

Nancy Forsythe

11. THEORIZING ABOUT GENDER: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF TERENCE K. HOPKINS

Feminist theory has been in search of its subject for nearly two decades now. When Juliet Mitchell published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in 1974, her concern was with “the place and meaning of sexuality and of gender differences within society” (1974: 3).¹ With the publication of *Gender Trouble* in 1990, Judith Butler explores the “locality and meaning of both the ‘subject’ and ‘gender’ within the context of socially instituted gender asymmetry” (1990: 11). It is far from a coincidence that twenty years apart, with poststructuralism intervening, these two great works are still posing the problem similarly.

Various attempts have been made over the past decades to ascertain how gender was related to women such that women were the subject of feminist theory, and to clarify the role of gender in accounting

1. Mitchell makes this statement in referring to the work of the group Psych et Po, yet she clearly takes this as her starting point as well. That feminist thinking since the 1960s has been shaped by the engagement with Marxism is attested to in Mitchell's own intellectual development: her first book, *Woman's Estate*, was an early attempt to think through what Barrett would call the Marxist-feminist project.

for both women's oppression and women's liberation (or feminism). Nevertheless, feminists are still pondering questions about the "location and meaning of gender." Lying not far beneath the surface of these questions about gender is the slippery category "women," the political or conceptual integrity of which has repeatedly escaped the grasp of feminist theorists. The difficulties in grasping what makes women "women" has, in fact, taken feminist analysis from attempts to define the essential character of womanhood to tossing out the category altogether and thinking about gender on some other basis.

We will begin by briefly outlining what we consider to be the two issues that are at the center of the attempts by feminists to come to terms with this dilemma. The first issue is reconciling the category "women" with an understanding of gender that clarifies the analytical interaction between the two; the second is making sense of what has come to be called the debate over essentialism and difference (the intersection of race, class, and gender).

We will follow this with a discussion of how key points in the work of Hopkins elucidate productive ways of meeting the criteria set by feminists for the study of gender. On the first point, we will read the relationship of women to gender through Hopkins's discussion of the inappropriateness of the study of "cases" within world-systems analysis and the limitations of the covering law paradigm, referring as well to his discussion of the movement between figure and ground as ways to sort out what the most suitable subject of feminist theory might be. This discussion will raise the issue of unit of analysis, and we will suggest that conceptualizing gender differentiation as a constituent process of the modern world-system lays a sound foundation on which to build feminist analysis of gender.

On the second point, we will examine the potential of world-systems analysis to confront the meaning of "the intersection of race, class, and gender." Here we draw on Hopkins's discussion of the relational nature of information to understand "intersectionality" and other forms of multiplicity, and his pairing of the terms "partial" and "abstract" to propose that understandings of varying dimensions of the social world becomes increasingly "partial" the more "abstract"

the scope of analysis. In this reading of his work, Hopkins prefigures the feminist insistence on three things: 1) that selves, social relations, and social thought are “multiple and overlapping”; 2) that we need to move toward a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” interpretation of the social world; and 3) that knowledge is not truth but that some knowledge is “less false” than other knowledge.

EXPERIENCE AND CRITIQUE OF EXPERIENCE

The concept of experience, subjective and objective, has been crucial for the development of feminist theory. Beginning with separate spheres and following Smith-Rosenberg (1975), scholars called for attention to women rather than to women and men, marking a shift from viewing women as “objects” in the study of history, referring mainly to the roles and functions assigned to women in an androcentric history, to a developing interest in women’s experiences and subjectivity in which women were viewed as the subjects of history: women’s experiential difference from men was taken to be the source of different and better ways of being and knowing, of a distinctive subjectivity and, later, a distinctive epistemology. Women would no longer be the objects of inquiry, but its subjects, that is, to quote Harding: “the subjectivities from which the world could be viewed” (1990: 96).

The 1980s witnessed an explosion of renunciations of the “essentialism” inherent in works about “(all) women.”² The vitality of

2. Barrett (1987: 31): “This charge of essentialism argues that in these writings we find assumptions about women’s language, culture and personality that rest on psychic, social and cultural ‘separate spheres’ for men and women.” Gordon (1991: 93) describes an early reading of gender. “Gender, then, both described and challenged that which it described, but in the main it was used to postulate dichotomous categories and then to valorize the previously devalued female part. From this emphasis came the first and simplest understanding of difference, referring to the female/male dichotomy, insisting that the male should not be used to stand for the universal. The primary meaning of this kind of difference is, varying according to discipline, that women have a different voice, a different muse, a different psychology, a different experience of love, work, family and hope.” Gordon attributes the influence of difference read in this way within women’s studies to its development in the field of literary criticism; I suggest that the roots of this

the works that dealt in women's culture, women identified women, women's experience and standpoint was matched by a virulent attack on the assumptions that what women shared in common was more important than their differences, that is, differences of race and class. Instead, the experiential, subjective, and epistemological differences among women themselves have come to occupy the full attention of feminist scholars.³ Women were not only different from men, but, in addition, women's different experiences, both their different social roles and their characteristic identity, gave women the capacity to know different things and to know things differently.

The effects of this shift have been profound, sweeping rapidly through the academic literature on women. There is no longer the assumption that the category "women" is unproblematic and there are a substantial number of questions being raised within feminist theory today about the basis for feminist politics given the disintegration of the category "women." Current debate generally concerns which

perspective are equally in Parsonian functionalism and that the influence of this hegemonic ideology of gender pre-dated women's studies altogether, and pervaded the social sciences just as fully as it did literary criticism.

3. "Difference" has been interpreted in various ways by feminist scholars. Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (1988: 322-23) see three stages in the development of feminist sociological theory: phase (1) "began the work of discovering that 'other' or 'marginal' or 'invisible' constituency, 'women'"; phase (2) women were not only the objects but the subjects of inquiry, "the subjectivities from which the world could be viewed"; phase (3) "exploration of differences among women." For Gordon (1991), difference is used too simplistically to refer to either the difference between men and women or differences among women. Barrett (1987) sees "difference" as having three meanings in the current debates about whether the best use of difference refers to differences between men and women or differences among women: 1) as experiential diversity, 2) as positional meaning, and 3) as sexual difference. Harding (1986: 23) claims that difference is also discussed in two ways: 1) difference "as diversity and variety," as "simply cultural variation," and 2) "differences due to structures of domination that appea(r) in criticism of white Western women's participation in and benefit from race, class and cultural exploitation." While discussion of difference has occupied countless pages in the literature on feminism lately, perhaps the most important discussions of difference concern its relationship to power relations. Differences, in this conception, are not neutral but are power-laden.

“level” of analysis, arrayed from the idiographic to the nomothetic, best portrays the subject of feminist theory.

It is a given in feminist theory at present that women do not represent a group out of which a political perspective can emerge because any attempt to represent the group will misrepresent the differences among women in the group. Yet at the same time most feminist theorists are concerned that focusing on women’s differences and the relatively equal weight of women’s multiple “social locations” and “experiences,” standpoints and epistemological perspectives, dilutes the necessary attention to persistent inequalities between women and men.

Moreover, in denying a male or an essentialized women’s perspective the capacity to define the subject who knows, postmodern feminists have questioned the validity of positing any subject who knows—that is, the claim that a perspective embodying masculinity or essentialism distorts knowledge extends as well to any claim about a subject’s ability to know. It has raised the question: if women cannot be generalized as knowers, can they be generalized as known? Likewise, for all the reasons we can not know women, can we know anything?

The exposition on the subject has pushed the limits of the critique of causality and explanation; our ability to know has been questioned by feminist theorists. The focus on women’s differences originated in the denial of the universal and essential subject, the homogeneity of which was constructed by “metanarrative,” understood as universalizing generalizations, or the covering law paradigm.

Against this kind of thinking and knowledge, poststructuralist feminists have posed the concept of context. Its use is suggested by de Lauretis’s (1984: 160) contention that “... self and identity are understood within particular historical contexts.” Context gives the spatial and temporal coordinates of a situation, of experience in fact, and though it is never made explicit by feminist theorists, it refers to the social differences introduced by, de Lauretis’s words, the “particular” and the “historical”—that is, by race, class, region, society, etc. Context becomes a substitute for analyzing theoretically or historically the complex organizations of social differences. In other

works, social location fulfills a similar role, suggesting that women's differences situate them in different social locations.

In feminist discussion of gender, experiences differ in as much as they are constituted in contexts or social locations, or a similar term used to refer *in general* to the historical specificities of a case—to differences in region, culture, society, or race, class, and sexual preference. Yet the temporal and spatial boundaries of regions or races for example are never discussed explicitly.⁴ Despite the fact that the meanings of the terms race, class, region, etc., are very much contested, and more often than not as historiographic rather than theoretical issues, they appear unproblematic in this literature. "(P)ostmodernism offers feminism some useful ideas about method, particularly a wariness toward generalizations which transcend the boundaries of culture and region" (Nicholson 1990: 5). But, what are the boundaries of culture and region?

This is perhaps my most serious frustration with Scott's work and the work of most poststructuralist feminists: Scott's constant and consistent references to, for instance, "culture" and "society," specifically as establishing context or setting limits, are vague and sidestep the question of the temporal, spatial, and conceptual boundaries of such terms. At best they perpetuate, unproblematically, the terms of conventional historiography and the idiographic/nomothetic debate that frame the study of social change in the paradigm shared by both conventional and oppositional history/social science (oppositional referring to, as Scott puts it, "historians of difference").

There appears to be some confusion about why covering law paradigms—metanarratives or nomothetic views—are inadequate. Feminists substitute context and social location for nomothetic consideration of their topic. The general assumption among feminists

4. References to differences are pervasive in the literature, yet simply as assertions. See Fraser and Nicholson (1990), Flax (1990), Scott (1992), Hartssock (1983). "Situated knowledge" of standpoint theory, accommodating the critique of feminist analysis by women of color, has strengthened the use of "context" in so far as the latter appears to be more inclusive, that is, to permit the complexity of subjectivity or identity; but, again, this has been employed most productively in thinking about political strategies rather than social theory.

is that the spatial and/or temporal boundaries of nomothetic analyses, that is, analyses of something other than that justifiable as context or social location, although what constitute these boundaries is weakly suggested, automatically preclude doing justice to difference. But, unfortunately, this fails to capture what is most un-useful about covering law paradigms. It is not the spatial and/or temporal boundaries of the unit of analysis that prohibit confronting difference, but the rendering of multiple units of analysis discrete from one another—establishing the internality and externality of each—such that the interactions among them are contingent to understanding any single discrete unit. In the covering law paradigm, units of analysis are typically modeled separately and then brought into relationship with one another.

World-systems offers us the opportunity to articulate the relationship between gender differentiation and other kinds of social differentiation as processes of a world-historical system. As parts of a single historical system, the relationship between gender and other social differences is “built in.” The primary intellectual, or theoretical, question concerns the unit of analysis of which each analytically discrete process of differentiation is a part—but only a part—and in which the relationships among processes of social differentiation adhere. The history of this unit of analysis must, in turn, be written as the histories of both transformations within each discrete process of differentiation, as well as transformations in the intersections among processes of social differentiation.

The first point is that we should, in fact, stop referring to gender at all, or refer to it as a short-hand for what it is we mean when we use the term: the processes through which gender is differentiated. To think of gender, not as a property of a self or a society, but as the process of gender differentiation, as the construction of continuities and discontinuities in gender relations, makes more explicit the ways in which the multiple meanings of “women” change and change at different paces. What women share, what men share, what men and women share, the differences among women, the differences among men, the differences between men and women—each of these, and the

various elaborations of commonality and difference, must be explored as essentially historical meanings that are continuous or discontinuous as the case may be. Let's listen to Hopkins:

I have in mind the figure-ground movement where if one refocuses, what was figure becomes ground and when one refocuses again, what was ground becomes figure. For us, the figure-ground movement seems to take place centrally between social relations and agencies of action, between role and role relation. I think the methodological directive with which we work is that our acting units or agencies can only be thought of as *formed*, and continually re-formed, by the relations between them. Perversely, we often think of the relations as only going between the end points, the units or the acting agencies, as if the latter made the relations instead of the relations making the units. Relations, generally, are our figures and acting agencies are our backgrounds. At certain points in conducting analyses, it is of course indispensable to shift about and focus on acting agencies; but I think we too often forget what we have done and fail to shift the focus back again. (1982: 149)

Whereas Hopkins goes on to give an example related to economic phenomena, this is applicable to the feminist dilemma over the distinguishing appropriate use of women and gender. Women are the units; gender differentiation refers to the relations between the units, the relations forming the units.

The holism of world-systems theory differs from the "holism" rejected in current feminist theory in so far as its theory and methodology differ from that of the covering law paradigm. The holism is in the unit of analysis, not in a universal law that is generally applicable to "concrete" "historical" situations, or cases. The holism of world-systems analysis discards a whole series of (usually binary) categorical distinctions ranging from necessary/ contingent, general/specific, theory/history to male/female, Black/White, economy/culture, state/society, to favor instead the relational nature of information.

Following the spirit of Hopkins's contribution incorporating the perspective on gender differentiation as a constituent process among several processes of social differentiation within a single historical system implicates gender in the very construction of the boundaries

of that system. In this way, gender is no longer given a definition that establishes what is internal and what is external to it (its essence) and then viewed as an attribute of several distinct units of analysis, but is an intrinsically historical process central to, but not privileged among, the unfolding of (all social differences within) the historical system.

Secondly, while we have situated gender differentiation as a constituent process of the modern world-system, we have yet to come to terms with how to interpret “women.” Are they the same? Are they different? This presents us with a series of questions about intersectionality on the one hand, and on the other, how to interpret the interrelationships between subjective and collective dimensions of the historical system—how to conceive and justify our “stopping points” arrayed between the (female) self and all women. The first is more straightforward in Hopkins’s work; the second is more speculative, more an extension of the work of Hopkins.

What feminist theory has critiqued only obliquely, poststructuralist feminism included, is the very distinction between the subject and the social. That is the paradigm that underlies “Enlightenment thinking”; it is not the covering law paradigm alone, but the elaboration of this on the basis of the autonomy, relative or not, of discrete units of analysis, based in the fundamental distinction between the self and society. It is this distinction and the separation of subjective from objective phenomena that opened the space for the emergence of a universal subject and an objective knowledge.

The task for feminists then has been to theorize some relationship between the subject and the objective/structural/social without precluding the invariability or the independence of either, that is, outside of the covering law paradigm. But this is an impossible task as long as the two remain separate units of analysis. Within the paradigm of the historical system, discussion of the two as interrelated parts, or dimensions, of a single historical system begins to overcome the reading of gender as either “in” the individual or “in” the social. The process of gender differentiation affects simultaneously both subjective and social dimensions of the historical system. This means that it is not only processes and relations that are relational, but dimensions of

the historical system as well. That is, we are reading the subjective and the collective/social as interrelated parts of the historical system rather than as separate units of analysis. World-systems analysis has thus far not dealt with subjective and objective, self and society as dimensions of the modern world-system. Critique of these as discrete units of analysis is implicit in world-systems analysis, but focused attention on these is the contribution of feminist theory to the discussion of unit of analysis.

More to the point, gender continues to be premised on categorical difference, or the difference in which inequality is vested. But this difference that results in inequality cannot be the basis for the coherence of gender precisely because inequality is no longer categorical, if it ever was from a world-historical perspective. That is, gender difference can only be characterized as categorical at the highest level of abstraction *and partiality*; at any point short of that level of abstraction, gender difference will not be categorical but will be “intersecting.” That level of abstraction and partiality at which gender difference might be thought of as categorical hardly offers an adequate basis for political strategizing, while the political strategies that might follow from less partial levels of abstract analysis are less predictable as general statements about relations between women and men.

If experience is simultaneously subjective and collective (in Elias’s sense [1982]), both figure/ground, process/instance, partial/holistic or complex, such that the project is not only to reveal women’s differences, but also to make sense of how the diversity of experiences within the category “women” is synonymous with the unity of the category, then women’s differences become meaningful in relationship to one another, and the unity of the category women becomes meaningful because of—not in spite of—the diversity of experience subsumed by it. It is mistaken to think that gender, or subjectivity, refer to a theoretically or historically distinct and autonomous set of differences. Gender, like subjectivity, is one axis along which difference is structured and, once again, *the only real theoretical question pertains to the unit of analysis* through which to understand the complex of social differences through which experience is given meaning.

Making the unit of analysis the central theoretical question puts the issue of the “interactions” among social differences and levels of abstraction at the heart of theory, where it should be. Making sense of the relationships among social differences, or between self and society, compels us to make the construction of temporal and spatial boundaries as much a part of the theoretical question as accounting for the construction of particular social differences and their appropriate “levels.”

From the vantage point of very long historical time and wide space, we can identify continuity in women’s oppression. This continuity, the radical feminist idea of patriarchy, is acknowledged by scholars in all fields that have investigated gender relations historically or cross-culturally. Furthermore, it represents a clear continuity in male domination, even as we acknowledge that discontinuities exist simultaneously. We should not read this as a contradiction between two mutually exclusive meanings, however. Rather, it is the creation and maintenance of the meaning (male domination/women’s oppression) through the creation and transformation of other meanings (differences in the meanings of male domination for women).

The greatest significance of this is that it allows us to see *what is truly unique about the development of gender relations in the contemporary capitalist world-system*. What is dearly discontinuous at present is the development of women’s empowerment on a global scale, and a thorough-going critique of gender that has overturned not only notions of “male” and “female” but those of self, identity, agency, politics, etc. While patriarchy reigned in the past, simply seeing more of it in the modern world-system prevents us from seeing what is historically unique, and, more importantly, what is politically most relevant to the unfolding of the historical system. The most urgent questions for feminists today center, not so much on capitalism and women’s oppression, but on capitalism and women’s empowerment, the fact that the modern world-system has been witness to the emergence of women’s empowerment.

In fact, the debate over gender and other social differences, taking seriously the diversity of women’s movements, demonstrates the

inadequacy of thinking about *feminist theory* at all. What we can theorize is the historical system, not gender, that is, gender only in relation to other social differences in the world-system. I would argue that this is what is unique about gender relations in the present. Whether or not this represents a historic break with patriarchy depends on the success of the movements, but the changes already wrought by these movements would be difficult to reverse.

In effect, we need to work with a weak version of an as-then-so-now procedural premise. This means conceiving of the socialist world-revolution of our time as, first, a historically singular world-scale movement; secondly, as being given increasing shape and substance through the cumulative succession of the loci of its constitutive struggle and the real relations among them; thirdly, as evolving through its stratifying processes the complex of historically original ideas that a long time hence will be seen as among the major differences distinguishing the capitalist era from the socialist era (if they will even be called that then). These stratifying processes, it should be understood, are presumed to be at work on a variety of levels—personality formation, household formation, labor-process formation, state formation, world-movement formation, and so forth. (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1982: 140)

What seems wanted, rather, are focused studies on the emergence, reproduction, and change of hegemonic ideas and of the opposing ideas defining them, in particular periods of change in the modern world-system and in particular locales, all without presuming the framework of “Western Civ.” (Hopkins & Wallerstein 1982: 137)

The point is, of course, that feminist theory and women’s empowerment have done these things. We will conclude with a question: If the current period does mark the end of male domination (male hegemony), we cannot help but ask about its beginning and middle, its pattern and evolution, its histories. Does the shift in gender relations in the current period suggest a new periodization in which the modern world-system is an end point?

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