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## FEMINIST THEORIES

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What do we love most about sociology? Surely, it is that we can take her anywhere. Sociological theories, methods, and critiques make it possible to research virtually anything where social relationships occur, indeed wherever the fingerprint of human beings has touched—or damaged—the ecosphere. Yet its practitioners often forgo acknowledgment of sociology's own debts: sociology of knowledge, yes, but really only as a subdiscipline, not as a grounding for the whole enterprise. In some of sociology's guises, and certainly in the positivism that has predominated in American sociology, there is much to be gained by covering up the tracks: As a "science," sociology claims to have, as part of its birthright, the necessary arsenal for forwarding its knowledge claims. Disciplining the questions, insights, and critiques that come from elsewhere involves shaping them up, trimming their sails, and in short, making them "fit" the prevailing sociological discourses. Sociology stands as a thing apart, independent, robust, and versatile.

But of course, the innermost secret of the discipline is that its questions and critiques come from the outside, often in the form of critiques of the discipline itself. A focus on feminist theories provides a recent example of what happens when a discipline, imperialistic in intentions, finds itself not the subject but the object of another's gaze. In the 1960s, for the second time in the twentieth century, the feminist movement garnered adherents in every walk of life, some of whom turned their critical gaze on the academy, earned credentials, and became insider/outside *par excellence*. Sociology's science, they said, was nothing more—or less—than the commonsense sexist assumptions of its practitioners (Acker 1997;

Bernard 1998; Rege 2003).<sup>1</sup> Sociology, like every other societal arena, became not only an object of contested feminist critique but also a site of desire for transformation of the discipline and the entire social world.

#### SOCIAL CONTEXT FOR SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

The contemporary feminist challenge to the dominant social relations and ideology, and to their constituent forms of knowledge, resulted from a convergence of social processes that took off in the years following the World War II: First, the expansion of industry and government drew unprecedented numbers of women, including married women with children, into the labor market. Yet there was no accompanying development of social support for child care, no change in the sexual division of labor in the home, and no change in the dominant ideology that held that women were first and foremost mothers and that children needed full-time mothering. Second, the promise of equal education for boys and girls—the outcome of earlier feminist struggles—had not hindered either the development of a segregated work force or the perpetuation of radically unequal pay for comparable work. Third, the experiences of women in the civil rights movement, in the New Left, and in the anti-(Vietnam)war movement left them reeling from a clash between the rhetoric of equality and social justice and their actual experiences as secretaries, cooks, and bedmates to the male theoreticians and activists (Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail 1988; Echols 1989; Brownmiller 1999; Hamilton 2005:39–55). This

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extraordinary convergence of broad macroeconomic processes, of a liberal education system, and of the protest movements of the 1960s affected thousands of (mostly young) women. Their mushrooming protest movement converged with a more institutionalized process through which women expanded their traditional organizations into pressure groups for legal and social reform. Contemporary Western feminist theories first developed within these social movements and then in virtually every academic discipline. The first practitioners were feminist activists, a few within the academy—some of whom entered graduate school and then the professoriate—in order to understand and change the world, including the scholarly canon.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these wide-ranging political and academic engagements, feminist theories offered no disciplinary allegiances. Philosophers, rhetoricians, literary critics, social scientists, psychoanalysts, biologists, and other scientists all engaged in their development<sup>3</sup> and borrowed freely from one other.

## OVERVIEW

In the succeeding decades, feminists have produced an enormous, diverse, and eclectic range of interpretations of how sexual hierarchies are created and sustained as well as strategies for confronting these hierarchies (Shanley and Narayan 1997:xxi). Taken together, these interpretations constitute an unprecedented historical challenge to the organization of social life and the ways in which that life has been apprehended. This challenge involves examining how sexual oppression informs and is informed by the many social practices through which people are privileged and disadvantaged, included and excluded, wield and submit to power. In its diversity, complexity, internal debates, and many languages, feminist literature defies summary. Yet all of it is provoked by unease and often outrage at current social arrangements, a multipronged drive seeking to transform social relationships on levels ranging from the intimate to the global.

From the late 1960s, feminist theories have questioned the assumptions, explanations, and silences in sociological theory, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies (Chanana 2003; Rege 2003). Feminist theories have also generated new areas of empirical research. In this process, existing theories were pried open and read for the spaces they could provide for feminist inquiry,<sup>4</sup> and writers previously excluded from the canon—Harriet Martineau is a leading example—were reread and declared sociological theorists (Hoecker-Drysdale 1991; McDonald 1994, 1998; Adams and Sydnie 2002; Rege 2003:12–13). Contemporary social thought—poststructuralism, postcolonial studies, queer theory, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, antiracist theory, and postmodernism—enabled and refashioned through feminism—all found sociologists who appropriated them for their intellectual projects. A voluminous literature resulted, and sociology underwent a metamorphosis

(Siltanen 2004).<sup>5</sup> But the extent of this sea change is not immediately obvious. Much sociological work appears untouched by feminist inquiry for whether as researchers and authors, editors (especially of main-stream journals), or instructors, the disciplinarians have worked to cover the traces of “outside” influences, normalizing feminist critique by tailoring it to fit existing discourses.

Feminist theories encompass a wide range of (often competitive) contributions that have developed rapidly, and that are undergoing continuing critique, and proliferation. They constitute moving targets, captured only uneasily, incompletely, and inevitably controversially. This essay provides an account of (1) the origins and development of feminist theories (Eisenstein 1984; Tong 1989; Jaggar and Rothenberg 1993; Hamilton 2005:9–38), (2) their challenge to sociology, (3) the contours of the various relationships between these theories and sociology, and (4) some of the key debates within contemporary feminist theory. For the most part, this essay only deals with the developments in Western feminist theory, and is thus a highly partial account. African-centered feminists, for example, have called for a halt on the one-way importation of theory, which in Obioma Nnaemka’s (2003) words, allows for “a localized construct to impose a universal validity and application” (p. 362). She urged an engagement with African feminist theory that builds on “whatever the people consider important to their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves.” “Western feminism,” she charges, is “caught up in its ambivalence: fighting for inclusion, it installs exclusions; advocating change, it resists change; laying claims to movement, it resists movement” (p. 363).

## SOME ORIGINS OF FEMINIST THEORIES

Examples of women railing against their status, critiquing dominant ideas about their sex, actively championing their virtues, and fighting their exclusions have been gleaned from histories dating back to the ancient world, and continuing through the ages. But a reasonable understanding of contemporary feminist thought may be achieved by beginning with the writing, following the French Revolution, of feminism’s most famous advocate, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) (Taylor 2003).

### Liberal Feminism

When Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, she was in broad agreement with the liberal democratic slogan—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—of the French Revolution. She argued that women, like men, are rational beings with the potential to be fully responsible for their own lives. Although she wrote in scathing terms about men’s treatment of women, and provided them with reasoned arguments to treat women as their equals, she also lambasted aristocratic and

middle-class women for exchanging “health liberty and virtue” for food and clothing, that is, for a life of dependence on fathers and husbands (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1992:147).

During the next 200 years, with much ebb and flow, women struggled for the right to higher education, entrance into the professions, the right to own property and hold public office, and for suffrage, the right that came to symbolize full citizenship. For liberal feminists, the laws that decreed that women were lesser beings than men were a product of ignorance. The expectation was that as men and women educated themselves, these laws and the prejudices that underwrote them would gradually be overturned in favor of those extending equal opportunity to women. As Zillah Eisenstein (1981) has argued, the assumptions of liberal feminism became the new common sense understanding, at least in the West—for example, even the religious right does not campaign against suffrage. Today those sociologies that claim to be value-free tend to carry liberal feminist assumptions.

### Marxism and the Woman Question

Historically, liberal feminism and the Marxist perspective on the woman question share a time line throughout the nineteenth century. But they not only had different explanations for, and solutions to, the subordination of women but also occupied different, and sometimes hostile, political territory. Marxists accused feminists of being “bourgeois,” interested only in ensuring that women share in the privilege (or destitution) of their class. Feminists, for their part, often accused left-wing men and their political parties of being as disinterested, if not as hostile, as their class enemies in the rights of women.

From the perspective of feminists in the 1960s, it was Marx’s collaborator, Frederick Engels, who made the major contribution to understanding women’s historic subordination. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* [1884] (1948), he argued that early humans lived in a state of primitive communism: Everyone had to labor to survive and, therefore, all that was available was shared. With the invention of cultivation and animal husbandry, people created the possibility of accumulating surplus. This development was of monumental importance in human history, opening up the possibility of longer, more secure lives. But the underside was that this surplus could be controlled by some and used in the interests of the few against the many. Ever since, various private property regimes have codified these oppressive and exploitative social relationships. Those men with a surplus, Engels argued, wanted their own children to inherit the wealth they had amassed. But how would men know who were their own children? The solution historically and in most known cultures was to turn women themselves into property. If a man owned a woman, she would labor for him, and she would be permitted to have sexual relations only with him. All children born to a man’s wife would be,

legally speaking, his children, because he owned their mother; unmarried women would give birth to “illegitimate” children. This is the patriarchal basis of marriage, contested by feminists, gradually eroded in law, but retaining formidable social and legal underpinnings today.

In this interpretation, class society and male dominance entered onto the world stage together: for Engels [1884] (1948) these developments constituted the “world historic defeat of the female sex” (p. 57). It followed, then, that with the abolition of private property (under communism), women would be emancipated. Under capitalism, Engels detected a first step toward women’s emancipation, as economic desperation forced working-class women to become wage laborers, and hence propelled them into de facto equality with their husbands.

With the development of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s, Engels’s theory became subject to feminist critique: Notably, he failed to offer an explanation for why, after a promising start for sexual equality among our early ancestors, it was apparently so easy for men to take women as their property (Delmar 1976; Burstyn 1983; Barrett 1986) while his prediction about working-class marriage turned out to be, for the most part, a pipe dream. Feminists have been more inclined to believe that sexual inequality—in many forms, and some far more pronounced than others—predated class society and, if left to its own devices, would certainly outlive it, a position now supported by the histories of socialism in many countries.<sup>6</sup> Radical feminist sociologist Mary O’Brien (1981) argued that Engels should have looked more closely at the mode of reproduction, the consequences of men’s alienation from “their seed,” and hence from posterity and—what she argued was—their long compensatory patriarchal gesture to take control of women, their children, and everything else.

Second-wave feminism launched a critique not only of the public world but also of the private world—the world of family, love, sexuality, pregnancy, and child care. This feminism soon divided along political and theoretical lines into socialist feminism and radical feminism. A primary difference between them centered on the question of explanation: Who and what oppressed women—and why.

### Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminists argued, with Marxists, that the relations of capital, and therefore class relations, are pivotal for understanding women’s oppression. But they differed from Marxists in insisting that the oppressive relations between the sexes are not simply derivative of class, and hence would not disappear automatically with the overthrow of capitalism.

Socialist feminists analyzed the interconnections between the public sphere of capitalist and state relations and the private sphere of the family/household. On both a daily and generational level, they found, women contribute to the reproduction of labor power by having and rearing

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children and by looking after husbands between their shifts in mines and factories (Secombe 1974; Hamilton 1978; Luxton 1980; Armstrong and Armstrong 1994, 2002; Luxton and Corman 2001; Vosko 2002). As a result, not only did capitalists and individual men benefit from the unpaid and personal service of women in the home but also, as feminist researchers discovered, they had helped create and naturalize the gendered distinction between private and public. During the rise of industrial capitalism, for example, men of capital, together with middle-class philanthropists and social reformers and the better-paid male skilled workers engaged in diverse, but mutually reinforcing, strategies to push women out of the labor force, a move legitimated through the promise of a family wage for male workers (Land 1980).

For women, the results of this long historical maneuver (reiterated today every time the media reports triumphantly on a well-paid powerful woman's withdrawal from the labor force in order to care for her children) were problematic. First, denied access to higher education and the professions, women were also pushed out of the better-paying jobs through various forms of "protective" legislation (Cohn 1985). Second, many men never earned a family wage but were nonetheless expected to support a wife and children. Women compensated for inadequate wages by increasing household labor, taking in boarders, doing laundry, caring for other people's children, putting the needs of others before their own (Bradbury 1993), and especially in the case of black women in the United States and Canada, securing paid domestic work in the homes of the affluent. Third, men earned the (main) wage, and this privilege reinforced their power over their wives and children. Men, exploited in the work force, often responded by flexing their muscles, literally and figuratively, at home.

Socialist feminists pointed to the final irony that when husbands or fathers died or deserted their families, women, encouraged from birth to believe that men would care for them and their children, had to earn a living in the capitalist marketplace with "one hand tied behind their back" (Liddington and Norris 1978). Most women had no marketable skills, were denied access to education and better-paying jobs, and had no social supports for child care. The family wage, portrayed as a form of security for working-class people, was unmasked as a fraud. This idea also served as a justification for women's sole responsibility for child care and housework, coupled with a lifetime of personal service to a particular man, an idea still underpinning much social policy and sanctified by many religious traditions.

### Radical Feminism

Radical feminists, meanwhile, argued that buried deeper in human society, both historically and psychically, were the relations of domination and subordination between the sexes. Shulamith Firestone (1970) located these differences between men and women in nature's unequal allotment of reproductive tasks. Women bore,

suckled, and raised children, while men had the time and opportunity to develop social institutions—including the family—through which they appropriated power and control over women and children. The bottom line was that men oppressed women. Overthrowing that oppression constituted the primary struggle in which feminists should engage. Radical feminists charted the path that brought male control of female sexuality—including marriage regime laws against birth control and abortion, and male violence against women into the mainstream of feminist theory and practice, as well as into the broad political and academic arenas. So overwhelming did the incidence of male violence appear, especially to many working in the shelter movement, that radical feminist interpretations veered close to genetic or biological explanations and suggested that men should be removed from child rearing, and women should separate themselves from men at least for the foreseeable future (Rudy 2001). More generally, feminists insisted that—while short-term relief in the form of safe houses and other support were vital—the systematic relationships of inequality between the sexes must be dismantled for the violence to end (Walker 1990).

The debates among liberal, socialist, and radical feminists animated social movements during the late 1960s and early 1970s even as challenges to all these perspectives came swiftly from lesbian and antiracist feminists among others. But it is fair to say that when feminists first began challenging the academy they came armed with various versions of these three theoretical explanations for male domination and female subordination and determined to transform these relations throughout the university and in all the disciplinary traditions.

### FEMINIST THEORY AND THE ACADEMY: FEMINIST PRECURSORS IN SOCIOLOGY

From the beginning of the 1970s, some feminists already in the academy, motivated by developing feminist theories and the women's movement more generally began offering explanations for how sociology had managed to "miss" gender inequality, or more precisely, in the case of Talcott Parsons, for example, had accepted this form of inequality as a solution rather than as a social problem.<sup>7</sup> At the age of 86, in "Some Reflections on the Feminist Scholarship in Sociology," sociologist Mirra Komarovsky (1991) reported that

feminists [had] made manifest a social problem that was invisible in mainstream sociology prior to the 1960s . . . neither the general sociology textbooks nor books on social problems or the family registered any concern with the "women's problem" before the rise of the new feminism in the 1960s. (P. 3).

Komarovsky (1991) was in an excellent position to know this; her career in American sociology spanned seven decades. One of the few "immediate precursors" of

the “new feminist scholarship” (pp. 5–10), she launched a counterattack on the post–World War II antifeminist scholarship in sociology (Talcott Parsons), psychoanalysis (Helene Deutsch), education (Lynn White), and elsewhere (pp. 8–9). In her research on Barnard coeds, she revealed the cultural contradictions for women who were receiving a broad education and were expected to become full-time wives and mothers, and argued that they were not “inescapable dilemmas of life” (p. 9). W. M. Kephart’s critique of her work represented the dominant reaction both inside and outside the discipline: “The women that Mirra Komarovsky has written about . . . seem to have little in common with the often-taunted, often-endearred, often-devoted women who comprise our wives, mothers, and daughters” (p. 9).

Kephart’s sentiment, shorn of its overt paternalism, was well represented in the discipline’s dominant perspective on the sociology of the family, the only area with a sustained focus on women. Predicated on an acceptance of the belief that men and women naturally occupied separate spheres—the woman in the family, the man in the world—this perspective emphasized the universal and functional nature of the family. At its most, banal functionalism degenerated into courses on marriage and the family, which attracted mainly female students hoping (in vain) for tips on their problematic task of attracting and keeping a husband, and male visitors for the film on childbirth. Discussion of family life lacked any discussion of sexuality (Wrong 1960). Nor was there consideration of violence, rape or sex under duress, child abuse, incest, or birth control and abortion. What William Goode (1963) called “the classical family of western nostalgia” minus a grandparent or two, and relocated from farms and villages to the suburbs, was alive and well in sociology classes right through the turbulent 1960s.

During these prefeminist decades, Komarovsky did not stand alone in her sociological critique of women’s position, but the list is short and includes Helen Hacker (1951), Viola Klein (1946), and Alva Myrdal (Myrdal and Klein 1956).<sup>8</sup> But few students found these authors on their reading lists, and if they had been there, most would have found them as outrageous as did their professors. A more glaring omission from academic curricula during these years was Simone de Beauvoir’s (1952) *The Second Sex*. This book, informed by existentialism, provided an interpretation and synthesis of women’s subordination throughout the ages and cross-culturally.

### Why Was Sociology Oblivious?

Several sociologists like Komarovsky whose work spanned “before” and “after” offered explanations of why sociologists, despite their declared mandate to research social inequality, remained impervious to the hierarchical social relationships between the sexes—and in many cases resistant even after the Women’s Movement was in full swing. Many point to “simple” sexism—the same garden

variety that permeated the rest of society. Make no mistake, Komarovsky (1905–1999) would have been very lonely and not just because of the critical response to her research. A Barnard professor advised her not to become a sociologist: “You are a woman, foreign born, and Jewish. I would recommend some other occupation” (cited in Rosenberg n.d.). Another feminist pioneer, Jessie Bernard (1903–1996), wrote that

sociology has kept the female world all but invisible because to recognize it in all its dimensions would be unpleasant if not actually painful. They would then have to see themselves as part of the oppression of the underdog. They would have met the enemy and learned that it was them. (1998:39–40)

Paramount among those already on faculty when second-wave feminism began was Dorothy Smith, who had earned her doctorate at Berkeley in 1963 and who taught at the University of British Columbia. Her work won her an international reputation; she is certainly the most widely cited feminist theorist writing as a sociologist. Her critique of the discipline that “had taught her to look at the everyday world, at home and family, from a standpoint within the gendered relations of ruling, in which women were other or object” (Smith 1987:8) resonated with many of her peers as well as with younger scholars. Smith’s method, honed over many years, begins “with women’s experience from women’s standpoint and [explores] how it is shaped in the extended relations of larger social and political relations” (p. 10). Drawing on ideas from Mead, Merleau-Ponty, Marx, and Garfinkel, she nonetheless declared that she was neither “a symbolic interactionist, phenomenologist, Marxist, nor ethnomethodologist” (p. 9). Her intertwining of indebtedness and innovation marks the work of many feminist theorists, both within and outside sociology.

During the 1970s, pressure from feminists resulted in issues dedicated to research on women/feminist sociology in major journals in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and elsewhere. In her introduction to the January 1973 issue of *American Journal of Sociology*, Joan Huber wrote that “those who are sympathetic to the women’s movement will be grateful to the [journal] for devoting an issue to reporting research about women” (p. 763). Huber provides both confirmation that feminist sociology owes its genesis to the women’s movement and signals the deference of the less powerful to the more powerful—unless her reference to gratitude was intended irony. Huber wrote, “The idea that American society is structured so that women encounter severe occupational discrimination brings forth reactions from male sociologists that are not theoretically disappointing” (p. 765). In 1975, the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* dedicated an issue to feminist scholarship and according to the editor Frances Henry’s tactful introduction, the decision did not come easily. “The first formal sociological occasion in Britain which recognized gender roles as a

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serous object of study” occurred in 1974 with The British Sociological Association’s conference, “Sexual Divisions and Society” (David 2003:65; see also Oakley 1979:1262). In the introduction to the subsequent books, the editors noted that “in so far as sexism constitutes unproblematic, commonsense behaviour in contemporary British culture, it should not surprise us that it appears thus in sociology” (cited in David 2003:65).

These comments suggest reasons for the resistance of the discipline’s gatekeepers to the emerging feminist sociology. Huber (1973) wrote that

although male sociologists have been sensitized to the social and psychological correlates of prejudice, their response to the idea that child care is a parental and societal responsibility to enable women to compete freely in the occupational world parallels the response of certain nonblack blue-collar workers who are afraid that they will suffer economically if discrimination against blacks should end. (P. 65)

Huber’s language is women’s movement language—not yet sanitized for a respectable academic journal, a sign of the overlap and mutual indebtedness of the two sites. Embedded in Huber’s prose is both the liberal feminist view that sexism can be overcome through changing laws and attitudes and a more pessimistic radical feminist view that men will try to hold onto power at all costs. This is the power that many feminists, especially in the 1970s, referred to as patriarchy (Fox 1986; Walby 1990). Cynthia Fuchs Epstein charged in 1981 that

the intellectual gatekeepers have chosen those ideas that support their own power and undermined women’s rights to challenge it. Even among those who argued for a value-free social science, many allowed their prejudices to blind them to the bias in their own experiments and observations. (P. 150)

Several scholars have explained sociology’s resistance to feminism and feminist theory with reference to its particular history and conceptual framework. First, feminist inquiry reactivated an old fault line in studies in human society, most famously encapsulated in Marx’s famous dictum “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx and Engels [1888] 1969:15). In the early 1950s, for example, “a group of rebels” split off from the American Sociological Society (ASS) to form the Society for the Study of Social Problems. In her account, Jessie Bernard (1973) recalled objections to ASS’s “lack of interest in social problems and issues . . . and its complacent acceptance of the increasing trend of putting sociological research at the service of business and industry” (p. 774).

Whatever differences exist among feminist scholars and their theories, theirs is a project of social transformation, and that places it outside the boundaries of much mainstream sociology.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, as Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne pointed out in their 1985 article “The Missing Revolution in Sociology,” feminism did not

receive a warm welcome from those sociologists whose disciplinary perspectives were also dedicated to social transformation—for the small matter of what required changing, and in what order, and how—remained, fueling resistance, controversy, denial, and appropriation without acknowledgment. Many Marxist sociologists resisted feminist analysis (Acker 1997), and some continue to argue, as do Beth Anne Shelton and Ben Agger (1993) that feminism is a “moment in a rejuvenated feminized Marxism” (p. 40).

Still, functionalism is the perspective most often identified in considering sociology’s resistance to feminism (Stacey and Thorne 1985:308). Although functionalism no longer dominates mainstream sociology, some of its concepts hold on tenaciously. The concept “sex roles” provides an excellent example. Talcott Parsons’s (1956) massively influential work on the family argued that social systems require the performance of complementary instrumental and expressive functions. Within the family, the father-husband played the instrumental role (he does things), the mother-wife the expressive role (she holds things together). When feminist thinking reached the academy, the concept of sex roles enjoyed the great advantage of actually acknowledging the social presence and importance of both men and women. From the late 1960s, with pressure from students and some professors for the inclusion of research on women, sex roles offered itself up as the most obvious and safest route. Most new courses carried the title “Sociology of Sex Roles,” and in these courses feminist sociologists began critiquing the content and differential valuing of male and female sex roles. Sex roles took on the burden of describing and explaining women and men’s work and social status. Sex roles worked well with the new feminist concept of gender. Many sociologists found this a useful concept, for it reinscribed the bifurcation of (biological) sex (considered not in their province) and (sociological) gender (clearly their mandate).<sup>10</sup> In mainstream sociological research, gender became invoked as a variable in countless studies. But many feminists believed that the concept of sex roles could not shake the idea of harmony and complementarity offering, as it did, no theoretical space for an analysis of power or hierarchy (Stacey and Thorne 1985:307; Rege 2003:28).

## SOCIOLOGY AND FEMINIST THEORIES

Broadly stated, five variations on the relationship between sociological theory and feminist theory—not all mutually exclusive—exist at this time. Reviewing these relationships provides a useful prelude to a discussion of some of the central developments that animate contemporary feminist theories, and why these developments continue to elicit a broad range of responses within sociology.

First, some sociologists remain opposed to the introduction of feminist thought, arguing that, lamentably, contemporary social theories, including feminism, have

eroded and fragmented a once unitary discipline: There had been a center and it did not hold (Eldridge et al. 2000:5; Stanley 2000; Rege 2003:18).

Second, several theorists have invoked feminist theories to critique existing sociological theories to render them more useful for explaining the social world (Sydie 1987; Chafetz 1997; Laslett and Thorne 1997:12). Theories that do not incorporate women's experience or gender relations as an active process, they argue, remain deficient. A variation on this response includes those who have taken up feminist theories and questions to make their own theory of choice more robust and inclusive (Wallace 1989; England 1993).

Third, some feminist theorists argue that feminist insights have enabled new developments in social theory but that these contributions have remained unacknowledged, or explicitly denied. In critiquing philosophical binaries such as male/female, mind/body and reason/emotion that had paraded as "truth" from at least the time of the Enlightenment, feminist thought presaged postmodernism's challenge to notions of universality and historical metanarratives (whether liberal notions of progress or Marxism's dialectical materialism). But as Meaghan Morris (1988) and others have argued, some (male) theorists not only fail to cite feminist theories but also express surprise that feminists have not made contributions to the development of postmodernism (Roseneil 1995:195–96). Another version of this phenomenon has been the tendency, as revealed in studies of citations, for (mostly female) feminist theorists to reference the mainstream (mostly male) theorists in their work without having the compliment returned (Stanley 2000:64; Delamont 2003:115–35).

Fourth, some feminist sociologists have reversed the question about the impact of feminism on sociology to point out the influence sociology could—and should—exert on feminism. Stevi Jackson (2000) has argued strongly that many of feminism's concepts—including social constructionism—derived from sociology, but have now been attributed to other disciplines, "thus obliterating sociology's contributions from the collective scholarly memory" (pp. 92–93). Primarily, she is concerned that feminism's embrace of the "cultural turn" serves to minimize the importance of material social inequalities, a development that would be countered by reintroducing sociological perspectives (see also Roseneil 1995:199–200).

Fifth—and this may be the dominant stance within sociology at the beginning of the twenty-first century—there are those who accede, implicitly or explicitly, to adding feminist theory to the "list" of legitimate sociological theories. This stance leaves scholars free to take feminist theories on board—or not. As a result, in British feminist sociologist Liz Stanley's (2000) words, feminist theory becomes (simply) "'another parallel project' [running] alongside mainstream theory" (p. 64). Critics of the "take it or leave it" position charge, in Dorothy Smith's (1996)

words, that sociological theory remains caught up with the "problematics of the past like the DNA of flies preserved in Amber" (p. 4). Along the same lines, Australian sociologist, Robert Connell (1997) (who led the development of feminist sociology in that country [Deacon 1997:169]) notes that "American sociology long ago found it could deflect critique by defining each criticism as a new speciality" (p. 163; see also Eldridge et al. 2000:4). So it has been with feminism. In her survey of world systems theory, Kathryn B. Ward (1993a) argued that "when theories continually fail to respond to feminist critiques, and thus to incorporate gender, race, and class at their centres, this omission results in theories that fail to fully capture the experiences of diverse groups of women and men" (p. 60).<sup>11</sup>

Feminists have offered two major reasons for this refusal. First, they observe that the interdisciplinary nature of feminist theory unsettles the sociological borders, and second, recent feminist theory threatens (deconstructs) the very categories that so much sociology takes as articles of faith (Laslett and Thorne 1997:15).

The resulting theoretical bifurcation—what Stacey and Thorne (1996) call "the continued absence of meaningful dialogue" between sociological and feminist theory (p. 3; see also Alway 1995)—finds its substantive equivalent in the way that sociology curricula divide the social world. For example, sociology departments offer courses on stratification, women or sex roles, and race and ethnic relations. When the theories informing these areas remain outside the "theoretical core," one can see the broader basis for the charge that "most theory sessions at mainstream meetings trundle down the old tracks" (Connell 1997:163). Meanwhile, feminist courses in sociology and elsewhere have become a prime location for addressing multiple and interlocking systems, including sexual, racialized, and class inequality.

These tensions within and between sociology and feminist theory can be elaborated by looking at some of the central issues and debates within contemporary feminist theories. These theories continue to be informed *inter alia* through developments in psychoanalytic theory, poststructuralism, queer theory, cultural studies, and new science studies. While some feminist sociologists participate in these developments, sociologists more generally seem to spurn or ignore them. Indeed, the lack of attention they receive in major main-stream journals stands in sharp contrast to their centrality in a proliferating range of interdisciplinary journals.

## CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEORETICAL DEBATES

Feminist theories have been the site of ongoing debates and challenges. Three major areas of particular importance to sociology may be identified. First, from the mid-1970s, feminists of color challenged the exclusionary nature of

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feminist thought and its claim to speak for all women. Second, feminist poststructuralists, queer theorists, and feminist science scholars offered deconstructions of gender, the sex/gender binary, and sexuality. Third, feminist theorists have put their mind to the question of what happens to feminism when not only gender but also the male-female binary is destabilized.

### Antiracism and Intersectionality

For over a century, feminists argued that for women sex (or, for socialist feminists, sex together with class) constituted the most important and sustaining form of oppression and exploitation. Within dominant feminist discourses, this became self-evident, and much effort went into mapping the long and varied histories of patriarchal relationships. From the mid-1970s, women of color and aboriginal women began challenging publicly the universalism inherent in liberal, radical, and socialist feminism, all of which ignored—or at best sidelined—the histories of colonialism and imperialism, the legacies of slavery and genocide, and the systemic racism that produced lives of brutality and exclusion for some and lives of unearned and unrecognized privilege for others (Lorde 1984; hooks 1988; Collins 1990; Williams 1991; Brand 1994; Agnew 1996; Dua 1999; McKittrick 2006).

Theorizing racism as a system of power relations that legitimates differential and unequal treatment at institutional and personal levels illuminated the exclusions that white feminists installed within their theories and challenged the hegemonic narrative that second-wave feminism was a white middle-class affair (Baker 2004:7). By claiming to speak for all women (as universality implied), white feminists denied their social and economic advantages, reproduced racism within their theories, failed to make their movements relevant to women of color, and excluded myriad struggles against racism from the histories of feminism.

Feminist scholars began to join a new analysis of racism with the Marxist focus on class and the radical feminist focus on the sexual hierarchy under the rubric of what has been called intersectionality.<sup>12</sup> Such a perspective is prominently announced in the titles of books and courses—“Race, Class, and Gender” (Ward 1993b; Anderson and Collins 1995; Creese and Stasiulis 1996). The race-class-gender list, however, suggests the possibility of coherent theoretical perspectives that might limn the interconnections between these three dimensions of inequality, and yet this is no easy matter. Michèle Barrett (1988) has argued that “existing theories of social structure, already taxed by attempting to think about the interrelations of class and gender, have been quite unable to integrate a third axis of systemic inequality into their conceptual maps” (p. xii; see also Agnew 1996:3). Those in sympathy with this assessment tend to choose historically specific, theoretically informed local studies that allow for comparisons across time and space and that reveal the

complex subjectivities—their agency and resistance—of those whom they study (Adamson, Briskin, and McPhail 1988; Glenn 1997; Weber, Higginbotham, and Dill 1997).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), on the other hand, argues that Dorothy Smith’s “relations of ruling” concept “makes possible an analysis . . . of simultaneous and historicized exploitation of Third World women without suggesting . . . a geometric analysis of gender, race, sexuality and class” (p. 56). In line with this, some feminist sociologists—notably Patricia Hill Collins (1990)—seek an overarching theory that would attend to many systems of oppression and privilege, while Janet Chafetz (1997) anticipates that “theoretical progress on the topic of how various systems of inequality intersect could revolutionize the sociological study of stratification” (p.118).

### Challenging Gender and the Sex/Gender Binary

The challenge to gender-as-given occurred on many other fronts, including within (1) psychoanalytic theory, (2) poststructuralism, and (3) new science studies.

#### *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Psyche as Social*

After an inauspicious beginning, resulting from the misogyny of many of Freud’s statements, some feminists—Juliet Mitchell (1974), and notably among sociologists, Nancy Chodorow (1978)—began reworking psychoanalytic perspectives in order to explain how sex and gender identities become lodged so firmly in the psyche, and how and why women and men come to collude with the system of male dominance and female subordination, and thereby participate in its perpetuation.<sup>13</sup>

Feminist scholars take seriously the Freudian promise to explain how infants become gendered, how their sexual preference is shaped, and how they take their place within the hierarchical gendered order. What is particularly pertinent is how people come to feel themselves to be men or women as an intrinsic part of their being. This means that they are not just forced to be dominant or submissive, but that they are complicit in these relationships, as collaboration may be more comfortable than resistance (Benjamin 1988). Feminists have also reworked psychoanalysis to show that other forms of social inequality—especially class and racialized hierarchies—also become internalized and are therefore reproduced generationally (Spiller 1987; Abel 1990; Hamilton 1997).

#### *Poststructuralism*

Gender as a concept faces serious challenges especially in its use as a taken-for-granted variable synonymous with sex. Within feminist poststructuralism, the emphasis shifted to how gender—male/female, masculinity/femininity as well as the homosexuality/heterosexuality binary that is predicated on the gender binary—is made and unmade through “relational and thoroughly social processes”



(Marshall 2000:161). Historian Joan Scott (1988) and historical sociologist Denise Riley (1987) were among the first to develop a poststructural approach that displayed not only how gender was “constituted differently across historical and political contexts” (Marshall 2000:161), carrying shifting meanings, and differential access to everything from resources to influence but also that apparently neutral linguistic regimes, including taken-for-granted categories of social life such as revolution, work, bureaucracy, and charity were thoroughly infused and carried by gendered meanings. The earlier feminist emphasis on the oppressive aspects of femininity also gave way to the study of both femininity and masculinity as forms of subjectivity that shift in relation to each other and to changing cultural and political environments (Connell 2005).

In apprehending gender not as a category but as a process (gendering), feminist poststructuralists turned the core sociological concept “norm” from an assumption into a series of questions. Parsonian functionalism in particular explained social conduct both at the individual and institutional levels with reference to accepted norms—including fundamentally norms about male and female behavior. From a poststructuralist and Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, Judith Butler (1993) posited that, when it comes to norms, there is no there there: that is normative behavior involves what she calls reiterations, and reiteration is always contingent, thereby creating space for altered meanings, including resistance.

Gendering happens through constant reiterative behavior whereby earlier reiterations are cited in support of present behavior, thoughts, and words and produce the materiality of the body. “Real men don’t . . . ; real women should.” All of this is not socially constructed once and for all but, rather, involves a contingent, fragmented set of processes that permit agency, social change, and resistance at each moment. We may feel ourselves to be male, female, masculine, feminine, gay, and straight in the depths of our being but the meaning of these concepts is neither unified nor unchanging.

Poststructuralism is indebted to theories about discourse and about how language works. Commonsense notions tend to hold that language is simply a tool for expressing an underlying reality. Words, however, do not simply describe or identify. Words make distinctions and create oppositions. In this way “we can only know what ‘man’ is through its opposition, ‘woman.’ The female is everything that is absent from the male and vice versa” (Hird 2002:23).

Any discourse makes some thought possible and others less possible or impossible. Contemporary feminists have drawn heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, who showed through several historically engaged genealogical studies how discourses “bring the true into existence” (Barrett 1991). Their work revealed that discourses are constituted not only through prevailing power relations—of class, race, sex, age, and sexuality among others—but also by a commonsense rationale for accepting those

power relations as given, that is naturalized, through reiterative practices (Butler 1993).

Within feminist theories, the categories of sex and gender have been thoroughly intertwined with critiques of sexuality within patriarchal societies. From the 1970s, radical feminists began to locate men’s power over women in their ability to control women sexually and to develop the institutions that ensure continuing control. Adrienne Rich (1980) coined the famous phrase *compulsory heterosexuality* to encapsulate the social and cultural imperatives that close off all sexual options for women except monogamous, heterosexual, coupling, usually called marriage. In a world of unequal power relations between men and women, compulsory heterosexuality ensures not only women’s sexual dependence on men but also their economic, social, and psychological dependence (“Resources for Feminist Research” 1990; Rudy 2001).

The concept of compulsory heterosexuality challenged normative notions of sexuality but left the category “woman” intact. Developments within poststructuralism—notably queer theory—undertook the deconstruction/destabilization of gender and sexual categories (Adams 1994). The founding principal for heterosexuality is, of course, the distinction between male and female. But as Judith Butler argues, this founding principal is simply sustained through reiteration (Hamilton 2005:173–74). In support of this contention, we note that, sociologically, the male-female binary that has been seen as so basic does not stand up well. The distinction has been challenged within social movements, and within the daily lives of many people who have developed new words and concepts to describe themselves: transgendered, transsexual—sometimes just “trans” (Hausman 2001:448). Some of these challenges appear to reinscribe sex categories as a kind of ontological truth, an essentialist version of what I “really” am. Yet the traffic between male and female destabilizes the categories, and some of the resulting challenges are pointedly aimed, in Suzanne Kessler’s (1998) words, at “giv[ing] up on gender” (p. 123) (Hird 2004).

Destabilizing gender categories attracted feminists for several reasons: First, this practice challenged the categories of the discourse that once left women invisible and the assumption that men and women were different, indeed, oppositional in their being and character. Second, it challenged the assumption that all women are in some sense the same because the category woman tended to collapse the differences among women that accrue from class, racism, heterosexism, imperialism, and even the idiosyncrasies of taste and talent. In this way, theoretical challenges of feminism from women of color, women with disabilities, lesbians, bisexuals, and older women to “historicize differences” appeared to converge with those of poststructuralism (Rege 2003:6). Third, the male/female binary dismisses evidence that intersexuals may account for as many as 4 percent of all births (Fausto Sterling 1993) and that in these cases, doctors decide whether to classify them as male or female. Taking this evidence

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seriously led to renewed sociological interest in science studies.

*New Science/Materialism Studies*

Medical practitioners in North America treat children born with ambiguous genitalia “in such a way that they conform as soon as possible to the two-sex model of sexual dimorphism.” While this occurs purportedly “to relieve the psychological trauma and suffering” (Anderson 1996:354), Sharon Elaine Preves’s (2000) recent research on the intersexed reveals that the nature of the interventions may be the cause of the greater trauma and that this drive to intervene mainly stems from the strong cultural belief that “all bodies should conform to the binary classification of male/female” (Anderson 1996:346). Yet this is a circular argument, as the belief in *social* difference impels us to ensure that all of us are male OR female. If one asks why is there a social difference between men and women, the answer is biology. In Myra Hird’s (2004) words, “Reliance upon a nebulous understanding of biology reifies a binary relationship between sex and gender such that explorations of gender are authorized upon the condition that ‘sex’ is left largely intact” (p. 2).

In addressing these issues, Hird (2004) repeats well-rehearsed critiques of sociobiology—namely, that it reads “backward” from the social to the “animal kingdom.” But by becoming science literate, she makes her own interpretation and concludes that sex differences in humans are hugely overdrawn. The animal and plant kingdom, as well as new scientific knowledge of genes and human cellular formation, reveal such enormous diversity to render the very notion of sex difference unhelpful—and wrong. “Whereas ‘the body’ is meant to signify nature, what is actually being analyzed are sites at which culture meets nature” (p. 7): “Bodies are important and certainly ‘material’ but not necessarily in ways that justify continued emphasis on ‘sexual difference’ (p. 148).

Sociologist Vicki Bell (1999) provides one route for rescuing the body from the oblivion that antiessentialism seems to invite, and argues for empirical studies that historicize the body, by taking people’s sense of embodiment seriously. The resulting narratives of embodiment would replace unwarranted assumptions of sexual difference while giving full scope to the centrality of the body for human subjectivity and social theory.

### WHAT HAPPENS TO FEMINIST THOUGHT WITHOUT WOMEN AND MEN?

Although recent theoretical developments informed by poststructuralism challenge the concept of identity, and therefore of woman, in ways that some fear shake the foundations of feminism and social movements, questions about what constitutes “woman” informs older perspectives as well. The category woman—what she is and what she

should do—lies at the heart of most feminist analysis, albeit in different ways (Marshall 2000:68). Liberal feminists, dating from Mary Wollstonecraft (who declared that she “earnestly wished to see the distinction of sex confounded” [cited in Taylor 2003:1]) argue that if women appeared less rational, less interested in the world, less given to philosophical thought and political activity, the explanation resided in the ways in which women were denied the opportunity for education.

Following Marx, socialist feminists argue that the consciousness of human beings reflects the activities in which they engage and the accompanying relationships they create. Women in different historical periods and different social classes not only differ from each other but also in some respects share more with the men of their time and station than they do with women in other social classes.

Some of the most trenchant criticisms of the assumption that there is a category called woman that may be used in theoretical discussions and political mobilization come from women of color in the West and women in non-Western societies. Their analyses expose the chasms between dominant ideologies about woman and the lives that women lead, the assumptions of white feminists about female exploitation and oppression, and the centrality of racism, imperialism, and cultural specificity in structuring people’s lives in ways that privilege them if they are “white” and disadvantage them if they are not.

With gender, race, class, sexuality, and other major dimensions of social difference acknowledged as inextricably—but always historically and culturally—interconnected, many feminists insist that gender should no longer be granted pride of place; indeed, that moment simply reflected the perspectives of white middle-class feminists who wrote and published second wave’s first articles and books. This revelation may also be stated as a key theoretical point in feminist theory; in Kum-Kum Bhavnani’s (1996) words, epistemology “demands discussions about what constitutes knowledge, and the role of the knower’s experience in that constitution” (p. 7).<sup>14</sup>

Some feminists express concern about the move away from gender, pointing to the cross-cultural evidence for women’s continued oppression and poverty both in the West and worldwide (Shahidian 1999:316). But as Cornelia Klinger (1998) argues, “What women have in common and what constitutes the basis of feminist theory and practice does not reside in a feminine identity” but, rather, results from “certain still-valid rules of how societies are constructed” (p. 341). Two examples suffice: First, feminist-inspired gains have not resulted in significant change to women’s preponderant responsibility for child care. The feminist demand for equality of access and treatment in the public sphere, though hardly realized, is a great success compared with the underlying requirements for changes in the social structuring of child care. As second-wave feminists argued, parents need 24-hour child care, maternity and parental leaves, shared parental responsibility, and a major transformation of the

workplace environment, which still assumes that men have a wife at home managing all domestic and childcare responsibilities.

In sociological terms, we haven't had cultural lag; rather, the social structure stayed still and the social actors (mainly mothers in the work force) simply had to find ways to manage. Miriam Johnson argues that this was Talcott Parsons's great insight—that women's widespread "emancipation" from the traditional domestic pattern would "only be possible with profound alterations in the structure of the family" (cited in Johnson 1989:105). Arlie Hochschild's (1990) *The Second Shift* resonated not only within the discipline but also as a more general social indictment of a global political economy and national policies that take no account of the needs of children or their caregivers (almost always mothers). All over the world, women are left with their children as men are forced to leave to find whatever work they can and, then, either do—or do not—share their wages with their families (Goebel 2005). Political scientist Janine Brodie (1994) refers to a "crisis in social reproduction" as mothers are expected to be at home with their children and in the work force at the same time, and with no social supports (pp. 57–58); in the United States Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) first revealed the chord of resentment toward wives and children by affluent men.

Second, as Klinger (1998) argues, globalization has produced a "drastic deterioration [of the] actual conditions and prospects of women all over the world" (p. 341). Robert Connell (2005) identifies the most influential movement on a world scale for defending gender inequality as

"contemporary neoliberalism—the political and cultural promotion of free-market principles and individualism and the rejection of state control" (p. 1815) (Reddock 1998:55). Feminist scholars in the developing world struggle against structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that have eroded medical and health systems, deepened poverty and hastened global degradation. They challenge Western feminists to place global inequalities at the center of their theories, and to work worldwide against the policies of their own states and the powerful international bodies that represent them and not just for their own place within their own national boundaries.

"Gender is (still) used," as Klinger (1998) writes, "as a criterion for defining the division of labour in society, for excluding some and including others from different spheres, and for allocating 'potentials and resources of all kinds'" (p. 340) (Blumberg 1991). As long as all this is so—and only so long as it is so—her declaration that "feminism remains the theory designed to study these rules of construction and the women's movement is the practice designed to change them" (Klinger 1998:341) will resonate with most feminists. This is indeed the utopian appeal of feminism—a desire expressed in several recent works as "imagination" whether to evoke the destabilizing of boundaries between creative writing or fictional writing and knowledge and analysis (Barrett 1999; Bell 1999; Nnaemeka 2003) or to reinvent that precious disciplinary concept "the sociological imagination" (Jackson 2000:103).