identical, and one of the main tasks of feminism is to point out and analyse this asymmetry, and attempt to understand why the burden has fallen particularly heavily on women.)

The other problem is that if you put the matter in this sort of way, that is if you suggest that the trouble is simply that men do not treat women properly and that women should insist that they *are* treated properly, it makes it sound as if it was simply a question of getting individual men to behave themselves. (What, incidentally, would Radcliffe Richards think was the 'proper' way to behave in a porn shop or at a strip show?) This leaves untouched the question of what 'proper' behaviour amounts to, or where we should move beyond commonsense notions to find some analysis of notions of proper behaviour which find the Miss World contest acceptable. It does

not ask whether certain institutions or forms of social organisation make it impossible, or extremely difficult, for people to behave towards each other in more human and non-exploitative ways. You cannot change relationships between people, including those between men and women, if you leave completely untouched the social structures within which these relationships take place. Radcliffe Richards dislikes moralising about prostitution, rightly, but she makes two mistakes: firstly, that of supposing that moralising is what feminists do, as if they were only a hair's breadth from Mary Whitehouse; and secondly, that of just substituting one form of moralising for another. Instead of gunning for the prostitutes or the strippers, we are to go for the men who will not behave properly and lecture them until they do. But if it were that easy there would hardly be a need for feminism; blank moralism is no substitute for critical analysis of the conditions which breed the very things to which this moralism is supposed to be a response.

\*\*\*\*

I have picked these two chapters of Radcliffe Richards' book to illustrate what seems to me to be the fundamental weakness of the book, which is that, in conceiving of feminism simply as a moral fight about abstract and decontextualised and dehistoricised issues such as that of 'sexual justice', it tends merely to recapitulate current terms and categories, and to fail to recognise how often many of the things which feminism is fighting against are expressed in precisely those terms. This is why I think that ultimately Radcliffe Richards' 'feminism' is often scarcely worth the name, and rarely transcends everyday commonsense in order to ask why things have *become* commonsense. In a way, the book, for all that it offers some useful ammunition to feminists at certain points, is another exemplification of the barrenness of moral philosophy or of moralising which fail to try and understand the history of the terms that they use, and fail to recognise that the terms of moral debate do not exist in a remote philosopher's heaven, but underpin and are underpinned by social structures which may themselves have an interest in concealing this fact.



**We would like to concentrate a forthcoming issue largely on**

**FEMINISM**

**Please send contributions and suggestions to the editorial address (back cover)**

