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Histories of the Present and Future *Feminism, Power, Bodies*

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There is much about feminist theory that is in a state of flux right now; major transformations are occurring regarding how feminist politics and its long- and short-term goals and methods are conceived. The debates about the place of identity in political struggle, attempts to make feminism more inclusive, the ways in which even the body is conceptualized, the impact of feminism on young women and men, have, instead of producing a new more focused and cohesive feminist movement, simply witnessed the growing fragmentation and division within its ranks. I would like to look at some of the effects that some key theoretical/political changes have on the ways in which feminist scholarship and theory have changed or should change.

In particular, I want to look at two paradigm shifts—shifts that have affected the ways we understand knowledge and power—which have occurred over the last decade or so and have transformed, or hopefully will transform, the way feminist scholarship and politics is undertaken and what its basic goals are. The first consists in transformations in our understanding of knowledges, discourses, texts, and histories, which politicizes them not only in terms of their contents—that is, in terms of what they say—but also in terms of the positions from which they are articulated (their modes of address)—what they cannot say—and what their positions are within a network of other texts that constitute both their milieu and the means by which they become both comprehensible and tamed. The second involves transformations in the ways in which women and femininity are understood, that move away dramatically from the prevailing feminist models of earlier generations of women's identity, their absence from prevailing practices and forms of knowledge, their unique features, qualities, and characteristics. Instead of focusing on women's unique identities, their roles as unrecognized agents in histories and practices, it may be time instead to focus on the disparate and disunified processes, or rather agencies (in the plural), forces and impulses that comprise such an identity.

This dual politicization of knowledges, discourses, and writing, on the one hand, and of identity politics, on the other hand, have come together to raise new feminist questions about knowledge, subjectivity, and power. It is no longer clear, in the wake of antihumanist assaults on the general question of identity, whether the strategic value of identity-politics, a politics developed around the affirmation of minority identities, remains as strong as it was two or three decades ago. Subjects cannot be understood as powerless, oppressed, defeated, marginalized, and stripped of action; nor conversely can they be affirmed as self-contained and

pregiven agents, agents who control their actions, their effects, their social milieu. Though useful in bolstering a sense of fragility, both concepts of the subject conceived as victim and the subject conceived as agent are equally fictitious. It is perhaps now time to undertake more profound and braver experiments in conceptualization by attempting to think the subject, identity, agency, community—all terms reliant on a notion of some internal force—explicitly in terms of forces, agencies (in the plural), operative vectors, points of intensity, lines of movement, resistance, or complacency. We need to think subjects in terms of their strategic placement within power networks; that is, in terms of what they are able to do, more than in terms of who they are.

Both these tendencies, now beginning to have major impacts on feminist theory, owe an enormous debt to the radical antihumanism and the postulation of the inherent entwinement of power and knowledges developed in the genealogical works of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and other postmodern thinkers. I would like to divide this chapter into a discussion of these transformations. I want first to look at how these transformations may affect our understanding of history and historical research. I will then go on to discuss how they affect our understanding of power, and finally I will suggest how this provides us with more complex and subtle ways of understanding bodily differences and thus sexual difference.

I will use the philosophical writings of some late-twentieth-century French philosophers—Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Luce Irigaray—to raise the question of what history is, how its readings, its reconstitution, functions politically, and how alternative histories remain to be written. In raising these questions (I don't dare claim to be able to answer them!) I hope to focus on the contemporary political context in which feminist history, the production of an alternative feminist canon, or the problematization of historiography, can take place.

Past, Present, and Future

The status and place of temporality and of the past remains one of the elided ingredients in much current discussion about social change, upheaval, transformation, or even revolution, that is, in speculation about the future. How we understand the past, and our link to it through memory, reconstruction, and scholarship, prefigure and contain corresponding and unspoken conceptions regarding the present and future. Implicit in the very procedures of conventional historical research is the presumption that the past provides us with the means (or at least some of them) for understanding the present, a series of potential lessons to learn, an anticipation of events to come, a mode of repetition that revivifies and enlivens the past by linking its relevance, its sense, to the present (and by implication, the future). Rethinking the relations between past and present, reconstituting

ing historical “memory” as a form of production, may thus exert a powerful influence on reconsidering the ways in which the past is traditionally represented in both history in its various methodologies, as well as in dominant philosophical and feminist conceptions of time. The ways we rethink this relation will, of course, also have direct implications for whatever conceptions of the future, the new, creation, and production we may develop.

Much historical and historiographic research is mired in a certain belief that human beings, or even life in its generality, are essentially functions of repetition. The same kinds of issues reappear over and over again, and if we know how to read history carefully enough, perhaps we can learn from the first or second replaying of historical forces what we need not live through again. In short, history as a discipline is in large part motivated by the belief that we can learn from the past, and by reflecting on it, can improve the present. The past is fundamentally like the present, the present is a mode of continuity of the past, and insofar as this similarity continues, the past will provide a preeminent source for the solution of contemporary problems and the issues the future may throw up. The more and the better we understand the past, the more well armed we are to face a future that is to a large extent a copy or reformulation—the variation on a theme—of historical events. It is for this reason we need to cultivate memory, as the art and scholarship appropriate to memorialize the past. Such a view of history can only understand the present in terms of a concretization of the past, the culmination or fruition of what has been as a form of contained repetition. It thus sees the future in terms of tendencies and features of the past and present. Where the past is a retrospective projection of a present real, on such an understanding, the future can only be understood in terms of the prospective projection or extrapolation of the present. The problem with such a model of time and history is that it inevitably produces a predictable future, a future in which the present can still recognize itself instead of a future open to contingency and the new, the future as fundamental surprise. What is needed in place of such a monumental history is the idea of a history of singularity and particularly, a history that defies repeatability or generalization, and that welcomes the unexpectedness of the future and the new as it makes clear the specificities and particularities, the events, in the full sense of the word, of history.

This, as I understand it, must be one of the paradoxes of historical research in general: histories—stories and reconstructions of the past—are in fact illuminations of a present that would not be possible without this past. The time of the historian is strangely dislocated, somewhere between the past and the present, but not entirely occupying either. For the feminist historian, these paradoxes, the paradoxes of temporality, are particularly exacerbated: a feminist or radical historian (this point is of course not confined to feminists but could apply equally to the postcolonial or antiracist historian) the task is not simply to openly acknowledge that the writing of past is more a story about the present, but also that it is the linking of the past and present to a possible future, of providing a

connection between past potential and a future that does *not* resemble the present. The project of the feminist historian must be, in part at least, the forging of relations between the sexes, and of each sex, along lines that dramatically diverge from what is present. The past, a past no longer understood as inert or simply given, may help engender a productive future, a future beyond patriarchy. Time, the very matter and substance of history, entails the continual elaboration of the new, the openness of things (including life, texts, or matter) to what befalls them. This is what time *is* if it is anything at all, the indeterminate—the unfolding and emergence of the new.

The future is the domain of what endures. But what endures, what exists in time and has time as part of its being is not what remains the same over time, what retains an identity between what it was and what it will be. Time involves the divergence between what was, (that is, what exists in virtuality) and that which is actualized or capable of actualization. The past is what endures, not in itself, but what is open to becoming, to something other. This becoming infects not only beings in/as duration, but the world itself:

The universe *endures*. The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new. It is true that in the universe itself two opposite movements are to be distinguished. . . , ‘descent’ and ‘ascent’. The first only unwinds a roll ready prepared. In principle, it might be accomplished almost instantaneously, like releasing a spring. But the ascending movement, which corresponds to an inner work of ripening or creating, *endures* essentially and imposes its rhythm on the first, which is inseparable from it. (Bergson 1944: 14)

Even if our primary orientation is to the past, the past is never adequately conceivable except insofar as it propels a new future, a future beyond the limit of the present. This is why feminist history is so crucial: not simply because it informs our present, but more so, because it enables other virtual futures to be conceived, other perspectives to be developed, than those which currently prevail. In this sense, the astute historian stands on the cusp of the folding of the past into the future, beyond the control or limit of the present.

The Past Lives into an Unknowable Future

I want to raise a series of hypotheses, some of them quite speculative, some of them meant to surprise more than to convince or aspire to truth, some meant to highlight rather than obscure social and political issues, which I hope will help us to raise in relief the question of what feminist history might be and what feminist theory must be in order to support feminist history, feminist writing, feminist

knowledges (which for me are *not* about women's history, women's writing, women's knowledge but about writing *otherwise*). To write a history of the past from the point of view of the future: the task, at least one of the most urgent, is to think in the *future anterior*, the tense that Irigaray favors in her textual readings: what will have been, what the past and present will have been in the light of a future that is possible only because of them.

Three working hypotheses, then, about history and its inherent binding of past to present and future:

1. Augmenting Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish*), I would suggest that history is always a history of the present, and that the best history is not only one that is a history of the present, a reconstitution of the conditions of the present, but also a *history of the future*. In studying history, we are not simply gleaning texts, artifacts, and events as they occurred in themselves: we are not unearthing "facts" from the past, like little nuggets of gold, each of which have their own intrinsic value. Rather, what *counts* as history, what is regarded as constituting the past is that which is deemed to be of relevance to concerns of the present. It is the present that writes the past rather than, as positivist historiography has it, the past that gives way to the present. This is not to say that the present is all that is left of the past; quite the contrary, the past contains the resources to much *more* than the present. Rather, it is only the interests of the present that serve to vivify and reinvigorate the past. The past is always propelled, in virtual form, in a state of compression or contraction, to futures beyond the present;

2. Instead of the past being regarded as fixed, inert, given, unalterable, and rock-solid even if not knowable in its entirety, it must be regarded as being inherently open to future rewritings, as never "full" enough, or present enough, to retain itself as a full presence that propels itself intact into the future. This is Derrida's crucial claim about identity and iteration (particularly in *Of Grammatology* and *Limited Inc.*). The identity of any statement, text, or event, is never given in itself. Neither texts nor objects nor subjects have the kind of self-presence that gives them a stable and abiding identity; rather, what time is, and what matter, text, and life are, are becomings, openings to time, change, rewriting, recontextualization. The past is never exhausted in its virtualities, insofar as it is always capable of giving rise to *another* reading, another context, another framework that will animate it in different ways. What Derrida makes clear is that the significance, value, or meaning of a text or an event is only given in the infinitely deferred future. So that when we are "doing" history, not only are we writing the event, we are positively reinscribing it, producing it anew, writing it as an opening up to a life that is not exhausted in its pastness.

The historian, especially the radical or critical historian (such as a feminist or an antiracist historian must be) is crucially poised at the intersection of two virtualities, to use the language of Gilles Deleuze (*Bergsonism*, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, *Difference and Repetition*). The past is not a diminished or receded former present, a present that has faded into memory or carried in artifacts that

intrude in the present. The past is the virtual that coexists with the present. The past, in other words, is always already contained in the present, not as its cause or its pattern but rather, as its latency, its virtuality, its potential for being otherwise. This is why the question of history remains a volatile one, not simply tied to getting the facts of the past sorted out and agreed on. It is about the production of *conceivable futures*, the future here being understood not as that which is similarly contained in the present, but rather, that which diverges from the present, that which produces a new future, one uncontained by and unpredicted from within the present. This indeed is what I understand feminist politics—at least at its best—to be about: the production of futures for women that are uncontained by any of the models provided in the present. Rewriting, reinscribing the past is a way to activate these possible futures and, indeed, is their only political rationale. The inventive historian is poised between a past that is not dead and a present as the place for the inauguration of new and unpredicted futures. We can call these futures modes of becoming, modes of becoming-other; and

3. The past is the virtuality that makes both history and memory possible. Neither history nor memory should be equated with the past itself. As latency or virtuality, the past is larger, more complex, more laden, than any history can present—including feminist history. There can be no complete, or even partial history, no objective reconstruction, no extraction of the truth of history. What I am getting at is that the past always and essentially gives rise to multiple histories, histories undertaken from different perspectives of the present. This multiplicity is not given through the complexity that the present adds to the past, the present layering or enriching, spotlighting the details of the past. Such a picture is rendered more complex through the necessity of recognizing what the fissured and latent past enables, for the past is uncontainable within any one history, or even all cumulative histories.

This claim is based on Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference as the perspective that has yet to take place, yet when it occurs, it will transform the ways in which all knowledges, all practices, all relations can be understood, from perspectives whose positioning has never been occupied, or taken place before. There is another way of undertaking history—even feminist history—or another way of undertaking any activity or discipline, than that which is presently available. The past, in short, cannot be exhausted through its transcription in the present, because it is also the ongoing possibility (or virtuality) that makes *future* histories, the continuous writing of histories, necessary. History is made an inexhaustible enterprise only because of the ongoing movement of time, the precession of futurity, and the multiplicity of positions from which this writing can and will occur.

Taken together, these hypotheses imply that history is always—whether archivally or textually based, whether it appears to offer a haven away from the present or a way into the problems of the present—an intensely political matter, a

matter of one's political interests and alignments in the present. This is *not* a limitation of the discipline of history but is the condition of all historical research, even the most traditional: it is always invested, and its investments dictate what counts as being historically relevant information. This is not really a new claim: history, like politics and philosophy, is always an invested framework, always wedded to paradigms that are involved in political schemas. What I want to add to these claims is a feminist slant. In other words, I would like to take on one of the possible, future, anterior positions on the question of histories of the present and future, one articulated in terms of sexual difference. It is here that my work owes an immense debt to the writings of Luce Irigaray, who remains the most insistent and clear-sighted proponent of sexual difference and its ontological and epistemological implications. I will not talk about her texts in detail, but rather will use her insights to develop some of the implications of a sexually different understanding of history. But first, a brief detour through a Foucauldian and Deleuzian understanding of power.

Power and Knowledges

I want to return to the impact of antihumanist theory on feminism, how, inflected through the writings of those I have already mentioned as postmodern philosophers—Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze—it may provide us with new kinds of questions and new modes of utilizing existing intellectual frameworks for new ends. If these disparate thinkers share anything in common that is of direct relevance to feminist concerns, it is a broadly conceived understanding of power and its productivity, one that I believe is implicitly assumed in the writings of Irigaray as well.

Until very recently (until the work of Irigaray and, in particular, Spivak) power has been seen as the enemy of feminism, something to be abhorred, challenged, dismantled, or at best, something to be shared more equally. Power is not the enemy of feminism but its ally. The goal of feminism is no longer the dismantling of power or its equal distribution, for power must be understood more carefully as that which administers, regulates, and enables, that which flees and produces, as well as that which disqualifies and subordinates, limits, and contains. If feminists believe that their goal is to abandon power, then they have already lost in a game from which they cannot withdraw. Feminism must aim at the reordering of power and not its elimination, at the expedient use of power and its infinite capacities for transformation and rewriting, its fundamentally opened character, its capacity to be worked on and opened up to a future set of unpredictable uses and effects. Power is not something that feminism should disdain or rise above, for it is its condition of existence and its medium of effectivity. To understand how this different, indeed positively affirmative rela-

tion of power marks the present state, or rather, the cutting edge, of feminist theory, we must ask, then, what power is and how it functions. This too can be summarized in a few terms:

1. Power is a fluid medium within which we are produced and function, within which we operate, have effects, and are effected, act and are acted upon. It is not something we can deny, resist, or dispense with except in the very terms that it provides. It is only within power that power can be transformed, and only through its operations that change can be (and is) effected. It is not as if we can separate ourselves, our passions, our daily concerns, and our intimate relations from power, because it is that through which we have effects and are acted upon, the field of our effectivity. Such an understanding of power implies that many preconceptions we hold, or have inherited, must be abandoned if we are to accept, to intervene into, and be able to utilize power.

2. Power must no longer be conceived as a perfect, systematic, structural, or homogeneous whole. It is heterogeneous, multiple, contradictory, sporadic, uneven, calculating but not predictable, viscous or thick with its capacity to absorb what it finds recuperable about its unpredictable permutations. Moreover, it has what might be called recoil effects, which transform or modify the intentionalities directed toward its subversions. This is what is power's mode of effectivity, as well as its resistance to concerted manipulation.

Power is neither perfect nor ineffable, neither secure nor consciously manipulable by individuals or groups, churches or elites, however well placed or apparently lacking in strategic position or resources. Its functioning cannot be explained by universal laws or general rules, for it is haphazard, expedient, calculating (and thus also prone to miscalculation). Neither hidden nor clandestine, power always functions openly (if we know how to recognize it), through its modes of material constitution, arrangement, organization, distribution, and its administration and regulation of objects, subjects, practices, events, and institutions. It produces sites of particularly intense investment, and correlative, sites of relative underinvestment, which vary historically, culturally, and geographically.

3. Resistance is precisely a function of its haphazard operations (and not, as Marxism asserts, of power's internal contradictions—as if it were a system of logic: contradiction has never stopped practices from occurring, power from functioning), its modes of expediency and its necessarily excessive self-production (in particular, its fascinating capacity to generate more than it needs, to produce in excess of any functionality or systematicity), an excess that can be turned in on itself. These very excesses (the sites of over- or under-investment in power's uneven spread over culture) are what enable, indeed at times, insist on the conversion of power into its ever-newer forms, into its unpredictable future.

I have made no claims about individuals or groups "having" power, or exerting it over others; I have not discussed the issue of more or less power, because none of this makes sense if power is understood as a set of material forces

and effects. However, issues of oppression, subordination, domination, and control are not simply evaporated or defined out of existence (as some feminists, particularly those opposed to poststructuralism and antihumanism, suggest) but must be reconceived beyond the model of woman as passive victim of male power who is robbed of agency and efficacy. This victimology continues to be the dominant rationale and presumption behind the establishment of most forms of feminist politics and most feminist theoretical studies, which tend to presume an understanding of power and powerlessness, of power as systematically regulated enforcement of men's dominant and women's subordinate positions. Such a model is ironically unable to explain the very possibility of feminism itself, women's capacity to move beyond *ressentiment* and anger, righteous indignation or moral outcries, to produce something new, women's capacities to move beyond what attempts to debilitate or contain them, to devise strategies, harnessing what they know about power, about their daily lives, their experiences, their positions.

This is a much more complicated and murkier understanding of power—power as a mode of negotiation, implication, and complicity—that feminism must address if its theoretical projects, including those directed to the past, are to be more than a litany of the woes suffered by women, a position that I believe is inherently antithetical to feminism, for it cannot explain how feminism is itself possible. The task ahead, the challenge facing feminist theory will be that of taking power responsibly, of working with and through it, of producing and activating knowledge not against power, but against the prevailing assumptions that have regulated the production and use of knowledge against women's interests. The task ahead, then, is not to seize power (power has never been lacking) but to refigure knowledges so that they help position women to utilize power strategies, to regulate their lives, to produce differently and to recognize differently the kinds of production undertaken by women in the past.

Sexual Difference

I have thus far discussed how notions of temporality, relations between past, present, and future, are always implicated in power relations; and also, how all knowledges and discourses—in this case, histories—are, in one way or another, bound up with power relations. I would now like to see what implications that has for the question of sexual difference. I would like to explain how I understand this phrase, as its definition seems crucial to the ways in which it is used and abused in feminist circles. Sexual difference, like the very notion of difference itself, can be understood in one of two ways. First, as a difference between two preexisting entities (such as the difference between oranges and apples); and second, as a constitutive difference, a difference that preexists the entities that it produces. This second notion, shared by both Derrida and Deleuze, is also a constitutive ingredient in Irigaray's understanding of sexual difference. Sexual

difference is not the differences between the sexes as we know them today, or as we know them from the past. This is because, as Irigaray has argued, the differences between the sexes have never taken place (*This Sex Which Is Not One*). Here she is not claiming unique experiences that one sex has that the other does not: rather, she is arguing that there has never been a space in culture for women *as* women. Women have only ever been represented as a lack, the opposite, the same as, or the complement of the one subject, the unique human subject. In making the claim that sexual difference is yet to take place, she is arguing that there is no space in culture, in representation, in exchange, in ethics, in politics, in history, or in writing, for the existence of *two* sexes, only the one sex and its counterpart. Insofar as women are conceived as the afterthought, the reflection, the augmentation, the supplement, the partner, of men, they are contained within a phallogocentrism that refuses alternative positions and spaces, that refuses the right of any autonomous representations, that eradicates sexual difference, that refuses to accord women the possibility of being otherwise than defined in some necessary relation to men.

Phallogocentrism is explicitly *not* the refusal of an identity for women (on the contrary, there seems to be a proliferation of identities—wife, mother, nun, secretary, etc.), but rather, the containment of that identity by other definitions and other identities. Thus Irigaray does not seek the “real” woman somehow beyond her patriarchal containment, instead she aims to challenge conceptual systems that refuse to acknowledge their own limitations and their own specific interests. This is a challenge less to do with harnessing the lives, experiences, and energies of “real” women than to do with challenging and undermining the legitimacy of modes of their representation, models, and systems that represent, theorize, and analyze the world and that help to produce them. Irigaray’s questions are thus not questions about what to do, how to act, how to write in such a way as to be faithful to the lives and experiences of “real women”: her strategies instead are philosophical and methodological. She asks: how to develop conceptual schemas, frameworks, and systems that reveal what is at stake in dominant representational systems, and how to develop different ways of theorizing, based on the recognition of what has been left out of these dominant models. In other words, how to think, write, or read *not* as a woman, but more complexly and less clearly, how to think, write, and read otherwise, whether one is a man or a woman, how to accommodate issues, qualities, concepts that have not had their time before.

It is this challenge that Irigaray issues to feminist thought—not to simply take women as the objects of intellectual investigation (though of course this is not to be very easily accomplished in some contexts), but rather to open up the position of knowing subject to the occupation of women. To enable women to inhabit the position of knower so that knowing itself may be done differently, different questions be asked, different criteria of evaluation be developed, different intellectual standards and goals to emerge. Irigaray cannot specify in

advance how women, and men, might occupy positions of knowing when sexual difference finally takes place: that would be to preempt the specificities of other women's positions and their specific modes of occupation of positions.

The lessons that history can teach us are only as profound and adventurous as our own intellectual mindsets and political allegiances will allow: history is not a series of stories and texts that only illuminate the past. History is not the recovery of the truth of bodies or lives in the past; it is the engendering of new kinds of bodies and new kinds of lives. History is in part an index of our present preoccupations, but perhaps more interestingly, the past as rich as our futures allow. Insofar as those futures come to approximate the minimal conditions for an understanding, recognition, and celebration of sexual difference, what history, and the struggles of the past, have to teach us is still wide open, open to us rather than to them, to forge.

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