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The Trouble with Gender: Tales of the Still-Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociological Theory*

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Why do sociological theorists remain uninterested in and resistant to feminist theory? Notwithstanding indications of increasing openness to feminist theory, journals and texts on sociological theory reflect a continuing pattern of neglect. I identify reasons for this pattern, including tensions resulting from the introduction of gender as a central analytical category: Not only does gender challenge the dichotomous categories that define sociology's boundaries and identity, it also displaces the discipline's central problematic of modernity. The significance of this displacement is apparent when the discipline's responses to feminist and postmodernist theory are compared. I discuss the relevance of feminist theoretical work to contemporary issues in sociological theory, with specific attention to the synthetic nature of feminist theorizing, to work on rethinking power, resistance, and oppression, and to efforts to effect a conceptual shift from "either/or" to "both/and" thinking and to establish new grounds for assessing knowledge claims.

Sociological theorists are a troubled lot. Uncertain about the nature, significance, and scientific status of their project, they engage in a good deal of self-evaluation, and their current assessments of the state of sociological theory are, at best, mixed. For every hopeful declaration about its "abundant vitality and promise" (Ritzer 1990, p. 1), other evaluations are gloomier and more negative: Sociological theory is described as being pushed "to become something other than itself" (Alexander 1991, p. 147); as largely bankrupt and "something to be ignored" (Turner 1990, p. 389); as having "gone astray" (Seidman 1991, p. 131). This state of affairs is made even more interesting, discouraging, or amusing—depending on one's point of view—by the fact that it is not at all clear that those engaged in these discussions share a common understanding of the activity being discussed. It is generally understood and accepted that sociology is a multiple-paradigm science—that there is no one body of sociological theory that is universally regarded as valid. What is less commonly acknowledged and addressed is that there is not a great deal of agreement within the discipline about precisely what sociological theory is or should be. No doubt, many would assert that this is part of the trouble.

This confusion and soul searching, and the disciplinary identity crises they reflect and inform, are of course not new to sociology. Internal debates concerning sociology's status as science and its primary orientation—historical interpretation, critical philosophy, or generalizing science—are a constant throughout the discipline's history and development. Nor are the current soul searching and uncertainty unique to sociology. Rapid social,

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economic, and political transformations, as well as the approaching millennium, have cast doubt on accepted ways of understanding the world both inside and outside the academy. Commonsense understandings of and assumptions about the world—of the relation between humankind and nature, or the differences between liberals and conservatives, East and West, female and male, heterosexual and homosexual, or the oppositions of subject and object, individual and society, mind and body, nature and nurture, rationality and irrationality—are being challenged and upset. One philosopher has observed that “there is a growing sense that something is wrong with the ways in which the relevant issues and options are posed—a sense that something is happening that is changing the categorial structure and patterns within which we think and act” (Bernstein 1983, p. 2). The profusion of “posts” that permeate intellectual discourses and popular culture reflects both uncertainty and its antidotes, the label and the category. The reactions of sociological theorists to the “post-modernist challenge”—fervid embrace, contemptuous dismissal, and ambivalent fascination—are mirrored across the cultural landscape.

The uncertainty and confusion found within sociological theory today are compounded by the theorists’ sense that even under the best of circumstances no one really pays much attention to them. And although this may be true, theory nevertheless remains central to the discipline’s identity and self-understanding. Theory courses continue to be a (frequently dreaded) requirement of undergraduate and graduate training; and however much students and scholars may question its relevance to their work, a sense that somehow theory does or should matter persists. Patricia Hill Collins (1992, p. 73) describes sociological theory as the “important inner circle” of the discipline. Employing an image appropriate to the theorists’ own suspicion that they are the only ones to read and understand their work, she likens this inner circle to a football huddle where the players speak to each other in codes that only other members of the team can understand, about things of interest to themselves as insiders. These players are a contentious lot and the inner circle is characterized more by conflict and rivalries than by consensus. Nevertheless, team members are the “defenders” of the core of sociology. It is within this inner circle that the assumptions, frameworks, and orientations of the discipline are defined, developed, debated, and defended; it is within this inner circle that the troubles of sociological theory are contemplated and explicated.

Given the current state of uncertainty and self-assessment in sociological theory, as well as its efforts to develop a new relevance and applicability, I would like to address a question that has been raised with some regularity over the past 20 years: Why has this inner circle remained so uninterested in feminist theory? I raise the issue again not because I think feminist theory somehow needs recognition or legitimation by sociological theorists, but because I believe sociological theory impoverishes itself and the discipline as a whole to the degree that it continues to ignore this body of social thought. The epistemological, methodological, and substantive issues being explored and debated by feminist theorists are directly relevant to the concerns of sociological theorists. And the efforts of feminist scholars to develop an emancipatory knowledge while avoiding the shortcomings of “modernist,” scientific thought offer valuable lessons and directions to a discipline founded on the belief that knowledge of the social world can improve that world. There is something for sociological theorists to learn from feminist theory.

“Theory,” “sociological theory,” “feminist theory”—all, of course, are notably unstable and disputed terms. Theories are formalized, public explanations. Such explanations may consist of sets of hypotheses advanced to explain a particular area of empirical reality or type of phenomenon, or they may be abstract general accounts of some aspect of reality. Social theories are explanations of the social world; they suggest concepts and approaches for studying and understanding that world. The distinctions between social theory and sociological theory are contested. Seidman (1991) describes social theories as “broad social narratives” that arise out of and aim to affect social conflicts. The aim of sociological theory,

on the other hand, is to explain the logic and identify the laws that underlie social life. Social theories thus contain an ideological, moral, or political dimension that sociological theorists endeavor to excise in the name of greater scientific rigor and explanatory power. This distinction is, however, difficult to sustain: As Seidman himself points out, the theoretical work of the founding fathers of sociology—Marx, Weber, Durkheim—is both social and sociological. I am going to sidestep the issue of social versus sociological theory in this essay; here “sociological theory” will simply (?) refer to the range of abstract general approaches and competing and complementary schools of thought that exist in the discipline of sociology.

Theories of any sort arise from a need to explain something. Social theories (including sociological theories) develop out of a need to explain and understand something in our social experience. Sociology emerged in a period of massive social transformation, and the founding sociological theories attempted to explain what this new social order was all about and how it might best be studied. Similarly, postmodernist social theory has developed as changes in the cultural, political, social, and economic bases of the modern world have called into question the adequacy, assumptions, and implications of long-dominant explanations. And feminist theory developed as changes in women’s situations and experiences gave rise to a political movement that challenged prevailing explanations of women’s subordinate position in the social world.

Feminism is a social movement that seeks to end women’s subordination. It holds that women’s subordination is real, that this subordination is neither natural nor necessary, and that it can and should be ended. Feminist theory (as well as feminist scholarship in general) seeks to describe and explain women’s experiences and situations in ways that inform efforts to end their subordination. Feminist theory is women-centered: Women’s experiences and situations are the objects of inquiry; women are the subjects of inquiry (the world is seen from their unique vantage points); and feminist theoretical work is carried out in the interest of improving conditions for women (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1992, p. 447). Although feminist theory is a women-centered perspective, it does not *only* offer explanations of women’s situations, experiences, and subordination. Nor is it simply the ideology of a social movement. Feminist theory also offers explanations about how the social world is structured and critiques of how that world has been studied and understood.

My claim that sociological theory has failed to recognize and in fact has resisted feminist theory will be uncontroversial for many. Nevertheless, I will begin this discussion—which, it should be noted, focuses on sociological and feminist theory in the United States—by providing evidence to support this claim. I then identify and discuss reasons for this neglect. In this discussion I draw on and develop the observations of others who have addressed this same issue, and extend the list of reasons by pointing out two ways in which the central feminist analytical category of gender creates an unavoidable tension between sociological and feminist theory: Gender not only challenges the dichotomous categories that frame sociological thought, it also displaces sociology’s founding problematic—the problematic of modernity. The significance of this displacement becomes particularly evident when the inner circle’s receptions of feminist and postmodernist theory are compared. Finally, I want to elaborate on my statement that continued neglect of feminist theory impoverishes sociological theory by specifying some of the contributions feminist theoretical work might make to the sociological enterprise.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL RECEPTION OF FEMINIST THEORY

Sociology would seem a congenial disciplinary home for feminist scholarship. Its suspicion of naturalistic explanations for social facts and its orientation to solving social problems and improving social life are compatible with the feminist insistence that women’s subor-

dination is an unnatural and unnecessary condition that can and should be ended. Early “second-wave” feminist scholars did not regard sociology’s tradition of neglecting women’s experiences and social activities as an insurmountable problem; in fact, they looked forward to enriching and transforming the field with the new insights that would result from bringing women into the picture. In 1975, Arlene Kaplan Daniels optimistically declared that the feminist perspective would force sociologists “to rethink the structure and organization of sociological inquiry in all the traditional fields of theory and empirical research” (p. 340). To a significant degree, this has occurred in the fields of empirical research. Not only has the sociological understanding of areas typically associated with women—the family, sexual and interpersonal relationships—been transformed, so too has the study of other central social institutions and processes, such as work, crime, deviance, and education. Nevertheless, the impact of feminism on sociology has been far smaller than expected. In their 1985 article, “The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology,” Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne detailed how the feminist influence in sociology has been largely co-opted and contained, thereby allowing the discipline in general, and its dominant theoretical paradigms, to remain relatively unchanged. More recently, Barbara Laslett and Barrie Thorne observed that although sociologists in various subfields have recognized and incorporated the work of feminist scholars, “sociological theorists of virtually every school of thought have largely ignored the writings of feminist theorists” (1992, p. 60). A review of articles published over the last decade in two of the discipline’s prominent social theory journals—*Sociological Theory* and *Theory and Society*—confirms their assertion.

Although articles published in these journals do reflect the significance of the women’s movement in contemporary social life, little recognition or attention is given specifically to feminist theory. By a generous count, *Sociological Theory* has published 18 articles since 1984 that attest to the impact of the women’s movement on sociological thought.¹ Some of these articles deal with issues of gender, others offer reactions to or analyses of feminism, and still others—for example, the articles published in the recent symposium on Queer Theory—indicate the influence of feminist scholarship, although in a rather second-hand manner. Only seven of the 18 articles directly address or assess feminist theory, and five of these were published as a symposium on the work of Dorothy E. Smith. The symposium on Smith underlines both the uncertain relationship between sociological theory and feminist theory and the difficulties faced by excluded voices and perspectives in general. As Laslett and Thorne (1992) point out in their introduction to the symposium, recognition of Smith’s contributions to social theory is long overdue. However, given the lack of serious attention to feminist theory found in this journal and the fact that no other single theorist has received such attention, the effect of this symposium is to place Smith (and her work) in the troubling and troublesome category of “woman worthy.” *Sociological Theory* has published symposia on Queer Theory (12: 2), Brazilian Social Thought (10: 1), and Postmodernism (9: 2), but none on feminist theory. At the same time that the symposium on Smith brings attention and recognition to an important social theorist, it obscures the presence of the larger and quite diverse body of thought of which Smith’s work is only a part.²

¹ Rae L. Blumberg, “A General Theory of Gender Stratification” (1984, Vol. 2); Rosalyn W. Bologh, “Feminist Social Theorizing and Moral Reasoning” (1984, Vol. 2); Richard F. Curtis and Patricia MacCorquodale, “Stability and Change in Gender Relations” (8: 2); Jennifer M. Lehmann, “Durkheim’s Response to Feminism” (8: 2); Norman Denzin, “Harold and Agnes: A Feminist Narrative Undoing” (8: 2); five articles in the “Symposium on Dorothy E. Smith” (10: 1); Erik Olin Wright, “Explanation and Emancipation in Marxism and Feminism” (11: 1); Daphne Spain, “Gendered Spaces and Women’s Status” (11: 2); and six articles in the “Symposium on Queer Theory” (12: 2).

² The “mainstream” tendency to canonize a few selected voices and then ignore the rest is one that Patricia Hill Collins specifically seeks to counteract by grounding her analysis of Black Feminist thought in “multiple voices.” She writes: “Assuming that only a few exceptional Black women have been able to do theory homogenizes African-American women and silences the majority” (1990, p. xiii).

Theory and Society does not present a very different picture, although the fact that it bills itself as concerned with "renewal and critique in social theory" might lead one to expect otherwise. From 1984 to 1994, the journal published seventeen articles that reflect the influence of feminism.³ Ten of these articles, however, are specifically concerned with issues of masculinity. Although scholars engaged in the study of masculinities and the development of the new field of men's studies clearly acknowledge their debt to feminism and feminist scholarship (see, for example, Kimmel and Messner 1992), the theoretical work of feminists receives little explicit recognition in the pages of this journal. On one occasion this neglect has been specifically noted. In a concluding essay for a special issue on the influence of the 1960s generation on social theory (17: 5), Charles Lemert wrote: "Occasionally there are absences that, in their silence, make a statement that must be taken seriously. . . . What is absent?—a text from that one area of social theory that is decisively, without any question, a product of the sixties—feminist theory. Indeed, feminist theory and the movement that gave rise to it are perhaps the single most enduring achievements of sixties politics" (1988, p. 799). Lemert indicates that the editors of this special issue tried to find a contribution on feminist theory, but were unsuccessful in part because articles were committed elsewhere. It is true that feminist theorists have other arenas in which to present their work. The fact that *Signs*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Gender and Society* offer outlets for (and champion) feminist scholarship, therefore attracting both submissions and allegiances, may explain some of the editors' difficulties. However, the existence and vitality of "specialist" journals cannot fully account for the mainstream journals' neglect of feminist theory. That this neglect is more than just a consequence of a wealth of publishing outlets and opportunities is confirmed by a similar lack of attention to feminist theory in books published on sociological theory.

Examination of texts or edited volumes published over the last ten years which claim either contemporary sociological theory or social theory "up to the present" as their subject reveals a state of affairs that is somewhat advanced of that found in the social theory journals. Recently published readers on social theory, such as Lemert's *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* (1993) and Farganis's *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism* (1993) include the work of feminist theorists alongside that of recognized classical and contemporary theorists. Ritzer's texts on sociological theory—*Sociological Theory* (3d ed., 1992) and *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (3d ed., 1992)—include chapters by Patricia Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley which present feminist theory as a distinct and significant contribution to the field. And in the most recent edition of *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (1995), Wallace and Wolf have added sections devoted specifically to feminist theoretical work. Most other texts do not specifically address feminist theory and its contributions to sociological knowledge, but increasingly there is some note of the work of feminist scholars or the influence of feminism as a political movement. The latest editions of Collins and Makowsky's *The Discovery of Society* (1993) and Cuzzort and King's *Twentieth Century Social Thought* (1995) include chapters on the work of women social scientists. Other texts discuss work done on gender stratification, identify feminist contributions and critiques of dominant sociological perspectives, and

³ Janet Siltanen and Michelle Stanworth, "The Politics and Private Woman and Public Man" (13: 1); R. W. Connell, "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity" (14: 5); Winifred Breines, "Alone in the 1950's: Anne Parsons and the Feminine Mystique" (15: 6); Diane Margolis, "Considering Women's Experience: A Reformulation of Power Theory" (18: 3); Sue C. Jansen, "Is Science a Man? New Feminist Epistemologies and Reconstructions of Knowledge" (19: 2); R. W. Connell, "The State, Gender, and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal" (19: 5); Isaac Balbus, "De-Kleining Feminist Mothering Theory?" (21: 6); and Leslie McCall, "Does Gender Fit? Bourdieu, Feminism, and Conceptions of Social Order" (21: 6); and nine articles published in the "Special Issue on Masculinities" (22: 5).

consider how the dominant theoretical perspectives might analyze the roles of women.⁴ However, one also continues to find texts on sociological theory that make no mention of feminism or feminist theory. Given both the confusion over precisely what constitutes sociological theory and the many schools or specific theorists that might be included under this rubric, exclusion or oversight may not seem that significant. But this oversight is telling when such books are presented as specifically concerned with contemporary sociological theory, as offering complete coverage of sociological theory, or as addressing developments in social theory since the 1960s.⁵ In these cases, the message is clear: Feminist theory is not sociological theory, nor is it of any significance to sociological theory.

As is evident in some of the recently published texts on sociological theory, feminism—including feminist scholarship—has become difficult to overlook. It is also evident that, two decades after Daniels's optimistic prognosis, feminist scholarship *has* influenced sociology. It has reduced reliance on and acceptance of male experiences and perspectives; added to existing knowledge about social institutions and processes; introduced new topics and concepts; redirected inquiry into previously overlooked areas of social life; and helped forge and maintain interdisciplinary linkages. Recently published texts, as well as *Sociological Theory's* symposium on Smith and a session devoted to Smith's work at the 1992 ASA meetings, also indicate what may be a growing openness to and interest in feminist theory by sociological theorists. Nevertheless, when considering the response of sociological theorists to feminist theory I believe one can still speak of at least lingering resistance and neglect. Mainstream journals only occasionally include any serious, direct consideration of feminist theory, and texts on contemporary theory that disregard it entirely continue to be written and published. The question then is: Why does feminist theoretical work remain largely unnoticed and unacknowledged by sociologists in general and by sociological theorists in particular?

TENSIONS BETWEEN SOCIOLOGICAL AND FEMINIST THEORY

Several different factors contribute to the continuing neglect and disregard of feminist theory. Among those most frequently cited are the radical challenge it poses to sociology, the unfamiliar and suspect nature of its "voice" and location, its lack of grounding in any of the major sociological paradigms, and its questionable status as theory (Chafetz 1988; Laslett and Thorne 1992; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1990, 1992; Millman and Kanter 1975; Stacey and Thorne 1985; Stanley 1992; Wallace 1989). Feminist ambivalence to mainstream recognition and acceptance, as well as to the project of theorizing itself, also should not be overlooked. Evelyn Fox Keller and Helene Moglen write that academic "marginality was, in part, the strategy we ourselves devised in response to forces that threatened to exclude if not subsume us" (1987, p. 494). Women's marginality and/or exclusion, inside and outside the academy, has been described as "the political as well as organizational condition for the clarity and probity of much feminist theory" (Lemert 1988, p. 801). And, as Collins observes, a transformative, critical perspective is available more

⁴ Mark Abrahamson, *Sociological Theory*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990); Randall Collins, *Theoretical Sociology* (Ft. Worth, TX: HBJ College Pubs., 1988); Warren H. Handel, *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993).

⁵ Ian Craib, *Modern Social Theory: From Parsons to Habermas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Anthony Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Anthony Giddens and Jonathan H. Turner, eds., *Social Theory Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Peter Knapp, *One World—Many Worlds: Contemporary Sociological Theory* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994); Richard Münch, *Sociological Theory*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1993); William D. Perdue, *Sociological Theory* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1986); Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1991).

readily to those who stand outside of the inner circle (1992, p. 77). To stand inside the circle is to run the risk of losing touch with the women, the ideas, and experiences that ground and guide feminist efforts. To stand inside the circle is also to engage in and identify oneself with an activity many feminists distrust. This distrust of theory stems not only from the fact that it has always been a decidedly male activity, but also from the shortcomings of early feminist theoretical efforts. The generalizations of mainstream and feminist social theorists often have failed to account for, and indeed have excluded, the experiences of many women. Standing inside the inner circle is thus to risk “reinscribing” women’s experiences into conceptual orders that lie outside of and deny the legitimacy of those experiences (Smith 1989, p. 35).

Given that feminists challenge the substance, foundations, and methods of sociology, it is of course questionable whether they would be warmly welcomed into the inner circle in any case. Feminism exposes sociology as a male discourse, as “written by men about men for men” (Smith 1987, p. 18). The response to the criticism that sociology is about men has been to “add women” both by adding gender as a variable to be analyzed and by creating such new subspecialties as the sociology of women, now the sociology of gender. This response has allowed the discipline to sidestep the more radical challenges posed by feminism. Once a whole new set of actors is recognized, all previously developed descriptions and explanations of social phenomena must be reconsidered, if not reworked altogether (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1990, p. 318). Adding women also fails to address a central claim of feminist theory, namely that social life as a whole is deeply gendered: Gender is a property not only of individuals and their behaviors, but also of social structures and conceptual systems. Furthermore, the feminist critique of sociology is not solely a critique of the absence of women. It also raises fundamental methodological and epistemological questions that challenge the ways sociological knowledge has been developed and justified (Harding 1986, 1991; Smith 1987; Haraway 1988). Indeed, Lemert has referred to feminist theory’s “epistemological uppitness” as potentially one of its most important contributions to social theory (1988, p. 801).

Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (1990) note that feminists not only challenge the assumptions, methods, and contents of sociological knowledge, but they do so in a voice and from a location that sociologists may find unfamiliar and suspect. The vocabulary and tone of feminist writing is strange, often personal and poetic, and in any case frequently quite different from the preferred rational, objective sociological voice. The strangeness of this voice partly stems from the fact that feminist scholarship is the work of an interdisciplinary community: It is not located in sociology departments; feminist theorists are not necessarily properly credentialed sociologists; and their work is not primarily oriented to extending the discipline of sociology.⁶ That feminist theory has its origins and base in a political movement—that it is defined by an overriding political commitment—further taints its scholarly and scientific standing. Feminism’s fundamental political identity also makes it convenient for sociologists to deal with it primarily as a social movement (frequently as the favorite example of a “new social movement”) and therefore to treat feminist theory as simply the ideology of a social movement.

Feminist theory developed not only in response to practical political problems but also through critical encounters with various traditions of social theory (Laslett and Thorne

⁶ Marilyn Strathern (1987) points out in her discussion of the relationship of feminism and anthropology that the interdisciplinarity of feminist scholarship makes its relations with any of the disciplines difficult. She writes: “The fact that feminist scholarship works across disciplines means it cannot be parallel with them, and this is awkward in relation to the idea that feminist insights might modify work in any single discipline. . . . For its impact to be registered on mainstream theorizing, feminist scholarship would have to be construed as an isomorphic sister ‘discipline’ from which ideas and concepts could be borrowed” (pp. 276–77).

1992). Marxism, psychoanalysis, functionalism, ethnomethodology, and other “interpretive” sociologies clearly have informed the development of feminist theory. But while it has engaged in significant and productive dialogues with a variety of traditions, it remains unanchored in any one of the major sociological paradigms. As Joan Acker points out, these paradigms *do* illuminate social life, even if they do not or cannot take gender or their own gendered subtext into account. Why then, she asks, “should sociologists abandon whatever version of sociology they are using if it seems to work, if it answers, or even only deals with, questions they and their discipline as an organization of resources and power define as the relevant ones?” (1989, p. 76). Acker’s question highlights two important points: Not only do the dominant paradigms seem to work quite well, but the discipline, as an organization of resources and power, recognizes and rewards work within those familiar paradigms. That feminist theory cannot be subsumed into any one of the familiar paradigms, that it challenges “normal” sociological work and the accepted body of sociological knowledge, and that serious consideration of feminist theory is not apt to be rewarded all constitute powerful factors inhibiting its recognition.

There also seems to exist a suspicion (if not, in fact, a firmly held conviction) that feminist theory is not theory—social, sociological, or otherwise. More than a decade ago, Catherine MacKinnon remarked that feminism “has been perceived not as a systematic analysis but as a loose collection of factors, complaints, and issues which, taken together, describe rather than explain the misfortunes of the female sex” (1982, p. 528). I am not convinced there has been significant change in this perception. A colleague of mine recently voiced what I sense is a common reservation: “. . . but, it’s not really *theory*, is it?” Although it is generally conceded that feminist scholarship offers valuable insights, critiques, concepts and correctives, it is also frequently pointed out that feminism has not developed a general theory of social life or a coherent theoretical framework. The author of a recently published text on sociological theory describes it as an “emerging perspective” (Handel 1993, p. 102), and feminists themselves describe feminist theory as a “fledgling endeavor” (Stacey and Thorne 1985, p. 310), conceding that we are only “beginning to know how gender is fundamentally involved in . . . [all] social processes” (Acker 1989, p. 72). Given the general lack of consensus over what exactly sociological theory is, debates over feminist theory’s status as theory are somewhat nonsensical. But while there may be confusion over *what* sociological theory is, there is considerable consensus about *who* counts as a sociological theorist.

Sociological theory remains a largely male endeavor.⁷ This fact is certainly relevant to understanding the tensions between feminist and sociological theory, but it is not the point I want to make about “who counts” as a sociological theorist. We all know who really counts. Liz Stanley observes that there is “an almost fetishistic attitude toward ‘Marx-WeberDurkheim’ as a totemic structure” within sociology (1992, p. 258). To this structure are added (and subtracted) the names of other recognized social theorists: Comte, Spencer, Simmel, Schutz, Mead, Parsons, Goffman, Garfinkel, Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu. Sociological theorists have been weaned on the works of these theorists: Theirs are the works we studied and struggled with; theirs are the ideas and arguments that shaped and sparked the development of our own thinking and work; these are the people we teach in sociological theory classes.⁸ Feminist theorists also have engaged with and been stimulated by the works of these theorists. But their critical encounters with these figures are only one factor—and

⁷ Although the ASA does not currently keep figures on section membership by gender, several sources report that approximately 80% of the members of the Theory section are men. Of authors published in *Sociological Theory* and *Theory and Society* from 1984 to 1994, 82% were men.

⁸ Another indicator of feminist theory’s inclusion or exclusion by the inner circle are theory course syllabi. Laslett and Thorne (1992, p. 61) have commented on the invisibility of feminist scholarship in courses on sociological theory, but, other than the anecdotal and impressionistic, evidence to confirm this impression is not readily available. The syllabi set on sociological theory distributed by the American Sociological Association was

by no means the most significant one—in the development of their thinking. Their primary reference point is the experiences of women, not the work of the founding fathers. Furthermore, the results of their efforts challenge and reject many of the central categories, concepts, frameworks, protocols, and practices established by the discipline's totemic figures. Sociological theory is largely understood, developed, debated, and presented in terms of Marx/Weber/Durkheim et al.; feminist theory is not. It is hardly surprising, then, that feminist theory strikes sociological theorists as “not really theory.”

The questionable status of feminist theory as theory, however, goes still further than its failure to orient itself sufficiently to the works of the founding fathers. There is also the troublesome centrality of gender to feminist theoretical work. Gender is, as R.W. Connell (1990) has pointed out, simply the “wrong stuff” for serious sociology. Sociological theory represents an effort to explain a distinctively *social* reality, and however much one may advance a social constructionist argument, gender remains linked (however complexly) to an intractably *physical* reality. In theorizing gender as a central structuring principle in social life, feminists are also insisting that that social actors are embodied and engendered. (Freud, of course, also insisted on this point, but then he is not generally counted among the discipline's totemic figures.) In feminist theory, the biological—the body, the “natural”—intrudes into the social domain, the domain sociologists have claimed as their object of study and defined through the exclusion of just those natural aspects of human reality.⁹ And as the natural intrudes into the social domain, gender is revealed as undeniably natural *and* social. Neither biological nor sociological explanations can account for it; nor does it seem likely that some combination of or compromise between the two will work (Connell 1995, p. 52). Gender upsets a very basic opposition—that of nature and culture—which has informed the discipline's self-understanding. It thus requires us to reassess basic sociological categories and distinctions. But the centrality of gender not only challenges these categories and distinctions, it also displaces the founding, and in many senses defining, problematic of the discipline. To discuss this particular point of tension between feminist and sociological theory, I want to turn for a moment to postmodernist theory and to its reception by the inner circle.

THE PROBLEMATIC OF MODERNITY AND THE PROBLEMATIC OF GENDER: POSTMODERNIST, FEMINIST, AND SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Pauline Rosenau writes that “Post-modernism haunts social science today” (1992, p. 3). Although not everyone agrees on exactly what the terms “postmodernity” and “postmodernist theory” refer to, the challenges to sociology posed by theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari are becoming increasingly well known and difficult to ignore. The reactions of sociologists to the work of these theorists have by no means been uniformly positive or enthusiastic (see Habermas 1981, 1987). Nevertheless, the colleague who voiced reservations about feminist

compiled in 1984 and therefore, one hopes, cannot be regarded as indicative of what is being taught in sociological theory courses today. On the other hand, it is what the ASA makes available to anyone interested in developing or revising a course on sociological theory and thus is not irrelevant to a discussion of the current state of affairs. This set contains 29 syllabi that were selected as representative of a range of sociological perspectives, a variety of course themes, as well as a variety of pedagogical techniques. Of the 29 courses represented in the syllabi set, only one paid any significant attention to feminist theoretical work: Feminist critiques and/or revisions of dominant theoretical perspectives were the subject of four out of 26 lectures. In four other courses, several (between two and five) articles by feminist scholars or pertaining to how women have been conceptualized in sociological theory were assigned; in one other course these types of articles were included in the suggested readings. Thus, only six of twenty-nine courses presented or included any evidence that there even is such a thing as feminist theory.

⁹ See Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), especially chapter 2, for a discussion of sociology's treatment of the body.

theory's status as theory takes postmodernist theory very seriously, and this same response is evident in journals and texts.

Over the past ten years *Sociological Theory* has published a total of 18 articles on, or reflecting the influence of, postmodernist theory.¹⁰ Six of these comprise a "Symposium on Postmodernism" (9: 2) and seven more were published in response to articles in this symposium. One might also add to this count the eight articles recently published as a symposium on Queer Theory, which attest to the influence of both postmodernist and feminist theory. *Theory and Society* has not been as accommodating to or interested in postmodernist theory. Only eight articles testify to the impact of postmodernist social theory; six of these, however, were published as a special "Forum on Postmodernism" (21: 4).¹¹ Neither of these journals, it will be recalled, has offered a special symposium or forum on feminist theory. And although the total number of articles reflecting the influence of feminism is greater than the total that address postmodernist theory, far fewer directly consider or present feminist theoretical work. A similar pattern is evident in texts dealing with sociological theory. Of the 17 books reviewed above, only five fail to make any reference to postmodernist theory (versus 12 that contain no specific reference to feminist theory). Foucault's work is the most frequently discussed, but in Münch's (1994) three-volume treatment of sociological theory from the 1850s to the present, Baudrillard and Lyotard also receive significant attention. There are also other indications of the serious consideration being given postmodernist theory by sociological theorists. For example, the contributors to *Postmodernism and Social Theory* (Seidman and Wagner 1992) are almost all well-established and well-known sociological theorists. By contrast, the contributors to *Feminism and Sociological Theory* (Wallace 1989) are feminist sociologists who would not generally be identified as members of the inner circle. The title and contents of the latter volume, as well as the contrast between the contributors to each volume, reinforce Laslett and Thorne's contention that feminist theorists have been far more interested than sociological theorists in establishing some sort of dialogue (1992, p. 60).

These different responses on the part of sociological theorists are all the more interesting given the many characteristics and concerns feminist and postmodernist theorists share. As Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson point out, for over a decade feminists and postmodernists have been working "independently on a common nexus of problems" (1990, p. 19). Like feminist activists and scholars, postmodernist social theorists challenge the sociological enterprise, calling for a radical reworking of the concepts and categories of sociological analysis and questioning the discipline's favored methodologies and epistemological assumptions. Moreover, both wish to reconceptualize power and expose and explore its various practices and effects (in knowledge, language, social institutions, relationships, and the construction of identities). Postmodernist theory is also decidedly inter- (or even "post-") disciplinary; the language and tone of such writers as Deleuze and Guattari, or Baudrillard, are as strange and discomfiting as those of many feminist writers; and postmodernist theory is certainly not anchored in any of the familiar and useful sociological paradigms. These many points of confluence are confirmed by the considerable interest of feminist

¹⁰ Norman K. Denzin, "Postmodern Social Theory" (4: 2); William Bogard, "Closing Down the Social: Baudrillard's Challenge to Contemporary Sociology" (8: 1); Richard A. Brown, "Rhetoric, Textuality, and the Postmodern Turn in Sociological Theory" (8: 2); Scott Baker, "Reflection, Doubt and the Place of Rhetoric in Postmodern Social Theory" (8: 2); six articles comprising the "Symposium on Postmodernism" (9: 2); six more articles continuing the discussion begun in the Symposium (10: 2); Kenneth H. Tucker, Jr., "Aesthetics, Play and Cultural Memory: Giddens and Habermas on the Postmodern Challenge" (11: 2); and William Bogard, "The Postmodern Once Again" (11: 2).

¹¹ Scott Lash, "Postmodernity and Desire" (14: 1); six articles in "A Forum on Postmodernism" (21: 4); Benjamin Gregg, "Possibility of Social Critique in an Indeterminate World" (23: 3).

scholars in postmodernist theory (Weedon 1987; Diamond and Quinby 1988; Flax 1990a; Nicholson 1990).

Yet it is also true that postmodernist theory does not share all of feminist theory's vulnerabilities. Because it does not introduce a new set of social actors and is not clearly aligned with a social movement or the interests of particular group, postmodernist theory is not as easily subsumed, neutralized, or dismissed. Feminism's radical critique has been parried through the creation of new subfields and the incorporation of new concepts into already existing fields; the postmodernist challenge cannot be deflected in the same manner. Furthermore, although Nancy Hartsock (1990) has pointed out the curious historical coincidence between marginalized groups claiming the right to act as subjects and postmodernism's decentering of the subject, and Luce Irigaray (1985) has wondered whether it is not the "last ruse" of patriarchy, postmodernist theory is identified more often as the viewpoint or mood of our times than as the revenge of the beleaguered white male. The consequences of this are rather ironic. Because postmodernist theory is not obviously tied to a social movement or particular interest group, it benefits from an illusion of objectivity and value-neutrality that it neither claims for itself nor regards as possible or desirable. Furthermore, insofar as feminist theory is predominantly (although not exclusively) an activity of women and postmodernist theory is predominantly (although not exclusively) an activity of men, postmodernist theorists are advantaged by the tendency to associate women's interests and activities with the local and particular and men's with the general and universal. The fact that feminist theory develops out of and through reference to the particular experiences and standpoints of women in the everyday world, whereas postmodernist theory develops out of a tradition of intellectual critique and through reference to the writings of such established cultural figures as Nietzsche and Heidegger, means that despite postmodernist theory's interest in and valuation of the local and the particular, it again (and again somewhat ironically) is positioned to command more serious consideration.¹²

In considering the different receptions of feminist and postmodernist theory, it would be naive as well as disingenuous to discount the continuing effects of sexism and the gendered nature of cultural institutions and practices. However, if the analysis stops at this point a significant piece of the puzzle remains overlooked. For it is not only that feminist scholarship—because it introduces and speaks on behalf of a previously unrecognized set of actors, women—is vulnerable to being marginalized in a subfield and dismissed as ideological or as concerned only with the particular. It is also the case that feminist theory displaces sociology's central problematic in a way that postmodernist theory does not. Sociology developed as a response to social and intellectual concerns aroused by the economic and political revolutions that created modern capitalist society. In its origins and its development—in its central concerns, categories, concepts, and methods—sociology has sought to identify and understand the nature, dynamics, problems, limits, and possibilities of modernity. Postmodernist theory is fully engaged in this same discourse. However much it challenges, shifts, decenters, abandons, or disrupts sociological ways of understanding the world, it nevertheless shares with sociological theory a common focus—that of understanding the (changing) nature of modern society. The discussion remains on familiar, if unstable and shifting, terrain. Feminist theorists, on the other hand, displace the problematic of modernity with the problematic of gender. Rather than being primarily concerned with the nature, limits, and possibilities of modernity, feminist theorists focus on the significance

¹² In a point relevant to feminist theory's questionable status as theory and to the relatively more welcoming reception received by postmodern theory, Mary Ellen S. Capek has noted that "it is not until theories are abstracted and translated (lately from French) that they are accorded the dignity of theory" (1992, p. 74). On a slightly different, but still related note, Arthur Stinchcombe has observed that "it is the theories that are most divorced from the blood, sweat, and tears that have the highest prestige" (1986, p. 46).

of gender, on the range of gender roles and gender symbolism found in social life, and on how they either maintain social order or promote social change. This is a problematic concerned with how gender organizes social relationships, institutions, and practices, and with how it gives meaning to the organization and perception of knowledge. The central questions of feminist scholarship—What about women? Why and how have women been rendered invisible, less privileged, and subordinate? How can this be changed? And, increasingly, what about differences between women? (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1992)—direct practical and theoretical attention to the changing, varied, and intersecting forms and functions of hierarchy, oppression, difference, and invisibility in all dimensions of the social world. The problematic of gender, in this sense, leads away from an exclusive focus on women to a more general concern with structures and practices of social inequality and social life.

In identifying sociological and postmodernist theory with the problematic of modernity and feminist theory with the problematic of gender, I am, of course, oversimplifying (and thus also misrepresenting) a more complex state of affairs. Not all sociological theorists place modernity at the center of consideration (think of symbolic interactionism or ethnomethodology, for example). Furthermore, the postmodernist understanding of modernity as discourse and identity is fundamentally different from prevailing sociological understandings of modernity.¹³ It is also true that inequality has always been a central concern in sociological (if not postmodernist) theory. Nor is it the case that feminist theorists are uninterested in or unaware of the nature and problems of modernity. They take quite seriously postmodernist analyses and use both sociological and postmodernist insights and forms of inquiry. Sociological, postmodernist, and feminist analyses can and do overlap (one could hardly argue for more critical dialogue between them if they did not). My point is that they approach and study the social world from different starting points. The discursive center of sociological and postmodernist theory is modernity; the discursive center of feminist theory is gender. The inner circle's relatively more welcoming response to postmodernist theory can be attributed at least partly to their shared focus on modernity; its resistance to feminist theory can be attributed at least partly to the fact that in placing gender at the center of inquiry, feminism not only calls into question disciplinary boundaries but also shifts the principal focus of concern and establishes a different perspective on the social world.

ON COMMON ISSUES/FOR CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS

The troubles gender creates are undeniable and unavoidable. Such difficulties and tensions, however, by no means preclude the possibility of a stimulating, if wary, relationship between sociological and feminist theory. Just as critical encounters with various traditions of social thought have been an important element in the development of feminist thought, so too might sociological theory benefit from critical encounters with feminist thought. Of the many issues being addressed by feminist theorists, I want to draw attention to four that are particularly relevant to current discussions and developments in sociological theory: first, the effort to theorize more adequately the interrelationships between levels of social reality; second, the treatment of power, resistance, and oppression; third, work on effecting a conceptual shift from "either/or" to "both/and" thinking; and, finally, the effort to establish grounds for assessing knowledge claims that avoid the pitfalls of both objectivism and relativism.

¹³ I am indebted to Jeff Livesay for reminding me of both of these points.

Ritzer (1990) observes that sociological theory has taken a decidedly synthetic turn. This movement toward theoretical synthesis involves both a greater willingness to draw from a variety of schools of sociological thought and an intensified interest in exploring the interrelationships between multiple levels of social reality. In both of these areas feminist theory has been ahead of the curve. Its proclivity for critically appropriating elements of various theoretical traditions has already been noted. Equally characteristic of feminist theorizing is its dismissal of the conventional sociological distinction between micro and macro levels of analysis: The early second-wave rallying cry of “the personal is political” already signaled the assault on this analytical distinction. Endeavoring to articulate and represent the subjective experiences and everyday situations of women, while at the same time identifying and analyzing the structures and forces that shape these experiences and situations, feminist scholars are working to develop new ways of conceptualizing the interaction and interrelationships of individual lived experience and social organization. Dorothy Smith’s “insider’s sociology” (1987) begins from the location and perspective of the embodied subject and discloses how that subject’s activities and experiences are organized and shaped by larger social and economic processes. Arlie Hochschild’s research on flight attendants (1983) demonstrates how human emotions are packaged as an exchange commodity. Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990) articulation of Black feminist thought reveals the ways in which communities mediate the interaction of lived experience and social structures. Subjectivity, personal relationships, group membership, and larger social structures intersect and converge in the lives of social actors; the micro/macro distinction is effaced when one approaches and understands the social world from the standpoints of these actors. And as a consequence, the public/private dichotomy that has grounded much political and sociological analysis—and that gets reproduced even by theorists, such as Habermas, who are working to resolve the micro/macro problem (Fraser 1989)—is challenged. This dichotomy has also facilitated the tendency to understand and study power primarily in its “public” forms. In casting all relations between women and men as institutionalized relations of power, feminists not only question the public/private distinction but also reconceptualize power and, in turn, political activism and resistance.

Most sociological treatments of power are informed by Max Weber’s definition of power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” ([1922] 1978, p. 53). Defining power in terms of the ability of one person or group to prevail over others through various means focuses sociological attention on the actions of dominants. Although feminists understandably have been interested in how dominants practice, reproduce, and legitimate power, they also have found this conception of power limited. In approaching the phenomenon of power from the standpoint of women, feminist scholars bring into focus different forms of power: the power to constitute and define oneself as a subject; the power to create and to nurture; the power to resist, to defy, to survive, to witness; the power to negotiate competently the demands of everyday life (see, for example, French 1985). This more expansive understanding of power not only draws attention to the powers exercised by subordinates, it also transforms understanding of the consciousness and resistance of subordinate groups.

The familiar Marxian distinction between false consciousness and class consciousness casts oppressed peoples as either suffering from a distorted, false understanding of their actual conditions and true interests or, as a result of organized struggle, developing a correct understanding of these conditions and interests. The treatment of oppressed groups as more or less totally hoodwinked by their oppressors unless or until they are actively involved in organized struggle is countered by feminist discussions of a dual or bifurcated consciousness. Smith’s (1987) analysis of the bifurcation of consciousness captures the many dis-

junctures, separations, and contradictions that women (and other subjugated groups) experience: disjunctures between their everyday world and the larger structures and forces that shape it; between their own lived experience and dominant (social scientific) descriptions of it; between the world and experiences of the oppressed and the world of dominants whose actions and ideas create structures of oppression. Members of oppressed groups are necessarily conscious (albeit to varying degrees) of these disjunctures and contradictions because they must live in and negotiate their way within both worlds. Whether it be Smith's sociologist moving between the everyday/everynight world of diapers, bills, and groceries and the university department, or Collins's domestic worker as the "outsider-within," these women are recognized as more than just victims of oppression or secondary figures of interest only insofar as their resistance requires new strategies on the part of the dominants. Women and members of other oppressed groups are understood as competent subjects getting by, creating, and surviving within hostile and limiting environments. From a feminist perspective, resistance and political activism not only (or even most importantly) involve collective action in the public sphere; they also entail everyday and individual acts of rebellion and personal transformation. Efforts to create safe spaces, the fight for individual and group survival, and struggles for institutional transformation become significant moments of political activism (Collins 1990).

As feminists have expanded and reformulated conceptions of power and political activism, they also have been required to develop a more complex, multidimensional understanding of oppression. Early second-wave theorists searched for a single cause of gender oppression: Liberal feminists argued that it was the consequence of irrational beliefs and institutions; Marxist feminists, private property; radical feminists, the male control of female bodies. Not only did early second-wave theorizing assume that there was one cause, it also assumed that women—whether because of nature or culture—constituted a relatively undifferentiated group. The critiques of women of color, poor women, and lesbians forced recognition of the fact that women are a heterogeneous group and that their experiences and positions as women are conditioned by multiple, interacting systems of oppression. In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins describes a "matrix of domination," structured along multiple axes—such as race, class, and gender—and on multiple levels. While social relations of domination are organized along these (as well as other) axes, people experience and resist oppression at the levels of personal biography, community or group, and social institutions. Rejecting "additive approaches" to oppression which tend to quantify and rank human oppressions, Collins argues for recognition of distinctive systems of oppression operating within one overarching structure of domination. Systems such as race, class, and gender oppression interact with and feed on one another—she speaks of the "simultaneity" of these systems—but they are not interchangeable or reducible to one another. They function differently at different levels. All three systems operate on the social structural level of institutions. But while race and class oppressions have created communities that could foster resistance, gender oppression, which intrudes more deeply into family dynamics and individual consciousness and cuts across communities and institutions, creates fewer bases for resistance. This multiple-system, multilevel model of domination not only alters our understanding of how oppression and resistance operate, it also counteracts the common tendency to think of "oppressor" and "oppressed" as distinct, mutually exclusive categories. Within multiple systems of oppression, individuals derive varying amounts of penalty and privilege. "Depending on the context," Collins writes, "an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed" (1990, p. 225); there are "few pure victims or oppressors" within a matrix of domination (p. 229).

Reflected in this denial of pure victims and oppressors—as well as in the dismissal of additive approaches to oppression and the challenges to macro/micro, public/private, false

consciousness/class consciousness distinctions—is the feminist rejection of the dichotomous categories and dualistic thinking that characterize Western scientific thought. Collins (1990) speaks of a necessary conceptual shift from “either/or” to “both/and” thinking; Jane Flax (1990b) writes about “thinking in relations”; Donna Haraway advocates exchanging the “border wars” of Western science and politics for “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and responsibility for their construction” (1990, p. 191). The dichotomous categories that inform scientific approaches to understanding the world—culture and nature, mind and body, thought and action, fact and value, truth and opinion, subject and object—not only posit these terms as distinct from and opposed to each other, but in each pairing one term is prior, determining, or privileged. As bell hooks argues, dualistic thinking is also hierarchical thinking; Western metaphysical dualism, she writes, shares with all systems of oppression a “belief in notions of superior and inferior,” a belief that provides the ideological foundation upon which notions of domination are constructed (1989, pp. 175–176). Dualistic, hierarchical thinking not only informs what hooks terms a “politic of domination,” it also leads us to look for and identify *the* cause, *the* most significant influence, *the* most powerful effect: It is race, class, *or* gender, it is culture *or* nature, it is mind *or* body. This type of thinking inhibits efforts to conceptualize (or even recognize) simultaneity, interrelationships, and complex interactions.

The feminist rejection of dichotomous, “either/or” thinking is based in the experiences of women. Collins (1990) presents the “both/and” conceptual orientation of Black feminist thought as a consequence of the material conditions and historical struggles of Black women which precluded the possibility of separating thought and action, individual and community. Similarly, Smith (1987) describes the consciousness of women as emerging along the “line of fault,” the point of rupture, between their own experience and the ideological modes of interpreting and reading it. The conceptual distinctions between mind and body, public and private, and culture and nature are points of rupture precisely because they are incongruent with women’s experiences. The critique and rejection of dichotomous, “either/or” thinking also can be seen as following logically from the introduction of gender as a central analytical category and the concurrent displacement of the problematic of modernity by the problematic of gender. In this one unsettling move, fundamental oppositions and orientations that have framed sociological inquiry are undermined. A conceptual shift takes place that requires us to work within the gray areas, tolerate ambiguity, and attend to complex, multiple interrelationships. This conceptual shift directs us to think in terms of constellations (to use Adorno’s imagery) or patchwork quilts and tapestries (to use feminist imagery). It also raises basic questions about how knowledge of the world is developed and assessed.

Strict separations of subject and object, reason and emotion, fact and value, and truth and opinion have set the standards for the scientific determination of truth. Central to the Western scientific method stands the figure of the value-free, impartial, dispassionate observer, occupying a point external to any particular position in society. Through rigorous maintenance of these separations and this position, objective knowledge about the world could be developed. Feminists have challenged the claims and procedures of Western science; indeed, at the heart of all feminist scholarship lies the assertion that Western science has produced partial and distorted representations of the world. Rejecting positivistic, scientific procedure, feminist scholars argue that all knowledge is situated knowledge, all knowledge is “interested” knowledge. There is no privileged, Archimedean point external to particular positions in society; there are, rather, only multiple and partial perspectives. Knowledge is socially constructed and therefore must be understood and assessed within the context of social relations in which it is produced. Sandra Harding (1986, 1990) argues that even “feminist empiricists” who contend that sexism and androcentrism in scientific inquiry can be eliminated through stricter adherence to existing methodological norms

betray their own claims: The ideal knower of feminist empiricism is not a “disembodied mind” but a historically located woman scientist. But if there are only multiple and partial perspectives and if all knowledge is situated and interested, on what basis can feminist scholars claim to be producing accurate knowledge of the social world? How can the feminist descriptions of women and women’s oppression or their critiques of social institutions be justified? In assessing, criticizing, and in many cases rejecting the assumptions, claims, and procedures of science, feminists appear to be making their own project impossible: If they abandon the procedures for determining and establishing “objective” truths, what is to prevent them from falling victim to the critical and political paralysis of relativism?

Harding (1990) has pointed out that the tensions and contradictions generally identified as existing between science and its postmodernist critics are also found within feminism. The critiques of science developed by feminists are similar to those offered by postmodernists. Both argue against the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the sciences, asserting that claims put forth as universally applicable generally represent the interests of a specific historical group. Both question the notions of universality and reason that undergird science. Both reject what Smith refers to as the “specific competence” of science to resolve “multiplicity into one” (1989, p. 58) and both seek to develop knowledge and criteria for adjudicating knowledge claims that respect and reflect the heterogeneity of social experience. But feminism advances this critique of science at the same time that it seeks to develop knowledge that contributes to women’s understanding of their worlds and their struggles against oppression. Asserting that women’s subordination is real and that it can and should be ended, feminism cannot afford to renounce efforts to describe, explain, and understand the regularities, the underlying tendencies, and the generalized meanings of the social world. It therefore must reconcile recognition of the diversity and plurality of social groups and perspectives with the need to identify macrostructures of inequality and large-scale, systemic problems that cut across and transcend the experiences and locations of particular groups.

Although feminist theory displaces the problematic of modernity with the problematic of gender, it nevertheless remains clearly engaged in a “modernist” project. Like sociology, feminist scholarship is informed by a conviction that knowledge of the social world is possible and that this knowledge can serve as a basis for at least improving social conditions, if not also bringing about a society free of domination. To posit the social as irreducibly heterogeneous is to render this project infeasible. Thus both feminism and sociology face the challenge of recognizing and respecting individual subjects and differences among subjects and groups, while also developing generalizations that provide a basis for social analysis and critique. Both need to establish grounds for creating useful knowledge out of situated and interested knowledge. Therefore, the efforts of feminist scholars to resolve tensions internal to their own project should be of particular interest to sociological theorists as they respond to the postmodernist challenge.

One aspect of the feminist effort to resolve these tensions has been to question the tendency to treat relativism as the only alternative to objectivism. It is generally assumed that either one holds to the position that there are absolute truths which can be discovered through rigorous adherence to the scientific method or else one is compelled to treat the competing knowledge claims of different groups as equally valid; either one adheres to the objectivism of science or one falls into relativism. This tendency—this “either/or” stance—in fact characterizes both the defenders of science and their postmodernist critics. Harding argues that the postmodernists, “like the most positivist of Enlightenment thinkers, appear to assume that if one gives up the goal of telling one true story about reality, one must also give up trying to tell less false stories. They assume a symmetry between truth and falsity”

(1990, p. 100). The feminist alternative is to try to produce less false, less partial, and less perverse representations, without making any claims about what is absolutely and always true. It is assumed that those whose lives and experiences are being represented are in the best position to develop and verify those representations. It is also assumed that these lives and situations are located within identifiable structures that transcend and shape specific locations. But since no group has a clear angle of vision on the social world, knowledge about these structures will always be constructed from partial and situated "truths." The development of less false stories about the social world thus must involve dialogue between groups as well as recognition of the unfinished nature of their own knowledge (Collins 1990). This alternative accepts that knowledge is always incomplete and therefore that claims about the world (and the analyses and actions based upon them) must necessarily become more modest. It nevertheless holds that some systematic knowledge of the world is possible and that such knowledge can be useful.

CAVEATS AND CONCLUSIONS

The feminist revolution in sociological theory has yet to occur. Resistance to and neglect of feminist theory by the discipline's "inner circle" has been fueled by many factors, not the least of which is the troublesome character of the central feminist analytical category, gender. Nevertheless, feminist theorists are grappling with issues that are directly relevant to the concerns of sociological theorists and, as Charles Lemert has written, "it is possible that feminist theory provides the resources required to resolve the dominant issues in contemporary social theory, and thereby suggest its future course" (1988, p. 800). I have proposed that some of these resources are to be found in the synthetic nature of feminist theorizing, in its treatment of power and oppression, and in its efforts to move away from dualistic thinking and to create a positive alternative to both objectivism and relativism. In arguing that feminist theory offers valuable resources to sociological theory, I am not, however, claiming that gender provides the foundation upon which we might reconstruct sociological theory or that feminist theory offers the one correct framework for understanding the social world. In fact, the character and content of feminist theorizing argue against any inclination to make such claims.

Feminism is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. There are many "types" of feminism, and these types differ in terms of their organizational forms and political strategies, their orientations to mainstream institutions and cultural practices, and their identification of key problems and solutions. On most any given issue—on sex, on science, on social welfare—a variety of conflicting feminist analyses can be found. There is no one feminist voice. Ann Snitow describes feminism as "an inevitably mixed form" and attributes this to a central, recurring divide that runs through its history. This divide, she states, is formed by the tension between "the need to build the identity 'woman' and give it solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category 'woman' and dismantle its all-to-solid history" (1990, p. 9). Haraway acknowledges this same unavoidable tension when she observes that "'women's experience' . . . is a fiction and fact of the most crucial political kind" (1990, p. 191). This divide goes by many names—"equality vs. difference," "social constructionism vs. essentialism," "solidarity vs. diversity"—and is apparent in older debates between liberal and radical feminism and newer tensions between modernist and postmodernist tendencies in feminism. It is also evident in differences between analyses grounded in women's standpoint (which tend to emphasize experience and agency) and those that take gender as their starting point (and focus more on structures). This divide reappears at every turn, and it is a divide for which there is no imminent resolution. Feminism cannot comfortably or consistently locate itself on either side of the divide. There

is “no fixed progressive position,” Snitow warns, “no final theoretical or practical resting place” (1990, p. 13).

Unquestionably, a crucial element in the development and vitality of feminist thought has been the tensions created by this recurring divide and the consequent elusiveness of any practical or theoretical resting place. There is no stable, privileged position within feminist theory: It is “created dialogically,” Marilyn Strathern writes, “in the sense that all the positions in the debate constitute its base” (1987, p. 285). The absence of a stable, privileged position means that knowledge of the social world can be constructed only from partial perspectives and out of situated knowledge, and that this knowledge can be improved—made more comprehensive and adequate—only through dialogue and debate. The absence of a stable, privileged position thus assures feminist theory’s synthetic character and undermines any tendency to establish it as the one correct framework for understanding the social world.

But if feminist theory does not and cannot present itself as the superior alternative to all sociological perspectives, it nevertheless issues serious and important challenges to those perspectives. When gender breaches the boundaries of the sociological domain and exposes the limitations and distortions of “either/or” thinking, we can no longer content ourselves with just “adding women” and carrying on with business as usual; we must rethink the very foundations of the discipline. But as feminists call into question conventional sociological assumptions, categories, and methods, they also defend a central tenet of the sociological project: that systematic knowledge of the social world is possible, that social patterns and structures can be identified, described, and analyzed. Feminist theorists argue that we can *both* recognize the multiplicity of social experiences and perspectives *and* make statements about regularities in the social world that can inform efforts to end oppression. In light of contemporary discourses that disclaim the possibility of developing useful knowledge, the efforts of feminists to develop procedures for telling “less false stories” and for fashioning useful knowledge from partial and situated truths should be of particular interest to sociological theorists. Despite the many challenges that feminist scholarship poses for sociology, their mutual grounding in a tradition that holds onto the possibility of developing knowledge that can be used to improve social conditions provides a basis for dialogue that sociologists would do well to build on. It would be worth the trouble.

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