

Feminism without nostalgia

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The title of the recent *Radical Philosophy* conference, ‘Torn Halves: Theory and Politics in Contemporary Feminism’, implied that two things which should be joined – theory and politics – have come apart; indeed have been ripped apart rather violently and now need stitching back together. Is it, then, the case that two processes which were, *and should be*, united, have been severed? If this is indeed our situation, then it suggests that some sort of crisis has befallen us, whereby feminist theory and the women’s movement have moved off in different directions: or even worse, that one of the pair (and presumably the movement would be the prime candidate here) has suffered a premature demise. This certainly raises a number of pressing questions: what was, or should be, the nature of this connection? Why has it been broken? Should we try to repair it, and if so, along what lines?

In trying to respond to these questions, I realized that the very meanings of politics and theory have become unclear in feminism. So I will begin by considering each in turn, before addressing their linkage and suggesting a particular relationship as exemplary.

Feminism and the political

In considering what feminism might mean by the political, I have distinguished between two senses, which I will call the *topographical* and the *dynamic*. In the *topographical* sense, politics is located within three different domains, each of whose differential effects on women have been a source of theory and of particular practices. Most explicitly, this spatial understanding of the political concerns the *state* as the pinnacle of power, where on the one hand feminists demand equal representation and where on the other we regard processes of legislation and policy-making with a mixture of hope and suspicion. In a rather obvious way, anything we do in this context can be regarded as political, and we may well feel that our

interventions and successes have recently fallen short here, for reasons broadly connected with the ideological climate and an attenuation of the democratic process. Paradoxically, the response by many feminist political theorists – especially in the United States – has been to focus on processes of a highly idealized model of discursive democracy, while paying little attention to how its preconditions for fair and equal participation might be realized.

At the next level down, feminists identify a series of structures and processes within *civil society* – such as economy and family – which reproduce sex roles and gender hierarchies in ways that have formerly been designated oppressive. Intervention is deemed political here, since its aim is to eliminate various forms of discrimination and injustice. Arguably this space has seen the major staging of second-wave feminism, where the state was more obviously targeted by the first.

Now, it is at these two levels, where there is a massive and resilient institutionalization of more or less crude and visible patriarchal power, that women have been able to situate a politics most unequivocally. It is in these contexts that an earlier discourse was able to refer to women’s *oppression* and to its opposition as the *Women’s Liberation Movement*. Here, then, was a clear and binary confrontation between the massive power of what Habermas calls steering media – state and economy – on one hand, and a relatively unified and militant force on the other. When we lament the demise of our politics, I suspect that it is on these levels that we situate its loss.

But as feminists, we also locate politics in a third realm, that of *personal life*, and although this is both re-enforced by, and in turn re-enforces, the other two levels, the kind of strategies it implies have been quite different from those recognized conventionally as political. It is surely here that our analyses and practices have been most innovative and specific to gender struggle, although they do not necessarily rely on a

mass movement since strategies are more individual and targets more local. Yet my impression is that *politics* has recently waned here, too, with confrontations over, for example, the division of domestic labour and sexual practices either resuming their personal but *apolitical* nature, or being displaced by a crisis in the household economy.

The alternative, *dynamic*, model of politics construes it not spatially but as a process of circulating and unstable power relations. If one were so inclined, one could trace it to Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Foucault, but I think it is also encouraged by feminists' own theoretical excavations, which show the powers reproducing sexual inequality and gender hierarchy moving through all domains of the political and indeed overflowing them into the discursive, linguistic, aesthetic and psychological. This suggests that it is never sufficient to pursue inclusion in government or equal treatment in civil society: instead politics must involve an ongoing engagement wherever power is present, via deployment of a whole variety of tactics which cannot be formulated in advance. This understanding of politics is most appropriate to the third topographical space of the personal, but it has tended to politicize culture as such.

There is a certain irony here, since, while many feminist philosophers have been intellectually enthusiastic about this politics, its significance and efficacy for a women's *movement* have been difficult to theorize. The diverse, often aesthetic or performative, strategies, fragmented support and ambiguous goals deployed are not obviously connected to a mass movement and do not self-evidently achieve the sort of outcomes we might expect from a successful politics. Indeed I would surmise that it is precisely because this often seems to be the only politics we are currently engaged in that some women might wonder whether we still have a politics at all, or if everything in fact takes place within the realm of the theoretical.

At this stage, however, I only want to question a tendency prevalent in this last approach, to collapse politics into power relations as such. Power is indeed ubiquitous, but not all power is political. To become so, it must be structured, conflictual and at least minimally open to change. And, even more importantly, it must also be articulated in such a way that its presence engenders some political mobilization. Where power remains merely habitual and mute, or uncontested, it is at best only latently political and awaits its theoretical disclosure and practical resistance to become manifestly so. This, then, brings me to the question of theory in relation to the political.

Feminism and theory

I find it helpful to begin here with a distinction between *empirical studies*, *theory* and *abstract philosophy*. There are limits to how far this is sustainable, but it allows me to associate theory with a specific political task, even if for feminism all three have political import. Finding out about women's lives and building up empirical data bases has been an essential task in overcoming women's social and academic invisibility, and we have succeeded brilliantly here. At the other end of the spectrum, engaging in philosophical questions regarding, for example, epistemology or metaphysics, has given feminism its own grounds for debating the foundational nature of gender differentiation. However, it is in the middle realms of theorizing, where *concept-building and empirical data* are brought together, that the connection between intellectual work and political intervention is drawn the tightest, and it is here that I think we must be concerned if the two part company or if theory collapses into either empiricism or abstract philosophy.

This does not mean that the only important theory is political theory, but it does suggest that for feminists, whose theorizing was from the start directed at changing the world, theory is oriented to political tasks. In this sense it is both instrumental in guiding and inciting practice, and is itself a participant in power struggles at a discursive level. Feminism is part of a tradition that never sees ideas as innocent. Political theory, for example, has both legitimized women's exclusion from public life and expounded the norms that have constituted and disciplined gendered subjects, while it has also been used by feminists as a vehicle for framing and legitimizing our own demands.

Yet, although theories have often acted as crude ideologies, masking and sustaining patriarchal interests, they also work more insidiously to represent reality in ways that are riddled with gender privileges and exclusions. This means that their demystification or deconstruction *is* a political act. Although it is not easy to point to concrete results, this is an activity that many feminist theorists and philosophers have been engaged in over a long period of time. Presumably it is an ongoing task we still value, although it may be helpful to pause every now and then, and to make explicit the strategic aims it bears.

Where the theory–practice link is more evident, however, is where theory directs its gaze onto what, for want of a better phrase, I will call *the real world*. Now, I have already argued that power becomes political only when it is articulated such that conflict becomes explicit and a spur to action. But thematizing effects

of power that were previously only lived is itself a political process. For it is not the case, as we formerly tended to believe, that inequalities are hidden truths simply awaiting representation. Power is also involved in the way – and whether – we problematize our situation and the conceptual framework we bring to bear on the myriad experiences of everyday life. For example, the public/private distinction is not a self-evident opposition simply spread out before us, but a wonderfully fecund conceptualization that feminism has developed to structure the real in ways that explain our exclusions and focus our transgressions. By representing a complex socio-cultural world from a particular perspective, we engage in an ideological/discursive struggle of reality-construction, whereby lines of conflict, and hence the political itself, are configured.

I would not, however, want to claim that this process is reducible to the exercise of naked power or sheer fantasy, since thematizations of oppression or discrimination are only resonant to the extent that they are already materially and existentially suffered prior to their discursive representation. The lived world is sufficiently open to accommodate a variety of interpretations and silencings, and for women the way it is presented is crucial in giving our politics both a normative basis and strategic direction. But representation is never just relative, since it is anchored in experience. Moreover, the clarity with which the disadvantages bestowed by gender at any given time can be articulated must have a bearing on women's politicization and mobilization, since if theory is to inspire action, it must be *felt* to be 'true' and consequential, not just abstract or ideological posturing.

Yet this is where I think we do confront a dilemma today. Our own studies have increasingly shown sexual inequality to be extremely complex and diffuse, as well as revealing gender identity as a diverse and ambiguous phenomenon. In one sense we can use this knowledge politically, to deconstruct vulgar notions of binary sexual difference. But at the same time, our more sophisticated theorizing has tended to dilute a formerly more incisive representation of opposition and oppression, which makes collective action difficult in the political and economic domains – that is, precisely where the power that sustains sexual inequality regarding rights and resources is most massive and consolidated. In part it is true that postmodernization has rendered those realms more difficult to understand comprehensively, and therefore more immune to any obvious oppositional strategy. But we have also been seduced by discourses that distrust structural

analysis and emphasize fragmentation instead. We are well schooled in antipathy towards Marxian-style totalizations or reductionism. Yet there has also been a certain retreat from engagement with the real, in light of *our* epistemological scepticism and *its* political intransigence. This needs redressing, whatever its difficulties, if the material and structural bases for either equal citizenship, or equal opportunities to be gender-complex, are to be constructed.

In this sense I think there is a political problem with the postmodernization of feminism – if I can put it this way – in that our pursuit of both diversity and consensus has distracted us regarding the nature of political struggle as requiring risky and audacious acts, where to theorize politically or to intervene effectively does ultimately require acts of conflict and closure, even a certain militancy. For no matter how much we might aspire to fulfil the ideals of discursive democracy or to accommodate difference and complexity, we still occupy a social field where violence and inequality require definitive responses which do not fade into impotent openness and multiplicity. These latter may be, and I believe are, potent strategies on a cultural level. But in the socio-economic domain, where there are more or less veiled conflicts of interest, structured inequalities and zero-sum games, more definitive analyses and mobilizations are necessary.

So far I have been considering what politics and theory mean for feminism, and I would now like to be clear about the *conclusions* I derive from this. A topographical approach to the political locates it in a variety of domains, where the nature of power and of appropriate strategic engagement with it vary. In so far as we both sense an eclipse of women's political practice and feel some urgency regarding its resuscitation, I would situate these specifically in the realms of state and civil society, where I have suggested that highly organized structures of power sustain more or less experiential, explicit and visible forms of discrimination which require collective action and political mobilization on a significant scale if they are to be effectively challenged.

To render the power that operates here political, however, its theorization is required, and this involves both a direct involvement in discursive struggles and a reading of events that takes their density and inertia seriously by thematizing a complex field of forces where different lines of strategy and defence are, if not determined, at least circumscribed. It follows from this that a crucial role for feminist theory is to engage in a *dialectical* reading of the present in order to formulate tactics and opportunities and to mobilize its forces.

Indeed it is here that I want to locate an *exemplary theory–practice relationship*, and I would suggest that it is its demise that has resulted in our current sense of crisis and torn halves. In order to illustrate what I have in mind, I want to go back twenty-five years or so, to a brief reconsideration of one of modern feminism’s founding texts: Juliet Mitchell’s *Woman’s Estate* (1971).

Woman’s Estate

In the preface to this work, Mitchell offered a list of political actions which provided a legacy for 1960s’ feminism. The suffragettes, she recalls, burnt down houses, smashed shop windows, destroyed buildings, blew up letter boxes and cut telegraph wires. Here was an unambiguous confrontation negotiated through direct action; and although Mitchell never associates herself with this type of violence against property, she does present the movement early in its second wave as comparable and revolutionary. She also explains its re-emergence and radicalism as a consequence of two factors: the contemporary situation (in which women were at the forefront of acute contradictions within capitalism) and the simultaneous explosion of other radical political movements which forged important alliances with feminists. She further traces the women’s movement’s own political influences in anarcho-syndicalism, anarchism, the Situationists, the anti-psychiatry movement and even terrorism, as well as in Marxist and liberal political thought. In short, Mitchell is in no doubt that the women’s movement is born out of an activist, even revolutionary, past, and that it will continue its trajectory.

This does not, however, prevent her from worrying about its *politicization*. In contrast to our own anxieties that theory has overtaken practice, she sees the movement in 1971 as tending towards a practice which is not yet adequately theorized. ‘The Women’s Liberation Movement’, she writes, ‘is at the stage of organizing our “instinct” of our oppression as women, into a consciousness of its meaning.’¹ Mitchell insists that this cannot be done in abstraction but is a *historical and dialectical process in which theory and practice are interwoven at every level*.

The renewed movement had, then, begun as series of complaints, derived from experience but at first manifest only in spontaneous protest. This aspect must not be lost: ‘We do have to experience the implications of our own oppression.’² But in order to render this political, it had to be transformed into a political challenge to social institutions generally. The organizational aspect of this challenge was in

fact crucial, Mitchell argued, in two ways. First, it was prefigurative: that is, it might be described as a form of unmediated political engagement in so far as small women’s groups *perform* a new mode of inter-subjectivity and a new political style that is consonant with feminist values – ‘collective work’, as she says, ‘is part of the process’, although it cannot be an end in itself since then it would be a merely moral, rather than political, solution.

Secondly, then, it is important that small groups should coalesce into revolutionary collectives. This is strategically necessary, but more importantly, as far as *theory* is concerned, it is at this level that a general theorization of women’s oppression, as well as strategies for liberation, are forged. The small group allows women to discuss personal experience, and through discussion to recognize that the *personal is political*. This does not mean for Mitchell that politics is a micro-matter, reduced to the level of the individual, but that personal experiences of oppression come to be understood as instances of a more general, structural oppression whose resolution can only be collective. The broader groups then work on analysing these structures, but it is crucial that they are not imposing some pre-existent formula. Theory grows out of personal experience and interprets it by eliciting generalities which are then related to structural forces. Politics is strategically guided by such theory, and theory mobilizes the individuals to whom it speaks to collective acts. In so far as change occurs, then the new conditions call for new theorization, different strategies, and so on.

In this dialectical linkage, there is, then, no question of having to seek the political implications of a theory subsequently, or of developing an abstract theory whose connection with lived experience might remain elusive. Experience is never taken simply as raw empirical data; nor does theory seek some complete formulation: they are continuously and mutually refined through their interaction. Women are not presupposed as some latent political agency just waiting to be set in motion, but nor do they have to be conjured up subsequently out of the complexities of theory.

My reason for returning to Mitchell is that her work suggests what I consider to be an exemplary way of holding theory and practice together. Much of her work during the 1970s was just such a reading of dominant structures in terms of their contradictions, articulations and the weak spots at which they were vulnerable to change. The details of her analysis, as well as her commitment to scientific socialism, may seem dated in the 1990s, but the point is that if we are to act

strategically; if we are to strike a resonance among the many and diverse women who suffer various forms of violence, discrimination, exploitation and oppression and to incite a further wave of feminist politics; then we too need an ongoing analysis of contemporary conditions and the political opportunities they allow.

This surely means turning again to the sort of *political economy* and *sociology* we have largely abandoned. Of course, for us post-poststructuralists the cultural and discursive structures that *construct* gendered identities remain an important site of analysis and contestation. But we also need to consider afresh the roles and deprivations that are imposed by a system which does identify us as female subjects inhabiting women's bodies; and granted the anachronism of Mitchell's analyses, do we not urgently need a new theorization of where *women* (as opposed to genders) stand as the century draws to a close? Should this not be the central role for our theory as a guide to an engaged practice in public life?

For example, Mitchell wrote of women's exclusion from the workforce, but today we witness its feminization. Of course women still occupy worse-paid jobs under worse conditions, but the complexities of our location in an economy that is both post- and pre-modern; the growth of a substantial underclass, of which women constitute a significant proportion; the effects of information technology on the home/work distinction that has underpinned capitalism thus far, as well as our own public/private opposition; the simultaneous collapse of the family and a renewed support

for so-called family values; a popular culture that itself celebrates gender-crossing and which only in its crudest forms exhibits the sort of blatant sexism bemoaned by Mitchell – these are all structural changes calling for new analysis, perhaps new paradigms, regarding their differential effects on women and the feasibility of response.

What is needed, then, is an audit of where women, in our commonality and diversity, stand in the context of the field of forces which constitutes our situation. This does not mean relying on unmediated accounts of everyday life, forgetting that our lives are already structured by ideology and power, but it does involve taking account of the specific forms of subordination and power that strike us, since it is impossible to mobilize people on the basis of theory alone.

Strategically, then, I am suggesting two levels of theorizing. First, we need to look once more at women's actual experiences in order to elicit generalities. This was once perceived as intrinsically political, when it took the form of consciousness-raising and organizing via the proliferation of networks of small groups. Should we try to reactivate this process (perhaps via the Internet?), or is it strategic work that might adequately be undertaken from a distance by researchers using interviewing techniques or opinion polls? The problem with the latter option is that, although it conveys a sense of objectivity, it ignores a dimension that was crucial to Mitchell's dialectic, where it was women themselves who collectively articulated the lacunae they suffered. It is surely not just a matter



of acquiring knowledge, as if it were already there but hidden, but of a *process* of coming-to-knowledge which also changes us and our (self-) perceptions on the way. In other words, it is a praxis, not simply an exercise in data collection.

Second, we need to locate these findings in a broader structural context, always remembering that this analysis, too, must be resolutely political. Dynamically, the question of the political is one of strategy: of reading the present as a shifting *field of forces*. By this I mean that power does not just circulate randomly, passing through players who are its conduits. It is often exercised with hierarchical intent, but in any case it runs into clots, nodal points, where it undergoes a certain ossification and closure whereby some groups are consistently more powerful than others. The field of forces may be agonistic, but not all players are equal. A *political* movement cannot, then, afford to go all the way with a Nietzschean–Foucauldian description of power flows: it must also focus on the way techniques of power are captured by institutions; colonized by privileged groups whose collective acts may indeed result in unintended consequences but whose result is nevertheless the reproduction of inequalities and exclusions.

A political theorizing must accordingly identify these concentrations of power: not as congealed centres of domination that would paralyse opposition, but as relatively closed (or open) force-fields that must be engaged with strategically, in light of their strengths and gaps. It is in this sense that we continue Mitchell's work, if without the language of contradiction or ambition of liberation. To theorize politically, dialectically, is to ask where resistance might be effective; where prefigurative alternatives might leave their mark; where power is experienced as especially intolerable and whether it thereby incites refusal or complicity. If, for example, we conclude that state and economy are especially closed and oppressive but that any truly radical negation is impracticable, then we might invoke our powers as voters and consumers, both having potentially immense leverage but one dependent on effective organization.

What this leaves us with is not, at least under current circumstances, any *grand* politics. It does not talk of Patriarchy or Capitalism with capital letters, because it understands that there is no mobilization currently powerful enough to negate these structures, even if theory could pin them down. But it does involve a critical engagement by locating all our piecemeal and diverse strategies in a larger field of relatively unstable relations where sometimes small transgressions, and

sometimes collective assaults, are effective. For this sort of theorizing must also be resolutely realistic, taking into account the status of *feminist forces* as they wane or grow; the potential for mass mobilization; the endurance – or not – of a latent feminism that might be preserved and reactivated; the existence of small and piecemeal but nevertheless committed groups of activists and academics. It has some mobilizing capacity in its explications of oppressive structures, and it takes an overview of the myriad acts of resistance women still collectively perform, but it is neither naive nor unduly pessimistic about the state of women's organization at any one time, recognizing that, like all movements, it will go through different cycles according to its own inner logic and changing external circumstances. The challenge is to match efficacious and appropriate strategies to the possibilities of the times, while recognizing that women's politics and hardships are themselves constituents of those times, which do not therefore have to be passively borne. It is not pragmatism but it is strategic.

Two waves, no nostalgia!

The reason for calling my article 'Feminism without Nostalgia', despite an appeal to a 1960s' praxis, was to insist that when we express concern over our politics we must not imagine that we are inhabiting the same world. Mitchell was writing during one of those rare and privileged moments in history when theory and practice do seem able to correspond and reinforce one another. Lived experience, as an experience of disjunction and discrimination, was relatively homogeneous and explicit in a context of systemic oppressiveness yet disarray. In other words, there seemed to be a certain clarity to the situation which was in step with its articulation by radical groups whom it further served to mobilize and orientate. Today nothing seems transparent: there are masks, ambiguities, complexities and reversals that make the disclosure of oppression much more complicated and much less immediately resonant with experience. All this opacity and multiplicity makes the dialectical approach, which is what I do want to relearn from Mitchell, so much more difficult and mediated, although I am arguing that we must attempt it both in terms of immediate strategy, and in order to make sense of the movement's fortunes in a broader historical context.

From this point of view, it seems to me that the real crisis for feminist politics is that while we are now passing into a historical situation where our

'instincts' tell us that state and economy – those spaces where the movement has always arisen most dramatically – should again be our target, we no longer have the theory or the political organization to respond efficaciously, since our models of theory and practice in these domains are now several decades old and we do not inhabit a privileged moment in history. We are suddenly lamenting a loss of politics not because women have not been acting politically, but because what we have been doing is not effective in the upper topographical regions of power where we now want to engage more dramatically. It would be much too complicated to try to work out here why this is, but I would suggest that a worsening economic situation has reached a tipping point, and also that it has become evident that what many of us believed would be a temporary phenomenon that could be rectified by a change of government is clearly not after all going to be challenged by parties of the so-called Left.

As an example of some of these developments, I would like to cite a recent comment in *The New Yorker* by Betty Friedan.³ The author's identity is significant, since Friedan has long been associated with liberal feminism and the powerful National Organization of Women in the United States. She was an icon of early second-wave feminism alongside Mitchell, since she identified 'the problem with no name' that was besetting American housewives. But she was also consistently criticized by socialist feminists for ignoring the economic obstacles to sexual equality. In 1996, however, we find her supporting a Stand for Children rally modelled on the Million Man March which had taken place several months earlier, and writing that it 'is likely to bring out some new thinking that has been quietly bubbling under the surface of the various and too often fragmented movements for American social renewal'.

The rally's specific target was draconian cuts in welfare, which critics saw as disproportionately affecting women and children, although its momentum was by no means exclusively associated with feminism. Nevertheless, Friedan focuses on the women's movement to argue that among many of its supporters there is a

growing sense that the time is ripe to go beyond 'gender issues' that lately have been the movement's prime concerns – abortion, date rape, sexual harassment, pornography, and the like – to such larger matters as economic distress and social disintegration.

Although we might pause at Friedan's distinction between gender issues and social disintegration, or her implied relegation of them to smaller issues (especially since in Britain we may well feel that we have become insufficiently political even here), I think her emphasis on economic questions is indeed symptomatic of the times. It is not a question of adopting her as an icon, but of noting that, significantly for a liberal feminist, she refers to the limits of an old paradigm of identity politics and rights, presenting in its place a new concern for 'extreme income inequality, and the concentration of wealth in the top one-half of one per cent'. Unsurprisingly, she does not go so far as to mention class struggle, but she does look to 'a new kind of power' wielded by the combined strength of 'forces for equality', which might mobilize support if government and corporations fail to respond to polling evidence that the most urgent concerns are those of families and jobs. In other words, even Friedan is arguing for a shift in politics from the personal realm to that of civil society, and she is also anticipating a new mobilization of forces under the banner of economic equality.

In the British context, I would like merely to refer to an article in *The New Statesman and Society*,⁴ which reported an extraordinary 81 per cent of respondents to a recent Gallup poll agreeing that there is a class struggle in Britain. Interpreting the responses, the analysts refer to a common-sense view of class derived from a sense of increasing conflict, predicated upon what is happening to people 'on a day to day basis': an '*idea in action*' as one calls it, that concerns 'the bonds between people that we experience everyday as real'. The article notes the lack of any political machinery for reflecting this view, as well as the elusiveness of the concept of class for theory.

These two articles do not, of course, add up to any adequate theorization of the times, but they are symptomatic, I would argue, of a general feeling that *the* political question for the millennium is one of resource distribution, which calls for more radical responses than the state is willing even to contemplate. The growth of an underclass, shifts in the job market, the decline of welfare support and extensions of commodification and market relations are all part of a resurgence of capitalism which affects all women, regardless of our race or class and despite our different situations, and which also affects us more generally as workers and providers. Of course, we have been here before, but in our post-Marxist climate everything

surely needs to be thought through again, including our political responses and interventions which were clearly inadequate the first time round.

Finally, I would also like to situate this problem more historically, and to do so let me take up feminist historians' *metaphor of waves*. This is quite appropriate, because the two explosive moments of the women's movement – in the latter part of the nineteenth century and again in the late 1960s – were indeed what I am calling privileged moments, when women rode the crest of a wave and theory and practice were in sync. But between waves there must be troughs – times such as our own, when solidarity wanes because lines of oppression are too complex and dispersed or invisible to allow experience and theory to gel sufficiently to mobilize mass response. In this context, the small but multiple transgressions and resistances, the defences and refusals that diverse women have sustained, are appropriate to the configuration of forces; and our recent cultural bias is also strategically sensible (although perhaps it is a *lack* of theory we suffer here, in its inability or refusal to represent these fragments in terms of an overall political significance).

But the movement itself shifts into crisis when the situation changes, as the previously cited evidence suggests it has: when a more organized confrontation with the massive forces of the steering media is called for, yet where the kind of organized practices that might be efficacious are barely evident in the current field of forces. To put all this in a different language: we might associate the crests of waves with *a politics of liberation*, and the responses appropriate to troughs with what Foucault calls *practices of liberty*. Or, alternatively, we might align the language of liberation and oppression with the sort of mass politics that economy and state require, and the more individualist or grouplet idea of practices of liberty with small resistances and experiments that sustain cultural gains during periods of reaction and closure.

It is interesting that, although Foucault himself saw a weakness of liberation struggles lying in their inability to establish the practices of liberty which would succeed them, he also conceded that liberation struggles may well be their precondition – specifically, under conditions of domination such as those of nineteenth-century patriarchy⁵ – because they open up the requisite spaces. Under patriarchal domination, women could not reverse the situation. Their limited freedom to resist allowed only 'tricks': 'the problem is in fact to find out where resistance is going to organize.' In

other words, the question is how to move from tricks to tactics; from domination to agonism, where the ethics Foucault associates with practices of liberty are replaced by collective, political acts.

In a sense this is only repeating what I have already said, but, since I am broadly trying to synthesize Marx and Foucault within a dialectical approach to history, it is important to realize that Foucault also supports organized struggle under certain historical conditions. While it appears to be true that women in the West no longer suffer the degree of oppression evident in previous centuries, we might surely claim nevertheless that our escape from domination remains hazardous since we have achieved only an incomplete liberation, where power is neither wholly closed nor open and reversible. Accordingly, our dialectical approach to history is also needed to tell us what sort of historical cycle we are entering and what kind of strategies are appropriate. It is not necessarily an approach unique to women (since we are not claiming to be history's privileged agents in any teleological sense), but it does summon a reading of the present which might locate allies. Moreover, it avoids the false universalizing that was a tendency criticized in previous, more overtly political, feminisms, in so far as it is an approach applicable to diverse groups of women as well as to women in general, although its focus is on connections and overlappings between them, since it is here that a general theory is constituted out of (and alongside) difference.

If we are indeed entering a new period where civil society is again experienced as the most significant, then we need to think about how to mobilize and how to act as women. We cannot just assume that new forms of power will incite their own counter-forces, but we can read people's experiences in the context of our objective situation and begin to theorize and mobilize on this basis. We can re-politicize our theory. Bringing theory and practice back into a dialectical rapport and inciting an efficacious politics in the real world will be no easy task, but if we do want to repair the tear, then this is where we must begin.

Notes

1. Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971, p. 92.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
3. Betty Friedan, *The New Yorker*, 3 June 1996. pp. 5–6.
4. *The New Statesman and Society*, August 1996, pp. 12–14.
5. Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 1, Spring 1987, p. 123.