Nikolai Genov (Ed.)

Advances in Sociological Knowledge

Over half a Century

VS VERLAG FÜR SOZIALWISSENSCHAFTEN

VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften
Entstanden mit Beginn des Jahres 2004 aus den beiden Häusern
Leske+Budrich und Westdeutscher Verlag.
Die breite Basis für sozialwissenschaftliches Publizieren

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek
Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

1. Auflage Mai 2004

Der VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften ist ein Unternehmen von Springer Science+Business Media.
www.vs-verlag.de

Umschlaggestaltung: KünkelLopka Medienentwicklung, Heidelberg
Druck und buchbinderische Verarbeitung: Lengericher Handelsdruckerei, Lengerich
Gedruckt auf säurefreiem und chlorfrei gebleichtem Papier
Printed in Germany

ISBN 3-8100-4012-6

Contents

Preface

Sociologists face difficult tasks at the turn of the century. Sociology needs conceptual breakthroughs in order to keep pace with accelerated social change. Global trends require new visions about social action and social order. Evolving patterns of regionalisation and specific developmental paths of societies demand careful elaboration on relationships between local, regional and global processes. Deepening social differences and efforts to re-integrate social structures foster comparative research. The growing complexity of networks involving individuals, groups, organisations and societies calls for interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary studies. They have to respond to widespread expectations for policy orientation and practical relevance of sociological research. Together with the spread of ideas and practices of sustainable development, there is an increasing pressure on sociology to incorporate closer links to nature and technology in its conceptualisations and to strengthen their normative content.

There is evidence to suggest that the international sociological community has difficulties in coping with the complexity and urgency of the above tasks. Narratives often overshadow analysis and explanations in sociological discourse as well as debates on current social processes. Studies and teachings in the field of sociological theory have turned into a self-satisfactory enterprise, receiving its inspiration from the classics of the discipline and much less from the burning social problems surrounding us. Empirical studies, having only symbolic connection to sociological concepts or to the need of practical solutions, are abundant. The result of these trends is the rise of heterogeneous and diverging orientations in sociological theorising and research and the deficit in the intellectual and institutional coherence of the discipline.

This is only one side of the coin. On the other side, one may identify the homogenising impacts of globalisation on sociological theorising and research. Old and new concepts of global trends, social networks, social capital, social cohesion, etc. take the lead in the sociological attempts to intellectually cope with the changing social situation. Comparative sociological research is getting more and more sophisticated. The traditional sociological search for the vision of 'good society' takes on new forms and contents.

Rosalind A. Sydie

Feminist Sociology: Past and Present Challenges

1. What challenge(s)?

The development of sociology as a form of inquiry into the nature of the social was always accompanied by a feminist focus that questioned and often opposed the prevailing male-centred canon. From Harriet Martineau on, feminists have made important contributions to the sociological enterprise.[1] However, the contributions of women in early sociological circles were "lost" or, more accurately, ignored until recently. In the last few decades, the contributions of our foremothers have been recovered and the relevance of their insights to contemporary feminist issues have been recognized. Despite the healthy state of feminist sociology, in the last few decades the celebration of, for example, the Marx-Durkheim-Weber canon remains central to the sociological enterprise.[2] Consequently, a feminist sociology still presents a challenge to the sociological enterprise; the question is what sort of challenge or challenges does it represent?

Feminist sociologists have presented challenges to the classical as well as the contemporary sociological enterprise. What, however, does it mean to say that feminist sociology represents a challenge?

A challenge can be understood as (1) an act or action of accusing: reproach, objection, (2) a demand of a right: claim, (3) a calling to account ...(as to obtain justification, verification, or information), (4) a summons, often threatening, provocative, stimulating, or inciting, (5) something to be striven for. Are feminist challenges objections, claims, calls for accounting,

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1 Martineau, often referred to as the first woman sociologist, produced the first methodological text, *How to Observe Manners and Morals* (1838), that preceded Durkheim's work and anticipated many of his methodological procedures. For a full discussion of Harriet Martineau's work see (Hoecker-Drysdale, 1992).

2 Sociological theory textbooks continue to enshrine the canon and only rarely, and that most recently, are some of the women sociologists included. Instructive in this regard is a recent theory textbook on classical sociological theory that has nine pages of references to "women: feminism" in the index. There are two pages in the discussion on Durkheim, three pages in the Engels discussion, and four pages in the discussion of Simmel (Craib, 1997). Feminist sociologists do not reject the contributions of the "fathers," but would like to see the contributions of women sociologists recognized and the gender bias that permeates the "canon" addressed.

provocations, or goals, or some combination of all these possibilities? What is the focus of the "challenge(s)?" Is it towards some designated sociological community or to some other constituencies apart from, or in addition to, a sociological community? Further, if feminist ideas are incorporated into the sociological discourse, what sort of feminist challenge is possible or appropriate? Can there be and should there be any challenges anymore? All of these issues and questions have been addressed in various ways by feminist sociologists in differing social and historical periods.[3] What has been central to the nature of the challenge(s) presented by feminist sociologists over the years has been an understanding that sociology is a form of political practice.

2. Sociology and Political Practice

Sociology has always been a contentious political enterprise and challenges to theoretical claims have animated the sociological discourse from the outset in the search for the Holy Grail of epistemic sovereignty. The various schools, paradigms, and research methods that are often used to organize the presentation of sociological knowledge and the orderly presentation of papers in specialized time-slots at sociological conferences are evidence that any unified agreement about the nature of sociology is a chimera (although one devoutly sought). There is, nevertheless, a general agreement in the sociological community that the stakes are high and the pursuit of sociological understanding is an effort worth pursuing.

The often acrimonious debates among sociologists occurred, and still occur, because it is assumed that sociology can have a direct impact on the social issues and problems of the day. For example, Comte confidently asserted that his positivist philosophy eliminated any other contenders who claimed to explain the true nature of social reality. Sociology was to transform troubled modern society through sociological insights.[4] For nearly all of the classical theorists, sociology "owed its creation and appeal to the promise of solving pressing difficulties that were not being suitably handled by other available disciplines, or by the resources common to non-academic political culture"

3 For example, Marianne Weber criticized Simmel's essay on *Female Culture*, objecting to his polarization of genders, claiming that he "failed to appreciate women's need to determine their own choices." She also insisted that women need to and have the ability to contribute to objective culture that Simmel saw as a masculine realm (Vromen, 1990).

4 Other examples of quite overt political intentions are found in the work of the early Chicago School sociologists, as well as the work of the Webb's, founders of the London School of Economics. And no one would claim that the various members of what is labelled the Frankfurt School were non-political sociologists.

(Sica, 1997: 296).[5] The search was for "sociological truths" that would define the benevolent, but authoritarian, universal social goals of social progress and social order (Comte's two intentions). Sociology offered technical, scientific solutions with possible universal application to the problems of modernity. Sociology was thus a political practice from the outset and one that had universal (although internally varied) utopian goals. In other words, sociology, even in its presumed "objective" form, was always a normative enterprise.

Sociology's critical engagement was conducted within the modernist assumption of the superiority of reason in providing objective knowledge of social reality.[6] But the rational conceptual frameworks designed to make sense of the social world with the intention of improving that world did not mean the elimination of political, ethical ends. As Weber (1949: 60) pointed out, an "attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific 'objectivity.'" Cooley also maintained that a "social science which is not also, in its central principles, an ethical science is unfaithful to its deepest responsibility, that of functioning in aid of general progress" (1930: 258). More recently, Bauman has pointed out that "there is no choice between an 'engaged' and 'neutral' way of doing sociology. A non-committal sociology is an impossibility" (2000: 89). Sociology was, and remains, a normative enterprise and a challenge in relation to goals to be *striven for* and in this respect feminist sociologists have been central (although often unrecognised) contributors to such an enterprise. Interestingly, the political promise of sociology in respect to utopian goals to be *striven for*, namely the elimination of sexism, injustice and oppression was taken up seriously as *a summons* by second wave feminist theorists. Earlier feminist sociological challenges had largely been on the order of *accusations* and *demands*, pointing to the neglect of women in sociological theory, but from the perspective of reform – 'adding women in'.[7] Second wave feminists returned to the focus of many of the classical sociological "fathers" on the "practical healing of the social divisions and disruptions they considered so threatening" (Lemert, 1994: 150).

In examining the more recent feminist challenges to the contemporary sociological enterprise, the origins and nature of so-called second-wave feminist movements will be outlined and some of the important challenges to

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5 Jones (1997: 164) suggests that Durkheim was "less the ideologue preoccupied with a kind of sociological metaphysic than a pragmatic and opportunistic *bricoleur*, casting about for tools that might be used to solve real social and political problems, and changing them frequently in response to changing circumstances."

6 A potential source of contamination was the messy emotional, irrational, passionate impulses that were so characteristic of female "nature." Modernity was after all a repudiation of such impulses that also animated less advanced societies – modernity represented the rational male mind over the emotional female heart.

7 For an historical discussion of the relationship of women to the production of knowledge within the academy see Mary Evans (1997), and for a cautionary note on more contemporary aspirations for women's incorporation into a "centre" from the margins see Myer, Anderson, and Risman (1998).

mainstream sociological canons in the last few decades will be discussed.[8] Finally, the question of political climates and feminists challenges will be addressed.

3. Feminists Inside and Outside the Academy

Contemporary feminist sociological theory was a concomitant development of various women's movements and all were predicated on the idea that theory and practice are inseparable – the personal is political. Jessie Bernard called the decades of the 1960s and 1970s a "Feminist Enlightenment" (1989: 25). It was during that period many women "trained in civil rights and anti-war movements" found that despite the movement calls for equality and justice, these rights remained male prerogatives (Bernard, 1989: 24).[9] Male sexism and the gap between the "glory they were supposed to enjoy" and the actual "deprivation they suffered" were an impetus for the development of feminist consciousness (Mitchell, 1971: 22).[10] The liberation movements provided a supportive frame for feminist sociological challenges to what was labelled mainstream, masculinist sociology.[11]

The blast of the second wave feminist sociological trumpet was sounded with the question, 'where are the women?' The answer was that women were collectively subordinated and oppressed in the everyday/everynight worlds (Smith, 1987) and thus invisible in the academy and in the construction of knowledge. The increased numbers of women in higher education in the late fifties and early sixties meant that there was a potentially receptive audience for the sort of questions that followed the query.

The feminist mantra that insists on the connection between theory and practice was an important framework for feminist sociological work. Theorizing was to be connected to feminist political actions that would, in turn, produce more "accurate" explanations of gender relations and suggestions for change. Theorizing was a practical politics, not simply, or only a contemplative exercise. Furthermore, feminist critiques were directed at the norms and practices of the academy as well as being tied to a social activism that in-

8 Because of space limitations the issues and debates selected are not exhaustive of the critical feminist directions of the last half-century, although the ones selected do represent important issues for feminist sociology in the early years.

9 As Deckhard (1983: 326) indicated, women in groups "dedicated to human liberation" found that "they were second-class members – useful at the typewriter, in the kitchen, and in bed, but expected to leave policy making to the men."

10 For a short summary of the academic climate at the beginning of the 1960s, at least in North American academies see (Adams and Sydie, 2001).

11 For women sociologists' own accounts during the early years of second-wave feminism see (Laslett and Thorne, 1997; Ryan, 1992; Orlans and Wallace, 1994; Rowbotham, 1973; Riley, 1988; contributions to *Signs*, 25: 2000).

volved a total critique of global gender relations (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Smith, 1975; Stacey and Thorne, 1985). As a challenge in this form, feminism questioned the sociological status quo, *calling into account* the theoretical and methodological foundations of theorizing with the goal of producing more inclusive and less oppressive social relations and social knowledge. The range of contributions was extensive and not confined to sociologists. The interdisciplinarity of critiques was one of the significant characteristics of second wave feminism in the academy, exemplified in the early years by the debates and exchanges in publications such as *Signs, Quest* and *m/f* and by the significance, in those early years of de Beauvior's *The Second Sex* and her concept of women as 'Other'. De Beauvior illustrated how the explanations from biology, Marxism and psychoanalysis about the nature of women present women not as subjects but as objects for men and, most especially, as sexual objects – "she is sex –absolute sex, no less" for men (1974: xix).

Feminist sociology had leaky interdisciplinary boundaries that produced important new insights into the rather ossified disciplinary specializations of mainstream sociology by taking women as objects *and* subjects of inquiry. For example, Friedan's (1963) critique of Parson's expressive/instrumental gender roles challenged the sociological understanding of family, so far one of the few places where women made their sociological appearance, as a social construction bolstered by cultural ideology. The family, marriage and household, when subjected to feminist scrutiny, was found to be a critical site of sexist relations summed up in the concept of patriarchy (Coward, 1987; Lerner, 1986; Sargent, 1981).

Patriarchy was an important concept in all early feminist critiques, most especially in analyses of family, sexuality, politics and work.[12] The concept was of particular importance in the early years in feminist critiques of Marxism. Many feminists had prior affiliations with a variety of left organizations and parties and it was the realization that the "woman question" for Marxists had never been a "feminist question" that led many feminists to conclude women "should not trust men to liberate them after the revolution, in part, because there is no reason to think they would know how; in part, because there is no necessity for them to do so" (Hartmann, 1981: 32).[13] In the Marxist-Feminist debates of the 1970s and early 1980s, patriarchy was theorized as combined with and reinforcing capitalist exploitation and oppression, as family and household relations clearly demonstrated. James and Dalla Costa

12 Representative readings include but by no means exhaust possible contributions (Hartsock, 1983; Thorne and Yalon, 1982; Tilly and Scott, 1978; Lerner, 1986; Harding, and Hintikka, 1983; Jaggar, 1983; Rubin, 1975; Sherman and Beck, 1979; Marks and de Courtivron, 1980; Eisenstein, 1979; Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978; Firestone, 1971; Hartmann, 1981; Walby, 1986; Rich, 1980; Gordon, 1977.)

13 See, for example, the debates in (Sargent, 1981) and (Guettel, 1974). Not all feminists rejected Marxist analysis *in toto* but most agreed that it was deeply flawed when it came to the analysis of sex and gender relations.

(1973: 7) pointed out, contra Marx, that domestic labour under capitalism was productive labour and represented a "hidden source of surplus labor."[14]

More interesting than the attempts to incorporate housewives as class actors into the classic Marxist explanation was the subsequent close examination of the nature of housework and the role of the housewife represented by Oakley's initial study *The Sociology of Housework* (1974). The interrelationship of unpaid and paid labour became a particular focus for many feminists, especially as the 'hard data' of economic national and international gender comparisons pointed unequivocally to persistent inequities (Boserup, 1970; Amsden, 1979; Blaxall and Reagan, 1976; Tilly and Scott, 1978).

The focus on the household and family and the particular labour of women included a focus on reproduction and socialization. In this context feminist confrontations with Freud's work were significant.[15] De Beauvoir had repudiated the notion that 'biology is destiny' and Mitchell (1973) pointed out that women's oppression was occasioned by the interrelationship of the structures of reproduction, sexuality, the socialization of children and the extra-familial realm of paid labour. Reconsiderations of motherhood (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976; Gordon, 1977; Ortner, 1974; Rubin, 1975; Weisskopf, 1980), sexual desire and practice (Rich, 1980; Sayer, 1982; Petchesky, 1980; Shulman, 1980; Foucault, 1978; Daly, 1978; Ferguson et al., 1981; Griffin, 1978), and extensive critiques of the psychoanalytic tradition (Mitchell, 1975; Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 1977; Person, 1980) and questions of body and body image (Haraway, 1978; Hubbard, 1981; Bordo, 1989; Suleiman, 1986) opened up a vast, interdisciplinary arena of feminist challenges.

Despite the vitality and the importance of feminist challenges, they were often greeted by critics as a *threatening provocation* to the "truth" of sociological theory. As a result, in the early years the impact of feminists in the academy was often marginal. Feminist critiques were dismissed by many (generally male colleagues, but also some female colleagues) as something irritating and certainly not to be taken seriously as an intellectual and/or political challenge. Feminists disturbed the calm of the ivory tower and the reactions from those who had the most intellectual and social capital invested in the institution was predictably negative and obstructive. For some there was a sense that feminists "bit the hand that fed them."

As "outsiders within" (Laslett & Brenner, 2000: 1234), many feminists often found that their eagerness to engage with the mainstream in open dia-

14 For a short period there was considerable effort expended on the so-called domestic labour debate. See, for example James and Dalla Costa, 1973; Delphy, 1984; Seccombe, 1974; Gardiner, 1975; Fox, 1980.

15 Firestone (1971:11) applied a Marxist dialectical materialist explanation to sexual politics and maintained that the abolition of the sexual classes based on women's reproductive potential, demanded that women, as an underclass, rise up and seize control over reproduction and eliminate the "sex distinction itself" so that "genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally."

logue and debate that might re-orient the disciplines was not welcomed. In reaction to exclusion many feminists simply turned their focus to advancing debates within their feminist communities. Lively exchanges were conducted largely among feminists of various intellectual and political persuasions as well as different disciplinary locations. What emerged were international, interdisciplinary connections that produced important analyses of gender, sexuality, race and class. Whatever the benefits, this situation produced a marginalization of feminist theories from what, in academic, institutional terms, remained understood as the "centre" of legitimate and important sociology. Feminists achieved a "room of their own" in the academy, but it was usually an attic room, far from the opulence of the mainstream drawing room. Feminists were tolerated as the means for universities, when called upon, to present a liberal face to outsider critics.[16]

Over time, co-option and marginalization tended to mute the challenges that feminism presented to the academic sociological enterprise. Gender became another variable along with race and class and critical feminist sociological work remained a separate endeavour in sociology.[17] Stacey and Thorne (1985: 221) claimed that feminist sociology seemed to have been "both co-opted and ghettoized, while the discipline as a whole and its dominant paradigms have proceeded relatively unchanged." In a later retrospective of their 1985 article they claimed that the "more intellectually challenging implications" of feminist work "had been evaded (e.g. by the use of gender as a variable rather than a theoretical category) and contained (e.g. feminist ideas were largely ignored or subsumed by Marxist and other social theorists" (1996:1). Stacey and Thorne concluded that the formulation of a "feminist revolution *in* sociology" was flawed because it presumed that "an intellectual revolution would move through separate disciplines and leave existing knowledge boundaries intact" (1996: 1).

Barrett and Phillips (1992: 2) have also suggested that the emancipatory vision of the early years has been lost. The initial assumptions that the "idea of *oppression* ... seemed to have self-evident application" and that there was a *cause* for women's oppression which could be found meant that feminist debates revolved around where to place the "explanatory weight" – in the realm of paid labour or family, as a result of patriarchy or capitalism (1992: 4). The 1970s debates were also accompanied by criticisms of the positivist methodological orientation of much empirical sociology and by the development of innovative and more inclusive research practices, often emphasizing a process of mutual discovery for the researcher and the participants. Femi-

16 For example, a recent book on post-modern social theory intended to summarize the field still only provides six pages to feminist theory within a chapter headed, "American Interventions: Bell, Jameson, Feminists, and Multiculturalists" (See Ritzer, 1997: 187-193).

17 As Stanley and Wise (1990: 45) point out, the study of gender as simply a variable is a "de-politicised version of feminism akin to studying 'race relations' rather than racism and colonialism."

nist sociology was ideally a sociology *for* women, not *of* women, that is, a sociology from the standpoint of women "situated *outside* rather than within the relations of ruling" (Smith, 1987: 46). Feminists were generally "united in the importance they attached to establishing the fundamentals of social causation" (Barrett and Phillips, 1992: 4).

Since the 1970s, any feminist political or academic consensus has been fractured. But despite the critical assessments of Stacey and Thorne and Barrett and Phillips about the current academic and political nature of feminism, many still see a feminist sociology as a credible, critically important internal challenge to sociology. Bhavnani (1996: 7) maintains that whilst a cataclysmic change has not occurred, feminism has "contributed to a partial yet significant epistemological shift within sociology." Ingraham (1996: 9) believes that feminist sociology has advanced "the reach of sociological inquiry" as well as increased the "revolutionary or activist orientation of the discipline." Ingraham also points out that the "history of social movements has taught us that the forces of co-option are ever-present and that transformative social change requires continual and adaptive efforts which attend to the historical and material necessities of any period" (1996: 9). Furthermore, the simultaneous attempts at co-option and containment of feminist sociology indicates that feminist challenges are important *but* what sets them apart from past challenges to mainstream canons is that *they set themselves apart.* That is, co-option and containment have not been entirely successful. Feminists at an early stage claimed an interdisciplinary, ethical mandate, a refusal to construct universalistic models and a commitment to radical politics in contrast to what was understood as 'mainstream' – whether this was a positivist, structural-functionalist approach or the equally universalistic claims of a critical Marxism.

More recently, Stacey recognized the different position feminism has in the traditional disciplinary boundaries of the academy. She points out that "academic feminism is *by definition* oxymoronic." If an academic is someone "scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world" who pursues knowledge that is "theoretical or speculative without practical purpose or intention" and produces work "having no practical purpose or use," such an intellectual should find herself categorically at odds with the fundamentally political character of the "F-word" (2000: 1190). However, if it is conceded that political issues and intentions governed the origins of the sociological enterprise, then feminist sociology in the academy is not quite the oxymoron that Stacey claims. On the contrary, feminist sociology is like the classical focus on sociology as a public, political discourse concerned with how sociology could be of use. Where feminist sociology differs from its predecessors is that it offers alternatives and possibilities but no grandiose models, systems, prescriptions or certainties in respect to the question of "how to go on" (in better, more equitable, less repressive ways).

The problem is that the challenges that feminist sociology represent "in theory" are a precarious enterprise in current political climates within the

academy and discipline as well as in everyday life (Brodkin, 2000). The global re-alignments ostensibly occasioned by the recent construction of a variety of threats, whether religious, racial, or sexual, to "normal democracy," and the insistence that now is the time for all good men and women to rally behind an amorphous war on terrorism (orchestrated from an imperial centre), have important consequences for any feminist research agendas and feminist politics. This is especially the case given the open-ended nature of feminist inquiry and the rejection of master narratives and the discourses of modernity. Feminist sociology has no ambition to produce a "totalizing system" and "unitary, absolute, or final truth" (Smith, 1992: 94). It is a "*method of inquiry*, always on-going, opening things up, discovering" and focused on the "politics and practice of progressive struggle, whether of women or other oppressed groups" (Smith, 1992: 88).[18]

4. Political Climates and Feminist Challenges

In the discussion above there is a lingering suggestion that feminism and feminist theoretical work is a unitary phenomenon. Nothing could be further from the case. At the outset, in the discussions and confrontations among feminists inside and outside the academy, divisions and differences were apparent. The divisions and differences were, by-and-large, productive, fuelling the theoretical discourse and the practical politics of various feminist groups and organizations. For example, the early notion of women's knowledge was empowering for a limited time but quickly the issue of "difference" pointed to the hegemonic nature of any all-encompassing, essentialist conceptualisation of "woman." As a result, the claim that "there is no such thing as 'woman' meant that it was impossible to speak of a 'coherent feminism', but at best, of different feminisms" (Winter, 2000: 106).

The reception of post-modern and post-structuralist views was not universally positive among feminists. Flax (1990: 220) reacted to the rejection of coherent notions of self and subjectivity with suspicion about the motives of those advancing such views just as women had begun to "re-remember their selves and to claim an agentic subjectivity" that had only been available in the past to a "few privileged men."[19] Others welcomed the rejection of master narratives and the discourses of modernity, especially feminists who critiqued the racist and ethnocentric assumptions of white, western feminists and the hegemonic nature of any essentialist conceptualisation of "woman" (Hooks, 1981; Spivak, 1987; Riley, 1989; Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Collins, 1986;

18 It is this openness to differences that is a challenge to any feminist sociology in current political climates that insist on "united fronts" to combat "axis of evil."

19 For extensive debates on this issue see Nicholson (1990) and Nicholson and Seidman (1995).

Prakash, 1995; Rattansi, 1995).[20] But whilst there may have been a "death" of the modern, white, European, male subject there was no corresponding "death" of the racial, gendered, classed Other, certainly not in the world of flesh and blood women, men and children coping with the daily grind of living in urban ghettos and underdeveloped nations. And a feminist focus on discourse does not mean that the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed individuals are necessarily guaranteed any hearing in either the academic or global institutions of governance.

The post-modern, post-structural debates did leave feminists exposed to the claim advanced by some critics that, "like all women", feminists were incapable of making up their theoretical minds. This was less important than the charge that feminist sociology was "simply" political in contrast to the desirable objective neutrality of mainstream sociological theory. That is, feminist sociology represents special interests and consequently produces a distorted conception of society and social relations. This reaction is not surprising as Laslett and Thorne (1997: 19) observe, "New intellectual movements, especially successful ones, do not go uncontested," especially when they "touch on and can threaten the interests, identities, and self-regard of those who work and take comfort from existing intellectual paradigms and professional norms and practices." Consequently, the "accusation that feminist sociology is politically motivated (always) is a tactic designed to sideline and de-legitimise feminist sociology" (Whelan, 2001: 555). However, feminist sociology from the outset was a challenge in the sense of *objecting* to the presumption of any objective neutrality and thus *calling into account*, or *demanding justification* and verification of such claims. In countering the political 'special interest' charge, feminists examined the who, what, and why of this knowledge claim, reversing the special interest designation by demonstrating the phallocentric bias of "neutral," "objective" sociology.[21]

The critical backlash directed at feminism and feminists in the academy had a counterpart in the realm of practical politics. Many critics claimed that race and ethnicity trumped gender when it came to challenges to everyday oppressive conditions as a primary legitimate focus for political action. Feminists resisted this stance claiming that racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression are "interlocking" and that the "synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions" of women's and men's lives (Combahee River Collective, 1994: 26). The key issue for many feminists is that the "voices" of non-white and non-privileged individuals be heard and respected and the urge to interpret, speak and write about an "Other" by privileged, heterosexual, whites be firmly resisted (Mihesuah, 2000; Twine, 2000).

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20 Brodkin (2000: 1224) points out, however, that the idea that the early feminists were all white, privileged women and that feminism "was only about white women" is incorrect and "obliterates the contributions of African-Americans and Chicana feminist activists who were working and writing in the 1970s."

21 An important part of this demonstration was the illustration of the ways and means that the social capital of sociology works (Smith, 1999).

Other sources of opposition and backlash are represented by the various conservative alliances that celebrate the "traditional family" and women's "natural" subordination to men claiming justification from biology, religion and the pressing need for social order and stability. For many women associated with these movements, the economic and social conditions of their existence make the idea of traditional family relations their best option, especially if this is reinforced by the notion that they are fulfilling their religiously ordained role (Marshall, 1984; Liebman and Wuthnow, 1983). Opposition to feminists and feminism was strengthened by the contentious debates over pornography, abortion rights, gay rights, and affirmative action.[22] In the early years many feminists viewed "conservative" women as misguided and simply a "political problem" to be solved. What became clear, however, is that the contentious issue of "difference" is of critical importance in understanding anti-feminist political choices made by both women and men and that this, in turn, represented a challenge to feminism.

By the 1990s the strains and tensions in feminist debates over theory and practice were around issues of difference, identity, sexual desire and practice. These strains and tensions were tied to critical political positions and actions within global feminist movements. By this time it was clear that a collective, universal theory of gender oppression and inequality was, at best misconstrued, and at worst complicit in the perpetuation of racial, ethnic, sexual and class distinctions and had very little applicability to conditions "on the ground" for the majority of women. Felski (1997: 17) however pointed out that not all "differences are necessarily benevolent and deserve recognition," so that "difference cannot form a value in itself." At the same time, academic debates over what were often regarded as arcane theoretical points were also seen as compromising any possibility of political practice (Hartmann et al., 1996).

One of the positions that developed out of the claims for a fractured conception of self and identity was that feminism must be concerned with discourse, language, and meanings. Whilst this focus had not been absent from earlier feminist theoretical explorations, it was often seen as an esoteric endeavour representing a "retreat to the academy" and thus a less direct and reliable guide for political action.

The work of Foucault was particularly influential in the examination of how knowledge is made and how power and inequality are constructed. For example, Butler (1995: 50) pointed out that when the essentialist, reified category of "woman" is deconstructed then "multiple significations" can "expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman." Critics claim that the elimination of "woman" mutes feminist sociology's ability to mount po-

22 These issues also divided feminists, see Ryan (1992) for an analysis of the women's movement and feminism in the U.S.A., Katzenstein and Mueller (1987) for a comparative analysis, and Klatch (1987) for an examination of the women of the New Right.

litical challenges. Hartmann et al. (1996: 933) suggests that by emphasizing difference and discourse feminist theory becomes "immobilizing" and cannot engage with "real-life situations." That is, feminist theory becomes apolitical. Others disagree, claiming that in the post-modernist discussions of constructions and representations of the term "woman," the contradictions and complexities of social life are revealed. Oyewumi (2000: 1097) claims that the "feminist anxiety over the disappearance of woman is unnecessary; she never existed as a unified subject in the first place" and the disappearance may be a way for "'women' to be all they want to be." Consequently, deconstructing the term "woman" offers the possibility that political practices can be tailored to differences.

Whelan (2001: 543) contends that "feminist post-modernists more closely approach judgmental relativism by suggesting *any* standard of adjudication is an artefact of discursive formations and power/knowledge relations and that the 'reality' to which any claim refers is itself a product of these formations and relations. But ultimately these suggestions rely upon realism too (e.g. discursive formations exist and they in fact promote the making of some claims and not others)."

What all the above debates illustrate is that just as was the case for the classical sociological tradition, there are no disinterested theorists, and political intentions are part of all knowledge claims, including those of feminist sociological theorists. Foucault's power/knowledge is importantly political power/knowledge in any sociological theorizing. What is, however, "critical" is that any theoretical claims are made in the knowledge that there will be an inevitable calling into account. Dolling and Hark (2000: 1197) point out that a "scholarly practice that aims to critique power and hegemony must be forthright about its own complicity in given relationships of power."

These internal critiques and debates are a sign of the continued health of feminist theory and they help to retain the focus of the early years that theory and practice are tied together and both are political. Ahmed (2000: 101) maintains that "feminist theorizing will always operate in a double register: it will both contest other ways of understanding the world (those theories that are often not seen as theories as they are assumed to be 'common sense'), as it will *contest itself*, as a way of interpreting the world (or of 'making sense' in a way which contests what is 'common')." Furthermore, "internal critique is a practical and theoretical necessity: it is about doing politics in a way which recognizes that political action involves the use of categories that may be exclusionary, or even violent, when they are recognized as categories" (Ahmed, 2000: 102). Doing politics is both internal critique and critique that orients to some "realities" external to the often rarefied spheres of disciplines, specializations, and texts.

The internal feminist debates and dissension over, for example, difference, discourse, or the deconstruction of the subject are healthy but can remain so only insofar as they can lead, at some point, and when appropriate, to a practical politics. That is, the feminist challenges must be a *demand of*

rights, and a *calling to account* in the interest of *striving for* a future that is less sexist, less oppressive, and less divisive for its participants. Such challenges do not, indeed cannot, envision a fixed regime of truth. Feminists (mostly) do not challenge by *summoning* in a *threatening, provocative, inciting* manner, they resist. That resistance is to "any power-knowledge relation, any identity formation, that seals itself beyond change" (Pavlich, 2001: 227). Feminist sociology remains a challenge as long as it calls into account oppressive social conditions and offers stimulating challenges to sociologists to strive for the establishment of a non-sexist, equitable world.

5. Feminists and Future Challenges

Feminists are guerrillas. Feminists challenge the sociological community (however that is defined) but also their own feminist communities in respect to a "commitment to a political position in which 'knowledge' is not simply defined as 'knowledge what' but also as 'knowledge for'" (Stanley, 1990:15). To the extent that feminist sociology is cognizant of its political nature and given the interdisciplinary character that the theory/practice connection demands, then the continued relevance of sociology to present troubles lies with feminist sociology. Uncertainty and contingency is the mark of the social, not order. Feminist sociologists have a responsibility to take risks in speaking about continuing injustices, coercion, and degradation of any group or individual in the understanding that "To speak about" is not "to speak for" (Hartmann et al., 1996: 936). Bauman (2000: 88) points out that, "to diagnose a disease does not mean to cure it" but he notes that "the illness of society differs from bodily illness in one tremendously important respect: in the case of an ailing social order, the absence of an adequate diagnosis ... is a crucial, perhaps the decisive, part of the disease." Feminist sociology has in the past provided and continues in the present to provide such diagnoses, recognizing the provisional nature of any statement, judgement or conclusion, but also recognizing that a refusal of commitment is both non-sociological and unethical.

Feminist sociologists, for all their differences, are passionate sociologists in Game and Metcalfe's (1996) sense. Passionate sociology is a practice that is "not based on otherworldly aspirations to the Eternal or Absolute." It recognizes that it is a "part of life. Passionate sociology celebrates an immersion in life, a compassionate involvement with the world and others," (Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 5) and that is the characteristic of feminist sociology. Feminist sociology challenges old, outmoded boundaries and conceptualisations, as well as maintaining necessary reflexivity about the practices and conceptualisations of sociology.

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