Third Wave Feminism and Post ‘Post-Ideological’ Politics?

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Introduction

Second wave feminism combined an active and visible social movement with a vibrant theorising discourse. By the end of the twentieth century the coherent energies of second wave feminism appeared to have been dissipated. The paper argues that the conditions are in place for a third wave of feminism, and this thesis challenges the idea of ‘post-ideological’ politics.

The case for a third wave rests in part on arguments about the internal dynamics of feminism and the impact of external factors. The internal dynamics refer to the sense in which the second wave is over and the way in which it is generating a third wave, through generation change, and the patterns of feminist politics and feminist theorising. A new generation of young women, while distancing themselves from association with second-wave feminism and asserting different perspective and goals, nevertheless expect gender equality in education, the workplace and the family. Young women, many of whom do not call themselves feminists, are also developing another agenda of recognisably feminist issues and concerns to do with areas of inequality and discrimination between men and women. Examples in Britain include highly-publicised cases of sex discrimination involving lack of promotion in the police force and business, and cases of sexual harassment brought by women in the armed forces.
In terms of feminist politics, the absorption of some feminist activists into policy-making bodies to develop women-friendly government policy, represent an important development. There has been a process of ‘normalisation’, of institutionalisation, from ‘social movement’ to ‘social policy’ as some feminist claims and perspectives became integrated into formal political structures. Theoretically feminism has expanded its horizons, recognising the effects on women of differences of age, ethnicity, and social class. The theoretical development of black and lesbian feminisms, queer theory, and masculinities theory (Carver 1996, 1998), and corresponding activism around the identity politics of sexuality, were also important. But overall feminism seemed to have lost the ideological power it had gained from the fusion of theory and practice, with the political practice running out of steam, and the political theory becoming disconnected from practice and activism, increasingly abstract and focused on discourse (Butler 1990, 1993) and divorced from material conditions (Coole 1994, Fraser 1997a).

The future of feminism does not depend only on internal developments. As Suzanna Walters notes, second-wave feminism has also changed under the impact of external factors: ‘feminism and feminist theory are themselves the subject of much critical revision and rethinking, particularly in the light of both structural shifts . . . and ideological developments’. By structural shifts Walters has in mind ‘changes in family life, [and] increasing numbers of women in the workforce’, and ideological developments refer to ‘renewed media attacks on feminism, the backlash phenomenon, the rise of right-wing Christian antifeminism and “family values”’ (Walters 1996: 831). Prime among these external dynamics is the effectiveness of the backlash against feminism, stigmatising feminism for producing a man-hating victim culture, ridiculing equal opportunities measures as ‘political correctness’, and encouraging women to regard encounters with gendered values and discriminatory practices as personal and individual rather than as grounds for political solidarity.

As a result of these factors, the ideological power of feminism to formulate a programme addressing gendered inequalities, to rally women behind its banner, and to have a visible impact on political life, seemed dispersed. Indeed the notion of the demise of second-wave feminism as a dynamic social movement was taken as an example of the idea of a ‘post-ideological’ age, and this in turn has reinforced the idea
of the contemporary redundancy and political irrelevance of feminism. However, the continuing theoretical creativity of feminism and the persistence of gender inequality provide a background for arguing for a third wave of activist feminism rather than a lipstick-wearing ‘post-feminism’.

**Indicators of gendered power relations**

While identity politics on the terrain of cultural recognition supplanted earlier feminist campaigns, feminist struggles for women’s equality in terms of material conditions and a politics of redistribution remains an important, as yet unachieved objective. A range of indicators demonstrates the persistence of gendered power relations in structuring social and economic life, social interaction, and the social and political order, especially for working-class women. For instance at a practical level and focusing on post-industrial societies such as Britain, gendered divisions crucially remain in the organisation, structure and rationale of the workplace. Women’s pay remains stubbornly at 80% of that of men for the same jobs after more than 25 years since the Equal Pay Act, and as a group women still carry the burden of childcare and domestic work. Women still form the majority of part-time workers, have lower promotion prospects than men, and account for only 5% of positions in top management. A recent Equal Opportunities Commission survey in Britain found that more than a thousand women a year take legal action on the grounds that they were sacked because of pregnancy, and concluded that victimisation was rife (The Guardian 26/2/04 and 27/2/04). In politics women remain under-represented: for instance in terms of formal political power women form only 18% of Westminster MPs. It goes unreported that two women are killed every week through domestic violence in the UK. Less than 5% of domestic violence prosecutions and only 6% of rape cases result in conviction.

These examples disclose a pattern of ‘politically not-innocent’ gender difference, revealing that gender inequalities are patterned such that inequalities are interlinked, produced and reinforced by inequalities in other areas across the workplace, public sphere, and family life. They show that power relations continue to be structured along gendered lines in Britain, in ways that disadvantage women as a group. Anne
Phillips notes (2004) that, in the current climate, small improvements in discrepancies between men and women are taken as evidence that gender inequality is over, revealing a complacency commonplace in public life about inequality. As a result, in contemporary popular discourse there is a presumption that women’s equality has already been addressed, that feminism has won. Moreover, aggregate measures of inequality (between all men and all women) mask important inequalities, for instance between the job prospects for graduate men and graduate women. In the mainstream theoretical field recent developments in the study of equality such as the notion of ‘luck egalitarianism’ have the effect of reinforcing norms and standards that favour men and disadvantage women.

Delamont’s work, in Changing Women, Unchanged Men? confirms that, while women’s opportunities have widened and although adolescent girls have higher aspirations and credentials, the overall gender imbalance in sociological terms is still much the same as fifty years ago (Delamont 2001: 111). Backett-Milburn and McKie (2001) document the diverse locations from the workplace to social areas and the leisure industry in which sexual practices and gendered bodies are constructed. McBroom’s work (1992) is but one example of an excellent literature examining the range of deep-seated problems facing women seeking equality in the professions. Fraser forcefully and convincingly argues in a book that documents the continuing prevalence of social and economic gender inequalities, that ‘it will not be time to speak of postfeminism until we can legitimately speak of postpatriarchy’ (Fraser 1997c: 167). All these examples represent evidence that the unequal playing-field has not yet been adequately addressed.

The unequal playing-field

Recognising the political significance of the continuing existence of an unequal playing-field facing women in social arrangements in the public sphere, the private realm, and in negotiating across the two, remains an uncompleted and crucial first step towards remedying the naturalisation of women’s inequality. Equalising the playing-field is the first step in a two-stage process that moves from naturalised gender-blindness to gender visibility, and from there to the diversity of women’s
choices in how to ‘play’ on that playing-field. Feminist ideas for a woman-friendly polity in which women’s choices are more meaningful stand no chance of sustained success until the first step of the unequal playing-field is successfully addressed.

The idea of the unequal playing-field challenges the implicit and explicit ways in which the workplace, the social realm, public life, and the private sphere are understood as gendered, and how power relations entrench that inequality by gender group. The playing-field is unequal because the workplace and the public sphere represent partial and incomplete frameworks constructed largely by men, men’s knowledge and experience. Men are still the ‘natural’ inhabitants of these realms, and attributes ascribed to men represent a standard that disadvantages women. It is also still normal for women to be expected to enter this construction as honorary men. Furthermore the unequal playing-field interprets women’s choices and actions and the meaning of their words through a preconceived lens of ascribed characteristics.

However, addressing the mechanisms through which the unequal playing-field operates is important not only in terms of the logic of the argument for women’s equality. The unequal playing-field also has pernicious material effects. For instance, in popular discourse pornography is now considered legitimate and politically-neutral rather than as exploitative of women, and the consumption of pornography by women is encouraged. But when power relations are still dominated by men as a group, the key effect of pornography is still to naturalise the objectification of women’s bodies through the male gaze for male gratification. Under conditions of the unequal playing-field women cannot win. Studies show that at job interviews and in the workplace women are routinely regarded as either unlikely to be able to do the job because they are too feminine, or are regarded with suspicion if they seem equal to men and so not feminine enough. It is ‘normal’ for young women to be labelled as ‘slags’ if they use the same sexual freedom as men and as ‘frigid’ is they don’t.

While feminists may have won the intellectual case for a meaningful equality, discriminatory attitudes that are routine and unexamined persist in everyday practices, media representations, and social power relations.

It is important to see the idea of the unequal playing-field in the context of the distinction between feminism’s short-term and long-term goals. Over the past two
decades confusions between the two aims have generated seeming paradoxes, with feminists arguing for both equality and difference, recognition of their biological bodies and the ignoring of them, gender-blindness and gender visibility, arguing for the category of ‘woman’ and for the diversity of women. The distinction between short- and long-term aims is valuable because it demonstrates the compatibility of these aims over time and their theoretical warrant of a diversity of different feminisms. The short-term perspective identifies the shortcomings of the playing-field that is not flat, and the long-term objective describes how things could be, imagined from a position of equal opportunity.

Politics is a key area in which to contest exclusionary practices and political action is required in order to further feminist aims. The unfinished business of feminism’s short- and long-term aims and the need for political action helps to drive the idea of third wave feminism. Agacinski’s exposition of Parity of the Sexes (2001) shares that aim in relation to French politics, and since May 2000 a law stipulates that half of the candidates put forward by all French political parties in all elections must be women. The French notion of ‘parity’ however, while clearly developing out of the cultural understanding of gender affirmed by French feminists, lacks the theoretical power of the two stages of gender visibility and women’s self-defined choices envisaged here. The idea of ‘parity’ in France highlights the short-term aim while reaffirming a ‘natural’ sex difference between men and women.

The short-term and long-term aims are not, of course, entirely separable. The logic of the short-term aim helps to give rise to the long-term perspective and theoretical possibilities. This perspective of how things could be then becomes an important factor in the perception of the present. As Grosz notes, ‘the actualisation of virtualities hitherto undeveloped’ requires ‘the day-by-day struggles necessary to provide the conditions under which the terms, categories, concepts necessary to think and to make the new can be developed’ (Grosz 2000: 216). The long-term aim is for women to be free to contribute, on a level playing-field, from the uncharted territory of their potentialities. Women want their different perspectives, capacities, work patterns and viewpoints integrated into the way things are done and understood and known and valued. Whether women’s perceptions come from a viewpoint created through oppression (forced to be co-operative and passive, to take on domestic and
caring roles etc.) or from an essentialist difference, does not affect the value or political cogency of those perceptions. It is not necessary here to identify their origins in order for their political cogency to be agreed. If they are valuable, and reasoned argument can support them, then they deserve to be taken seriously.

It is also important to recognise fully that the short-term aim of gender visibility is a prerequisite for the viability of the long-term aim. The combination of recognition and social redistribution are preconditions for difference to be able to flourish. An attempt to undertake the second step out of sequence results in disguising or masking to some extent the basis for the feminist claim for emancipation, for it is not immediately apparent that the claim for women’s equality and choices entails the broader recognition of women’s perspectives. Over the past century women have been active in contesting a ‘gendered’ perspective, but the combined achievements of first-wave feminism (in the extension of the franchise) and second-wave feminism (in the women’s movement activism and theoretical discourse) have not succeeded in gaining meaningful equality for women as a group. The feminist claim for the political visibility of their gender as perceived in the patriarchal gaze properly belongs to the first step of the proposed two-step process. Once gender visibility is recognised and implemented in our social practices, then it becomes possible to ‘hear’ what women’s choices mean. Rawlsian-type gender blindness is an example of jumping to the second stage before the first is attained, for it does not recognise women, cannot recognise women, and is precluded from recognising women by the terms of the veil of ignorance.

**Dichotomous thinking and social practices**

The mixed fortunes of second wave feminism and the persistence of the unequal playing-field do not fully account for the persistence of women’s inequality and the need for a third wave. Another important factor that hampers feminism from becoming again a strong ideological force in politics, and one that has not been sufficiently explored, is the continuing presence of dichotomous thinking and social values that inform social practices around gender. Dichotomous thinking, norms and standards are organised around self/other binaries, rather than, for instance, according
to relational strategies that acknowledge the constitutive inter-relationship of the pairs and the porousness of their boundaries (Grosz 1994, Gatens 1996a, Lloyd 1993, Plumwood 1995). Dichotomous thinking and practices do more than distinguish and differentiate in a politically-neutral fashion – they value and elevate one term or group of people by devaluing, subordinating and excluding another. Public discourse and everyday social practices around gender remain dominated by a hierarchy of polarised values drawing upon mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, public/private, and objective/subjective dualisms – even where equal opportunities are pursued. Gender difference is mapped onto such dualisms such that man is still powerfully associated with mind, culture, reason, the public realm and objective knowledge, while women as a group remains tied to body, nature, emotion, the private realm and subjective opinion.

Genevieve Lloyd’s classic work of historical recovery on gender and reason demonstrates the force of dichotomous structures taken for granted in modern philosophy and having a profound impact on thinking and discourse that informs social norms and practices around gender issues. Her central thesis is expressed in the recognition that ‘the maleness of the Man of Reason…is not [a] superficial linguistic bias. It lies deep in our philosophical tradition’ (Lloyd 1993, xviii). Lloyd and other writers have noted that there are latent conceptual connections in the dominant western cultural tradition between, for example, reason, masculinity, truth and intellect on the one hand, and sense, femininity, error and emotion on the other (Gatens 1991, 94-5). But dichotomous thinking that posits woman as a subordinate term can be identified historically and is not a necessary feature of the logic of concepts.

There are sound grounds for arguing that mind/body, nature/culture, reason/emotion, sex/gender, and man/woman are some of the dichotomies that have dominated the structure of our thinking and social practices around gender since the Enlightenment and that such dualisms continue to exert an important influence over social values and practices. Moreover, as far as issues of gender equality are concerned, this dominant explanatory framework involves a process of mapping or patterning whereby each of these pairs of categories have been mapped on to an underlying and fundamental source of meaning in the mind/body dichotomy. The force of the mind/body
dichotomy has been that mind is ‘naturalised’ as free to construct and produce by artifice, while body is ‘naturalised’ as merely biological and tied to diurnal rhythms. Consequently, under the influence of the dominant dichotomous outlook the manner in which we achieve coherent cultural understandings of reason, emotion, sex, gender, man, and woman, has been through the mediation of the social meanings of the mind/body split. The dominant understandings of gender in western philosophy (in being, knowledge, science), and the placing of value in social practices (of culture, society, politics, sexuality, work, family), and the ways these things are related to each other, follow as extensions of the logic of the mind/body dichotomy.

Many feminists (including Hekman 1990, Fraser 1989, Hartsock 1983, McMillan 1982) have recognized Lloyd’s work as of crucial importance, not only in highlighting the historical identification of reason with masculinity, but also in reinforcing feminist arguments challenging the historical relegation of women to the ‘private’ realms of the domestic, the family, reproduction and sexuality. These are all still predominantly seen to be governed by ‘natural’ rhythms, rather than being fit subjects for liberal rights, liberties, citizenship and justice. Feminists have built on the historical recovery undertaken by Lloyd, Brown (1988) and others of the persistent association of man with reason and the devaluation of women upon which it has rested. Iris Marion Young (1987) and Alison Jaggar (1989) have challenged the reason/emotion dichotomy, and Gatens (1996) and Grosz (1994) have examined the sex/gender binary. Lloyd (1993), Butler (1990, 1993), and Battersby (1998) have interrogated other aspects of the mind/body dichotomy, while Pateman (1988) has critiqued the dichotomy between public and private. Plumwood (1995) and Merchant (1983) have explored for nature/culture dualism, and De Beauvoir (1952) began and others have developed the investigation of how the difference attributed to man and woman is not a naturally-occurring given. Cocks (1989) has shown how power relations operate dichotomously, and the Gilligan debate has examined the dichotomous pairing of justice and care. Underlying this work is the view that a relational rather than a merely inverted dichotomous mode of thinking is the most cogent (though not the only) way in which to contribute to the redress of inequality and the recognition of difference.
That women as a group still face this unequal playing-field is due, then, to more than the gap between legislation and implementation. It is also owing to the continuing entrenchment of the key mind/body split in our society. For instance the workplace is still identified primarily with mind and the public realm, while children and child-care remain associated with reproduction and body and women, all located in the private sphere. Until the imbalance between men and women in facing this problem is made visible, and it is recognised as a form of inequality or inequity, it is not possible to recognise that what is needed is a wholesale change, not only in child-bearing and child-care practices, but in established work practices. The objection to gender divisions is that they express a difference that is not innocent; it is not an innocuous contrast but a dichotomised difference characterised by opposition, polarisation, hierarchy, and the devaluation of the ‘other’ term (Prokhovnik 2002). The ‘making strange’ of the social effects of the uneven playing-field is a precondition for the flourishing of difference. Furthermore, the effective reform of work practices requires that the conceptualisation of ‘work’ be extended, to fully value the work that is undertaken in the private sphere and to instantiate a flexibility with respect to paid work that encompasses the responsibilities of family life.

The conflation of ‘male’ and ‘human’ that we have inherited in ‘modern’ philosophy and the legacy of ‘modern’ social practices is not just a historical anachronism that is contingent and changeable at a legislative stroke. For that conflation, the mapping of ‘male’ on to ‘human’ that occurs through the unthinking privileging of male over female in the male/female dichotomy, is entrenched by the mind/body dichotomy that establishes the mind-set for what is taken as ‘normal’ in policy and normative values in our thinking and social practices. The two-step process that is described here as a means for ending structures of inequality and discrimination, is designed to contribute to the challenges made to the conflation of ‘male’ and ‘human’. The first step is based on the need to increase women’s visibility rather than to attempt to degender women, and the second step is based on the construction of relational mind-body connections.

Dichotomous thinking about gender also characterises second wave feminist theory, much of which remains rooted in an often covertly essentialist view of women through mind/body and confused sex/gender binaries. As Arneil notes, ‘[s]econd
wave feminism continued to accept the dualities inherent in modern political theory, but broadened the arena to which women should gain access’ (Arneil 1999: 154). Much second-wave feminist work was devoted to either making the case for women to be accepted into the ‘mind’ side of the mind/body dichotomy, or to valorising the women’s bodies and so inverting the dualism. Despite subscribing to the feminist distinction between gender as a social category and sex as a biological category, much second-wave feminist work tended implicitly to make a reductive assumption from gender to sex.

Some important feminist debates can be reassessed in the course of delineating the two steps involved in this process. For instance, it becomes clear that it is self-defeating to set up an opposition between equality and difference as goals for feminist theory. It is futile to portray equality and difference in a ‘binary opposition’ of choices, or to identify one rather than the other as the step that would bring about the emancipation of women. As with other dichotomies, the ‘antithesis itself hides the interdependence of the two terms’, as Scott notes (Scott 1988, 38). The dichotomous pairing of demands for equality and affirmations of difference creates impossible choices, and as Scott argues the only response ‘is a double one: the unmasking of the power relationship constructed by posing equality as the antithesis of difference and the refusal of its consequent dichotomous construction of political choices’ (Scott 1988, 44).

As long as the mind/body dichotomy remains in place in our thinking and in our practices, the primary and critical feminist task is to make gender inequalities visible. The mind-set established by the mind/body split powerfully tilts the playing-field through which women’s actions are interpreted. While that mind-set remains in place in thinking and practices, it is not possible to advocate women’s choices as persons rather than as women, without being misunderstood as saying only that women ought to be recognised as autonomous and rational agents (that is, essentially mind and not body after all) in the way that Rawls would propose.

Clarifying the two-stage process and the movement from one step to the other, tracks feminist responses to being defined and interpreted by others, to women’s multiple self-definitions. A similar trajectory is envisaged by Lloyd in her reflections on
Feminism in History of Philosophy’ (Lloyd 2000, 261). It acknowledges fully the ‘impermanence of collective identities’ which, as Denise Riley notes, is ‘a pressing problem for any emancipating movement which launches itself on the appeal to solidarity, to the common cause of a new group being, or an ignored group identity’ (Riley 1988, 16). The two-stage process resolves the seeming paradox of ‘the peculiar temporalities of “women”’ (Riley 1998, 96) and also overcomes the problem of the ‘dangerous intimacy between subjectification and subjection’ (Riley 1988, 17) which has exercised many feminists. Moreover, by focusing on a goal beyond that of gender visibility, the two-stage process responds to Grosz’s demand that feminist theory ‘produce the impetus to propel the present into a future not entirely contained by it’, without which feminism ‘risks being stuck in political strategies and conceptual dilemmas that are more appropriate to the past than the future’ (Grosz 2000, 23).

Third wave feminism and the relational non-dichotomous alternative

The short-term feminist goal of overcoming the invisibility of women’s inequality is frustrated in part by entrenched patterns of dichotomous thinking and practices. A meaningful third wave feminism could involve the relational and interactive replacement of liberal gender ‘neutrality’ in the public realm by the recognition of a diversity of gender positions, and by the recognition of the covert manner in which, inspired by the mind/body split and the ‘timelessness’ of sexual dimorphism, women continue to bear body and sex, seen as originating in the private realm. Judith Grant argues well that the ‘visibility of gender as an oppressive structure has only become possible with the redescription of gender from the feminist perspective’ (Grant 1993, 178). In other words it is only through feminist practice that the visibility of gender oppression can be reached; it ‘does not come from women’s experiences; rather, it is what we use to give new meaning to human experiences’ (Grant 1993, 179). Arneil makes a strong case for ‘third wave feminism(s)’ on the basis of ‘identity, difference, particularity and embodiment’ rather than ‘foundations of universality, sameness and scientific methodology’ (Arneil 1999:186).

While the short-term goal is a level playing-field, accomplished through the massive effort involved in dissolving hierarchy and opposition that thwart gender equality, the
long-term objective is the welcoming of women’s self-defined contributions to that playing-field. Once the playing-field is made level, then difference can be allowed and enabled to flourish. The long-term aim envisages a more egalitarian society and a political situation in which the hierarchically-valued significance of ‘men’ and ‘women’ is dissipated. The second step enables women, as Valerie Bryson notes (2004), to challenge the framework in which inequality is debated. She has in mind the liberal competitive view of equality whereby the outcome of a fair competition is taken to be fair even though it ignores the unequal context in which the competition takes place and in which rights are exercised. Gender equality does not have to involve women simply being treated the same as men, and it does not have to mean a dichotomous pairing of equality and difference. The aim of the two-stage process is the redistribution not only of money but also of time, resources, respect, and political influence. The first stage is designed to provide women with access into the debate and the second stage allows women to question and reframe the terms of that debate.

As far as the second stage of the two-stage process is concerned, it is not possible to specify in advance what women can do until gender visibility is achieved. Analogously, in a critique of mainstream academic international relations, feminists have shown that issues important to women have simply been excluded from the IR studies agenda. These issues include the reification of the state, the organisation of sex workers around military bases, the use of rape and violence against women as weapons of modern warfare, the sex trade leading to HIV and AIDS, the significance of the world’s poor being predominantly women, and the way women’s multiple roles are uncounted in GDP.

In an important sense then, ‘women’s equality’ cannot be delineated clearly prior to the diversity of realised expressions in concrete practice. At the same time, ‘women’s equality’ cannot be recognised without a language that can describe them as such. This is where the possibility of third wave feminism emerges. The development of such a language could involve the acceptance of extended and interrelated conceptions of pairs like mind/body, public/private and culture/nature, and a recognition that specific relational connections of interdependence can provide a more fruitful and valid mode of thinking about equality than the dichotomous mode.
The organising principles of the second stage would be the same ones that inform the first stage, drawn from the egalitarian tradition of emancipatory and progressive politics that characterised second-wave feminism. Third wave feminism, so conceived, does not look toward a utopian power-free society, but rather to one in which power is no longer distributed according to underlying and ‘given’ entrenched dichotomies that simply assume, or take for granted and naturalise, the value of some groups of people and the non-value of others. In a more non-dichotomously and relationally diverse society, the line is drawn – or contested – according to different interpretations of egalitarian principles. The idea of third wave feminism is not against unequal power relations per se, but only those based on politically-irrelevant power differences. Ultimately gender is not a politically-relevant basis for differences in power relations.

The way forward as a two-stage process can be considered in terms of part of what it meant for second-wave liberal, socialist/Marxist, and radical feminist goals. Liberal feminists sought equal opportunities embedded in legislation, while socialist and Marxist feminists called for equal economic opportunities and wages for housework. Radical feminists wanted different women to be able to have a say in redefining the contents and substance of what the playing-field might look like when level, that is not just ‘adding women’ or accepting women as ‘honorary men’. The liberal feminist aim corresponds to the levelling of the playing-field, and the radical feminist objective relates to the second step in the two-stage process. The socialist and Marxist feminist proposal is one of the ways in which social structures and values might possibly be changed, once women had a full voice in the structuring of social arrangements.

The idea of relational thinking and practice as inclusionary addresses the ‘principles of order’ that we accept as defining the fundamental logical rules of thinking, upon which dichotomous thinking is based. As Jay puts it, they are the ‘Principle of Identity (if anything is A, it is A); the Principle of Contradiction (nothing can be both A and Not A); and the Principle of the Excluded Middle (anything, and everything, must be either A or Not-A)’ (Jay 1981, 42). The quarrel here is not with these principles of order themselves, but with the way in which they are interpreted in a narrow and exclusionary fashion, such that two damaging and unnecessary
consequences are held to be also fundamental. These are that the values of relation, interaction and connection are systematically overlooked, and that the value of the principles of order is extended to form, to prioritise and to naturalise dichotomous thinking and practices. The relational mode reinvests the connection between a pair with multiple possibilities.

A range of feminists are already making important contributions to the theorisation of non-dichotomous ways of thinking, arguing for what Jane Flax (1992, 196) refers to as ‘thinking in relations’, Sonia Kruks (1995, 16) dubs ‘relations of reciprocity’, and Carol Gould (1993, 411) calls ‘individuals-in-relations. Joan Scott (1988, 33) also calls for a way of theorising ‘that will let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than of unities and universals…without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them’, and Val Plumwood (1993, 458, 459) proposes a ‘critical reconstruction of dualised identity’ that is different from the simply reversal of dualism; a ‘logic of mutuality’. Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 24, 21) puts forward a strategy to go beyond ‘oppositional categories’ and the ‘impasse posed by dichotomous accounts’. Gatens develops Spinoza’s relational concept of bodies, noting the way in which ‘human bodies are always parts of more complex bodies: the family, schools, institutions of all kinds, and ultimately, a body politic’ (Gatens 2000, 66). Hekman (1990, 16, 17), pointing to the value of Gadamer’s work, argues that feminists have shown that Enlightenment thought has identified the values Gadamer is rejecting – rationality and abstraction – as masculine and those that he espouses – contextuality and relatedness – as feminine’, and she contends that the ‘fact that contextuality and relatedness have been associated with the feminine through the misconceived dichotomies of Enlightenment thought is part of the problem that would be overcome should these dichotomies be displaced’.

Whereas dichotomous thinking is characterised by opposition, hierarchy and the exclusion of the ‘other’ term, relational features of a both-and mode of thinking include that the character of the relation is not a given, dynamic movement, open-ended relations, relation as inclusive, where ‘the middle and the extremes exist concurrently’ (Tavor Bannet 1992, 10). The relational conception of thinking also draws upon a contextualist view of how meaning is generated.
In terms of positive proposals for non-dichotomous social practices around gender that express these features, Minow and Shanley (1996) propose a theory of relational rights and responsibilities, to rectify the shortcomings of the contract-based, community-based and rights-based models of the individual’s relation with the state, a particular aspect of which is taken up by Gail Weiss’s (1995) relational approach to abortion. Caroline Whitbeck (1989, 63) advocates ‘the self-other relation [that] generates a multifactorial interactive model of…reality’. Evelyn Fox-Keller, describing the work of the feminist genetist Barbara McClintock, argues that in ‘this world of difference, division is relinquished without generating chaos. Self and other, mind and nature survive not in mutual alienation, or in symbolic fusion, but in structural integrity’ (Fox Keller 1985, 165). Morgan (1996), in work that has a direct bearing on a relational alternative to dichotomous practices, argues convincingly for the merits of a relational conception of different aspects of the self-foetal personality. Radden puts forward a strong argument for understanding the autonomy of the self as occurring at ‘the mean of relational individualism’, and illustrates how ‘an oppositional portrayal’ of relationality and autonomy ‘as contraries’ is misleading (Radden 1996, 86-7). Nancy Fraser’s view that cultural recognition and social redistribution must go hand in hand before democratic politics can operate effectively (Fraser 1997b, 187) can also be read as a demand for dichotomy to be replaced by relation.

Allison Weir’s thought-provoking critique of ‘sacrificial logics’, by which she means systems ‘predicated on a logic of exclusion of nonidentity or difference’ (Weir 1996, 184), resembles the critique of dichotomous thinking and practices outlined here. Weir argues that this logic of domination and exclusion, ‘the repression of otherness by the logic of the Same’ (1996, 5), has characterised not only traditional discussion but also much feminist discussion of self-identity, collective identities and the identity of meaning in language. It is too often and mistakenly assumed, she says, ‘that any concept of self-identity necessarily represses the fragmentation of multiplicity of the self, or the connectedness or relationality of the self to others’, and as a result ‘feminist theory has become caught in a series of impasses, produced by a failure to theorise nonoppositional, nondominating relationships between identity and difference’ (1996, 3). Thus, ‘rather than simply rejecting identity in the name of difference, or accepting it as something oppressive but inevitable, we need to develop
alternative theories of universality and of individual identity which do not exclude but include difference and otherness’ (1996, 7). Weir seeks to elucidate ‘a shift from a sacrificial model to a model of self-identity as a capacity for participation in a social world’ (1996, 8). She outlines a concept of self-identity ‘as the capacity to experience oneself as an active an relatively coherent participant in a social world’, as the ‘capacity for meaningful interaction with self and others’ that involves ‘reflexivity and intersubjectivity as essential components of self-identity’ (1996, 185).

The dynamic aspect of relational thinking and practices is well captured by Honneth in describing one of the possible outcomes of relational thinking, breaking down the dichotomy between subject and object. He reasons that ‘the connection between the experience of recognition and one’s relation to self stems from the inter-subjective structure of personal identity’ (Honneth 1995, 173). In consequence it becomes clear that, as Scott (1988, 44) puts it, ‘the oppositional pairing misrepresents the relationship of both terms’. The ethic of care can also be read as a complex example of relational thinking and practice, in which the dynamic aspect features in at least two different ways. For the ethic of care not only emphasises the significance of connectedness and interdependence, but is also a ‘morality of seeing “both” and “and”, of grasping two points of view simultaneously’ (Dimen 1989, 47).

The open-ended view of relational thinking and practice means that the opposition between two terms is reined back from the fixity of extreme polarisation, to the point of being a distinction whose basis has yet to be established. An example of relational practice relevant to gender politics that utilises this feature is found in contemporary attempts to theorise democratic politics. The history of democratic theory is often portrayed as giving us two broadly opposed views: democracy as the representation by means of a normatively-neutral aggregation of individual autonomous self-interested personal preferences, and democracy as collective, combined moral deliberation and agreement as to what is in the interests of the whole group. The most fruitful contributions to current debates, however, while recognising the major tension in democratic theory, seek in various ways to find an accommodation or balance between these two competing claims of democracy. Increasingly, contemporary democratic theory is no longer preoccupied with advancing the claims of one view and rejecting those of the other in the way that characterised, for instance, Berlin’s

In a society still characterised by gender inequalities, and in a world in which ‘two-thirds of illiterate people are women’ (Connell 2002, 5), many issues raised by feminists still need to be addressed further, in non-dichotomous terms, in order to cement the step from gender-blindness to gender visibility and beyond. Such issues include the recognition of the way in which the ethics of care underpins the ethic of justice; the revaluation of the ‘other’ of motherhood; gender-visible citizenship; and the reconceptualisation of heterosexuality on a non-dichotomous basis capable of recognising diverse ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’. New reproductive technologies challenge the boundary between nature and culture. The inequality of reproductive labour, of biological production and reproduction, in the social recognition of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, childcare, domestic work, and the menopause, challenges the deep-seated equation of mind with men valued more highly than the association of women with body. In international relations one outcome of the international culture of rights that has developed over the past couple of decades (for instance with Kosovo, and the International Criminal Court) is the west’s grudging recognition that patterns of refugees, asylum seekers, and migration, challenge our conceptions of internal/external and us/them. Moreover these issues have important gendered dimensions and effects, including the increasing dependence of first world childcare on third world labour.

The outcome of delivering a level playing-field as a springboard for women’s choices is to recognise that opportunities are created politically, in the name of equality, rather than upon any essentialist biological notion of gender difference. The notion of third wave feminism is crucially concerned with developing, in the light of the man/woman dichotomy, a non-essentialist view of ‘woman’ that increases her visibility in both theory and practice. Carver makes a convincing argument that what is needed in the gender debate is not a degendering of women, to go alongside the degendered (male) ‘man’ of political theory, but more attention to self-expressed difference, particularly sexual difference, for both men and women (Carver 1996, 682). In other words, what is required is the combined recognition of sexual difference and specificity – what is
needed for a non-dichotomous man–woman distinction is more recognition of differences, not less.

**Third wave feminism and post ‘post-ideological’ politics**

Liberal feminists like Susan Moller Okin argued for gender-blindness along Rawlsian lines, but making visible the gendered divisions in the thinking, values and power relations that inform social practices is a necessary pre-condition for re-engaging in practical struggles for equality for women. If politics is about collective decision-making (Freeden 2003, 123) and feminism is an organising framework for political thought and action on behalf of women as a group, then the inequalities faced by women as a group still require a political resolution.

Third wave feminism as a positive political force, thus reconfigured, provides an exemplar for post ‘post-ideological’ politics, challenging the basis of ascriptive divisions rather than relying on identity politics. The material and symbolic effects of inequalities arising from discrimination according to categories such as gender, class, ethnic origin, and disability provide a powerful impetus to political claims (Ranciere 1999) beyond just participative parity. Such claims challenge the pre-eminence of power relations and political agendas dominated by the demands of a universal consumer-driven (and putatively) global capitalism and managerial governance, without resorting to the problematic rights-driven discourse that increasingly characterises women’s groups on the international stage. Third wave feminism understood in relational terms could have the capacity to reassert the dynamism of the fusion of theory and practice while transforming the dichotomous basis of its second wave form. Ideological politics is still needed to highlight the discrepancies in social and economic power between men as a group and women as a group, and to promote women’s equal chances and status. While ‘the desire to change the power relations between the sexes in order to create greater equality’ (Haste 1993, 100), needs to be reinterpreted in a different context in the third wave, the aim remains as important as it was for second-wave feminism.
Finally it is worth raising the question of what kind of feminist politics might underpin a third wave. A third wave feminist politics would need to incorporate a renewed synergy between theory and practice as a social movement. In one sense it would require that the conditions of non-dichotomous thinking and practices already existed in a commonplace way, so that third wave feminist campaigns addressing informal and formal political structures at national, international and transnational levels were recognised as legitimate. In another sense, as Ranciere argues (1999), new claims to equality do not pre-exist the political event of their expression but are created through them. In concrete terms emancipatory feminist practice could take shape, for instance, around the 1995 Beijing Women’s Conference’s resolution that committed governments to measure the value of unpaid work, around a national childcare strategy, around family leave entitlements and flexible working, around women’s issues in the context of post-colonial projects, removing obstacles to women’s political, economic and social participation that are inflected differently in different economic circumstances, social values, cultural traditions, in different countries.

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