

JUSTICE AND FEMINISM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a contribution to the debates in contemporary political theory around competing understandings of social justice, and their implications for feminist struggles to eradicate gender inequality. While feminism has long advocated forms of distributive justice, which aim to distribute important resources equally between individual women and men, in recent years, many feminists have shifted to new understandings of social justice. This new paradigm, cultural justice, locates the primary social injustices in the state's failure to publicly recognize and value the cultural or identity-related differences that put some social groups, such as women and visible minorities, at a disadvantage. Against this trend, I argue that feminism needs an ethic of socio-economic egalitarianism, derived from individualist and distributive understandings of society, in order to effectively combat gender inequality.

Chapter 1 outlines the main features of the paradigm shift in theories of justice from distributive to cultural justice, as well as the related shift within feminist political theory from notions of gender inequality to gender difference. I argue that the feminist project associated with distribute justice, which may be called 'equality feminism,' seeks substantive, or strict, equality between women and men, and that this is essential for combating the economic dimension of gender inequality. Chapter 2 critiques the tradition of 'cultural feminism.' This tradition, following the logic of cultural justice, understands women's inequality as rooted in the public's failure to value women's distinctive culture, which reflects virtues such as patience and a greater capacity for nurturing. I argue that this understanding of injustice, which centres on gender *difference* not inequality, is flawed because its program will reproduce patterns of gender hierarchy and segregation. Chapter 3 addresses the way political theorists deploy notions of difference and culture in international contexts. Some writers maintain that western feminists inappropriately impose their norms of gender equality on different cultures, offending both cultural pluralism and non-western women's agency. By contrast, universalist feminists argue that there are similar notions of gender equality emergent in all cultures, and that feminists must not sacrifice women's rights in the name of respect for cultural differences. I outline a distributive model of universalist feminist justice that responds to critics' concerns for cultural pluralism and women's freedom.

In summary, the more conventional understandings of social justice, which rely on the logic of distribution, and the ethics of individualism and socio-economic egalitarianism, are not inimical to contemporary feminism. In fact, they are complimentary projects that attack the poverty, violence, ill health, truncated human rights, and diminished freedom suffered disproportionately by women everywhere, and that attempt to increase the real equality of women and men in all cultures.

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To the memory of my father, Ian Armitage  
1943 – 2000

## INTRODUCTION

MY THESIS BEGINS by examining how feminist political theory has engaged with debates on justice in mainstream political theory. Political theorists have noted that academic concern with social justice in the twentieth century has two distinct phases. The first phase is centrally concerned with socio-economic justice, or justice as redistribution. The second phase, beginning in the 1980s, is centrally concerned with cultural justice, or justice as recognition. Conceptually, my paper takes for granted this much-discussed shift in mainstream political thought about justice and uses it as a framework for distinguishing different waves of feminist political theory on the subject.

Essentially, I argue that cultural justice – deemed critical for the group-based politics of new social movements such as multiculturalism and gay rights – is not always compatible with feminist politics. In Chapter 1, I demonstrate that there is an alliance between ‘equality feminism’ (which originates in second wave feminist theory) and distributive justice.

Equality feminism and distributive justice are compatible projects insofar as they identify the social inequalities that arise out of the economic dimension of gender and seek to eliminate them. Chapter 1 demonstrates, by reference to the division of unpaid labour, when the principle of sameness-equality or identity between the genders is an appropriate goal for feminism.

In the second chapter, I turn to feminist political thinkers engaged with the paradigm of cultural justice. I demonstrate that there is an alliance between ‘difference feminism,’ which posits important differences exist between women and men, and cultural justice.

Difference feminism and cultural justice are compatible projects insofar as they identify the social inequalities that arise out of the cultural dimension of gender, such as the devaluation

of human traits and activities typically coded as 'feminine.' While this alliance may provide useful ways for *understanding* the injustices that arise out of the cultural dimension of gender, I will argue that it is not necessarily equipped with the best strategies to *redress* them. Although difference feminism has formed productive alliances with multicultural politics, I will argue that there are serious problems with conflating feminism with multiculturalism.

In Chapter 3, I shift the debate slightly from a domestic discourse between equality and difference feminist strategies for social justice within a state, to an international discourse between universalist and anti-essentialist feminisms. In other words, there are parallels between the political philosophy of equality feminism and that labelled "universalist feminism." These include commitments to the notion that there are cross-cultural explanations for gender inequality, cross-cultural applications for western feminist concepts of justice, and the idea that it is possible to devise a universal feminist theory of human flourishing. Similarly, there are parallels between the political philosophy of difference feminism and anti-essentialist feminism. These include scepticism about the coherency and stability of core feminist concepts and their cross-cultural legitimacy and explanatory value. Chapter 3 investigates the prospects for some sort of scheme for international feminist justice. Against anti-essentialist feminism, I argue that it is possible – and indeed, essential – that feminists continue to use universalist feminist concepts and principles to assess the justness of all societies.



## CHAPTER 1

### FEMINISM, JUSTICE & EQUALITY

SECOND WAVE FEMINISM'S paramount objective was to secure women's liberation. At the time – that is, from the 1950s to the 1980s – feminists used the term “women's liberation” interchangeably with demands for “women's equality.” “Women's equality,” in turn, meant making women as similar to men as possible.<sup>1</sup> The criteria for measuring women's equality – or similarity – to men were primarily socio-economic ones: second wave feminism fought for the same basic legal and economic rights for women as men; the same status, income and opportunity in the workplace; the same degree of participation in politics; and the same roles and responsibilities in the family. On these socio-economic indicators of justice, if women are different or possess different amounts of things (rights, status, income, or wealth) from men, they are unequal. Conversely, to be the *same* or to have the same amount of things is to be *equal*. In a sense, second wave feminism's ethic of economic egalitarianism made possible the conflation of the terms “women's liberation” with “women's equality.”

Today, these understandings of women's liberation and equality seem peculiar. Two important dynamics have muddled the longstanding conviction that women's liberation means making women, in some sense, the same as men. One is primarily internal to feminist theory. Against this tradition of “equality feminism,” which assumed a considerable degree of homogeneity among all women, many feminist theorists today start from the assumption that differences divide women. The second dynamic is the emergence of a spectrum of new social movements or groups that society has historically relegated to the margins. The gay

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that second wave feminism reflects a broad spectrum of thought. Although I take the ideal of sameness-equality to be a central principle for second wave feminism, radical feminists – who constituted a prominent strand of second wave thought – did not, in general, support the notion of sameness-equality.

rights community and multiculturalism are perhaps the most recognizable of these new social movements. The organization of marginalized groups around concepts of difference or identity sparked new thinking about equality and justice in modern societies. The importance of class divisions in society diminished as these new groups did not organize primarily around economic inequality, but instead because of political and cultural inequality. Answering their demands for inclusion did not seem to involve redistributing jobs or income; instead, their demands included the explicit recognition and accommodation of identity differences of race, ethnicity and sexuality. As Anne Phillips notes, where once equality was primarily understood in class terms, “equality is now thought to be a matter of politics or culture as much as (if not more than) one of the distribution of economic resources.”<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I will argue that feminism should not abandon economic egalitarianism since the economic dimension of gender identity continues to limit women’s equality and freedom. I will begin by outlining the main features of the shift in feminist political theory from equality to difference that serve as the backdrop to my thesis. Second, I will show how transformations in feminist discourses about equality and justice are similar to transformations in mainstream political theory. Many theorists agree that one of the most significant developments in contemporary political theory is the replacement of class concerns with identity concerns in politics. I will outline the main features of this “paradigm shift” in theories of justice from distributive justice to cultural justice or, to use the phrase of one of its pre-eminent advocates, “the politics of recognition.”<sup>3</sup>

Third, I will consider Nancy Fraser’s attempt to “finesse” or resolve the dilemmas of justice that present themselves when we expand our conception of social inequality to

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor is credited with this term, for his essay, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

encompass not only economic injustices but cultural and political ones as well. Fraser shows how some marginalized groups in society – particularly women and ethnic groups – suffer from both economic and cultural injustices. Using her analytic framework, I argue that feminists should continue to employ models of distributive justice in order to deal with the gender injustices that arise out of women's economic inequality. Finally, I will argue that the distribution of unpaid domestic labour demonstrates that feminists ought to retain the notion of sameness-equality described above. In other words, I shall defend the idea that, in some circumstances, we *can* evaluate women's equality against the standard of men's lives; and that, indeed, feminists should, in very important ways, be seeking strict equality with men.

### **1.1 Equality and Difference Feminisms**

Most contemporary feminists who look back on the recent history of feminist thought agree that two distinct phases can be identified. The terms I will use in this paper to identify these phases are 'equality' and 'difference' traditions in feminism. This thematic distinction derives mainly from the different assumptions each tradition holds about the nature and significance of women's gender identity. I prefer this thematic distinction to the more familiar one posed between 'second' and 'third' wave feminisms because the latter tends to imply a chronological ordering (i.e. the third wave following on the second) that does not really reflect how intermingled the two traditions are. Indeed, theorists who refer to feminism's second and third waves often enter a caveat that the positions, themes and issues taken up in the third wave feminist literature can be traced back to the second and even first waves. For example, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, who identify themselves as third wave feminists, argue "the second and third waves of feminism are neither incompatible nor opposed. Rather we define feminism's third wave as a movement that contains elements of

second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger and defining power of those structures.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition to emphasizing second and third wave feminisms’ shared themes and positions, most theorists are careful to avoid implying that the third wave reflects the evolution of feminism from its more primitive, theoretically-deficient second wave precursor.<sup>5</sup> I think it is important to stress the continuities linking the second and third wave because I do not want to give the impression that the ‘sameness-equality’ feminism described in the introduction has had its day. While contemporary equality feminism is certainly the inheritor of second wave feminist principles, it should be understood as its own distinct tradition today, considerably influenced and modified by its encounters with difference or ‘third wave’ feminism. That said, however, contemporary equality feminism does emerge primarily out of second wave feminism, while the third wave is closely associated with the two kinds of ‘difference(s)’ feminisms I am concerned with here.

Equality feminism is a humanist feminism. Humanism “seeks justice for human beings as such, believing all human beings to be fundamentally equal in worth.”<sup>6</sup> Humanism holds that there is a core human self that is identical for all people. Given this identical humanity, people’s “special dilemmas can best be seen as growing out of special circumstances, rather than out of a nature or identity that is altogether unlike that of other

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, “Introduction,” in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, ed. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3. See also Barbara Arneil, *Politics and Feminism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), 186-188.

<sup>5</sup> Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, for example, maintain that we “should certainly reject the simplistic teleology of assuming that later theory is therefore better theory...”, just as we should reject the view that argues “that nothing new is ever said...” (Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 7).

<sup>6</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

humans.”<sup>7</sup> Humanist feminism would support the idea that gender is deeply constitutive of women and men’s different identities, but it would argue that in some ways, these differences are superficial because of our underlying human commonalities.

The commitment to humanism suffused second wave feminist political theory. Iris Marion Young, for example, claims that second wave feminism constituted a “revolt against femininity.”<sup>8</sup> Women, according to second wave feminism, should try to shed their femininity because it is “the primary vehicle of women’s oppression”.<sup>9</sup>

Patriarchal culture has ascribed to women a distinct feminine nature by which it has justified the exclusion of women from most of the important and creative activity of society – science, politics, invention, industry, commerce, the arts. By defining women as sexual objects, decorative charmers, and mothers, the patriarchal culture enforces behaviour in women that benefits men by providing them with domestic and sexual servants. Women’s confinement to femininity stunts the development of their full potential and makes women passive, dependent and weak.<sup>10</sup>

This view suggests that gender identities are, in some sense, optional for women. And, as Young’s description reveals, second wave feminism felt that woman’s gender identity – her femininity – essentially crippled her humanity.

Feminism’s humanist foundations lent shape and direction to its goals during the second wave. Believing in women and men’s basic equality and similarity, second wave feminism argued that patriarchal society denied women, but not men, their basic human entitlements such as equal political, legal and economic rights and opportunities.<sup>11</sup> Mind

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>8</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics,” in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>11</sup> There was growing recognition among second wave feminists, however, that not all men stood in a position of privilege vis-à-vis all women. Some feminist organizations collaborated with poverty activists and the civil

you, the second wave was an era of “hyphenated feminisms,” when feminist political theory allied itself with the major ideologies of western political thought to produce liberal-, Marxist-, socialist- and radical-feminist traditions.<sup>12</sup> This meant that the different traditions proposed different routes to gaining women’s proper entitlements with men.<sup>13</sup> But they all ultimately shared the goal of “getting women ‘in’ – inside the spheres of the political and cultural realm – and [making] them the ‘equals’ of men.”<sup>14</sup>

Second wave feminism, it has been said, was about getting women “their piece of the pie.” The “pie” consisted of the economic, political and cultural rights and privileges extended to men, but not to women. Second wave feminism saw as ideal a society in which such important resources as jobs, income, wealth, and political office were distributed equally to women and men. It sought to promote the admission of equal numbers of women and men to what were still male-dominated institutions, such as universities and professional occupations. Where sex-discrimination still lingered in legislation – for example, in the areas of family law and “protective” labour laws – feminists fought to strike down that legislation. Feminists demanded changes to political parties’ constitutions and electoral systems that would facilitate more women taking up political office. Ultimately, second wave feminism aimed for a kind of strict equality between women and men – the ‘sameness-equality’ described in the introduction – which would result in a “gender-free” society, at least in terms of the public sphere.

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rights movement in the United States, for example, recognizing the important connections between issues of class, race and gender oppression. See Susan Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), especially Chapters 2, 3 and 6, for a discussion of coalitions between feminists, unionists and civil rights activists.

<sup>12</sup> Arneil, Chapter 6.

<sup>13</sup> For a good overview of ‘hyphenated feminisms’ see Arneil, Chapters 5 and 6; 209-211. Judith Evans’ *Feminism Theory Today* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995) is also helpful (if grammatically erratic) for distinguishing second wave feminism’s different ideological underpinnings.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

While second wave equality feminism mainly focused on public forms of gender inequality, contemporary equality feminism extends its analysis into the private sphere. Following on second wave's radical- and Marxist-feminist critiques of the family, contemporary equality feminism views the traditional nuclear family as being as great a threat to women's equality as a judicial system that upholds sexual discrimination or an employer that maintains gender pay inequity. In fact, as I will discuss below, the unequal division of unpaid, domestic labour in the home is now seen as a primary obstacle in preventing women from getting their piece of the pie. Thus, to a greater extent than second wave feminism, contemporary equality feminism focuses on both public and private processes and institutions for the ways in which they permit or facilitate the unequal distribution of opportunities to women and men.

'Equality' feminism derives its support for the principle of sameness-equality from its assumptions about the nature of gender identity; namely, that patriarchy has both constructed women's feminine identity and configured it negatively, and that therefore women's problems grow out of these circumstances, not out of their distinct identity. 'Difference' feminisms (I will discuss two main types here) hold that women's gender identity need not be configured negatively, and in fact, that that identity is a great deal more complicated than is admitted by an exclusive focus on the harms caused by patriarchy.

'*Difference*' feminism springs from the belief that there are profound differences between women and men that are not necessarily produced only by patriarchal societies; in other words, gender differences can be seen as meaningful, not always pernicious.

'*Differences*' feminism springs from the belief that there are multiple axes of differentiation between peoples, and that feminism should not look only to one type of difference – gender –

as the most important one. 'Differences' feminism is largely co-extensive with third wave feminism, but 'difference' feminism is not, since its ideas and beliefs can be seen not only in the most current third wave feminist scholarship, but also stretching back through first and second wave feminist political theory.<sup>15</sup> As Arneil points out, the former 'begat' the latter, in a sense: "The first theme of third wave feminism (namely 'difference' in all of its manifestations) necessarily leads feminism into the second general theme (namely 'differences'). For in taking seriously the notion of difference, and thereby the points of view from which women look at the world, the question of identity, or the specific and unique perspectives of different individual or groups of women, immediately arises."<sup>16</sup> Discussion of 'difference' and 'differences' feminisms can lead to a verbal tangle, so I would like to substitute two other labels for these traditions at this point: 'cultural' and 'postmodern' feminisms, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

Although cultural and postmodern feminisms are divergent philosophies in some ways, I group them together here because of their preoccupation with difference(s), as opposed to equality, and because of their relationships with cultural justice. As I indicated in the introduction, the paradigm shift in theories of justice can be used to distinguish important differences between different strands of feminism. Cultural and postmodern feminisms share an interest in cultural justice because that paradigm embraces the notion that justice involves

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<sup>15</sup> Although Arneil discusses what I am calling 'difference' feminism in her chapter on 'Third Wave Feminism(s)', she notes that its "notion of 'difference' was rooted in the end of the second wave feminism (194).

<sup>16</sup> Arneil, 204.

<sup>17</sup> I am committing a bit of reductionist violence to 'differences' feminism by substituting the label 'postmodern' here. I am aware that when some theorists discuss 'differences' feminism, they mean to include all the many themes of feminism emergent in the third wave: the generational aspect of feminism; eco-feminism; the movement centred on music and 'zines'; pro-sex feminism; as well as postmodern feminism (See Arneil, Chapter 7; Heywood and Drake, "Introduction"). Although I think these aspects of 'difference' feminism are important, I focus on postmodern 'differences' feminism here – and in-depth in Chapter 3 – because of its engagement with questions of identity and justice.



recognizing and celebrating the identity differences that mark different social groups. So just as equality feminism draws on distributive understandings of social justice, these two strands draw on cultural justice. Although these difference traditions will be examined more fully in Chapters 2 and 3, a brief overview is appropriate here.

Unlike equality feminism's belief that masculine and feminine traits are rather superficial veneers overlying essential human similarities, cultural feminism holds that these traits are the manifestation of men and women's different and deep-seated sex differences. Although cultural feminists disagree on whether these differences are rooted in biology, psychology, or socialization patterns,<sup>18</sup> they all believe that there are central defining features common to all women that distinguish them from men.

Furthermore, cultural feminism argues that women's gender identity should be a source of strength and pride, rather than the humanist feminist view that would do away with femininity as a patriarchal "script" that limits and distorts women's full potential. Thus, cultural feminism attempts to rediscover and revalue a distinct women's culture that is seen to arise from women's distinct identities. Whereas second wave equality feminism tended to denigrate the traditional roles and activities of women because it saw these as intimately connected to their oppression, cultural feminism takes pride in women's 'otherness.' Thus, the "first step towards third wave feminism(s) was thus an identification with, and celebration of, 'otherness'; the embracing of women's connection with nature and the private sphere." Arneil observes, "By looking at the world from 'a woman's point of view', the natural and private spheres which had been traditionally devalued are suddenly extolled:

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<sup>18</sup> As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, 'strong' cultural feminists such as Mary Daly believe biology accounts for gender differences, while 'weak' cultural feminists prefer less determinist sources, such as moral development (e.g. Carol Gilligan) or formative social behaviours such as mothering (e.g. Sara Ruddick) to explain gender differences.

women's sexuality, their bodies, their relationship to the environment on the one hand, and the values and activities associated with nurturing and motherhood on the other."<sup>19</sup>

Cultural feminism rejects the conflation of "women's liberation" with "women's equality" to men. Women should not pursue sameness or identity with men because this ideal of sameness-equality distorts the value of women's traditional activities. According to cultural feminism, this understanding of equality and freedom is impoverished; it appears to ask women to repress their differences from men in order to be like them. According to Iris Marion Young (whose term for this tradition is 'gynocentric feminism'), cultural feminism holds that women's "oppression consists not of being prevented from participating in full humanity" as second wave feminism asserts, "but of the denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalized and authoritarian masculine culture."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, cultural feminism would reject the idea that justice for women entails "getting their piece of the pie;" to cultural feminists, the pie – men's jobs, responsibilities and values – are not desirable. Instead, cultural feminism subscribes to the paradigm of cultural justice, wherein harms are primarily seen as the misrecognition and devaluation of alternative cultures and identities, and justice demands their revaluation.

Postmodern feminism engages the second major theme prevalent in the 'difference' tradition of feminism: the notion of 'differences.' Just as cultural feminism rejects the notion of a singular, human identity common to both women and men, postmodern feminism goes on to reject the idea that women and men can be distinguished by their possession of uncomplicated, dualistic, feminine and masculine identities. When feminism starts from women's experiences, it quickly becomes obvious that those experiences will be diverse and

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<sup>19</sup> Arneil, 194.

<sup>20</sup> Young, 79.

complex as women themselves. Indeed, postmodern feminism embraces the diversity, complexity and contradictions inherent to (post)modern women's lives, as well as the multiple subject positions and diverse community affiliations of its members.

Postmodern feminism challenges the second wave's tendency to "essentialize" women; that is, to assume all women share similar interests and qualities.<sup>21</sup> Denying that we can posit 'women' as a uniform or monolithic group, with shared essential characteristics, postmodern feminism argues that other aspects of our identity - particularly race, class, ethnicity and religion - complicate our understanding of women's oppression. It often works to "de-centre" or "de-stabilize" gender identity and patriarchy as the central issues in feminist theory.<sup>22</sup> Arneil asserts that third wave feminism "does not necessarily consider gender prior to all other notions of identity and is more willing to live with the contradictions inherent in bridging the boundaries between different identities."<sup>23</sup>

The complication of identity within postmodern feminism brings it within the purview of cultural justice. Most conceptions of distributive justice, with its 'essentialist' assumptions about the nature of human beings and their 'basic' needs for primary goods or resources would be seen as too monolithic and totalizing for postmodern feminists. Although some conceptions of cultural justice would also likely be seen as too restrictive, the paradigm's emphasis on the very importance of identity and difference resonates with a

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) provides a good critique of essentialism.

<sup>22</sup> Postmodern feminism is not only challenging the construction of gender identities, but also the 'construction' of knowledge itself. Postmodernism represents a very profound scepticism about our dominant 'discourses' about our selves and the nature of the world. Discourses, including feminist ones, that have constructed binary gender norms, for example, are called into question as objective descriptions of the world 'as it really is.' This aspect of postmodern feminism is taken up in Chapter 3.

<sup>23</sup> Arneil, 193.

tradition that is deeply concerned about finding new ways of theorizing women's differences and oppressions.<sup>24</sup>

To summarize, I have argued in this section that there are two main traditions evident in recent feminist political theory. The first, 'equality' feminism, foregrounds issues of women and men's socio-economic inequalities, manifest in the gender gaps that endure in the workplace, income levels, wealth, unpaid labour in the home, and generally, each sexes' ability to command important socio-economic resources. The second, 'difference' feminism, foregrounds women's specificity and differences. Either it attempts to celebrate what are seen as women's special traits and virtues, or it attempts to elaborate women's differences along other lines such as class and race. Both, however, view 'difference' among human beings as a resource, rather than a liability, as 'equality' feminism has tended to do. I have also foreshadowed how each tradition connects to competing understandings of social justice: the distributive and cultural justice paradigms. The next section will elaborate on the preliminary descriptions of each paradigm just provided.

### **1.2 Distributive & Cultural Justice**

Thus far, I have argued that we can identify two traditions in feminist political theory: an equality tradition, which, as the inheritor of second wave feminism, emphasizes humanism, 'sameness' or strict gender equality, and believes that justice resides in redistributing resources between the sexes; and a difference tradition, which emphasizes women's specificity, embraces identity differences both between women and men, and among all women, and believes that justice resides in recognition and celebration of those identity differences. I now want to turn to a related paradigm shift – the shift from

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<sup>24</sup> In fact, there is an interesting debate among postmodern feminists about whether their understandings of gender and oppression as profoundly fragmented and contradictory actually permit them to subscribe to something as 'hegemonic' as a theory of justice. This question will be taken up further in Chapter 3.

distributive justice to cultural justice – and to begin to give an idea how changing notions about social justice echo in our changing notions about feminist goals and strategies. I am not arguing that the respective shifts in feminist theory and the dominant theories of justice are co-extensive. However, equality feminism, concerned as it is with women's economic status and power, is amenable to distributive justice's concern with class, income and access to other social resources, while the tradition of difference feminism and cultural justice share concern for difference, identity and recognition. The debate over the merits of distributive and cultural theories of justice echo many of the debates engaged by equality and difference feminists insofar as each set of traditions offer competing visions about the forms of injustice suffered by marginalized groups in society.

We have experienced a major, some say, paradigmatic, shift in the way western societies approach questions of justice. The distributive paradigm is rooted in our long-standing belief that justice entails meting out limited goods to independent individuals who all stand in the same relationship as one another to the state. The task of distributive justice, then, in the view of one of its most famous theorists, John Rawls, is to discover principles for the fair distribution of a limited bundle of human goods. According to Rawls, while “the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone's advantage, and at the same time, positions of authority and responsibility must be accessible to all.”<sup>25</sup> In this view, intangibles such as opportunity are subsumed under a distributive principle to be fairly dispersed, along with other material goods, among individuals.

However, this view of justice has largely given way to a paradigm that does not take it for granted that we all stand – or should stand – in the same identical relationship to the

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<sup>25</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999), 53.

state. Critics of the politics of redistribution argue that it both assumes and tries to fashion a homogeneity among individuals that does not – and should not - exist. A new paradigm of justice, called the politics of recognition or cultural justice, trades on the importance of people's distinctive identities and memberships in cultural groups.

Many of our contemporary understandings of social justice require the explicit recognition of differences among individuals and contemplate individuals and groups having different sets of rights and duties, *in order* to secure the fundamental equality of all people.

Nancy Fraser summarizes the shift in paradigms of justice in this way:

Demands for the 'recognition of difference' fuel struggles of groups mobilized under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, 'race', gender, and sexuality. In these 'post-socialist' conflicts, group identity supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike distributive models of justice, cultural justice or the politics of recognition are said to transcend mere distribution of goods, since requirements for human fulfilment surpass those goods, such as money and power, which fit an individualist, distributive model.

With her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young produced one of the definitive works about this new paradigm of justice. Essentially, Young argues that distributive models of justice are inadequate for ensuring social justice in today's heterogeneous societies for two reasons. First, she contends, the distributive paradigm presupposes and obscures the institutional context that determines material distribution. In other words, the major institutions and processes that regulate our well being are themselves

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<sup>26</sup> Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 430.

immune to scrutiny in the distributive paradigm because it takes their existence – and justness – for granted. So, for example, rather than taking capitalist relations of production as inevitable, Young would turn the focus of justice upon those very relations. Though the scope of her paradigm is very broad, Young organizes her critiques of existing institutions under three categories: decision-making structures and procedures, division of labour and culture. In short, anything that “condition[s] people’s ability to participate in determining their actions and their ability to develop and exercise their capacities”<sup>27</sup> is susceptible to criticism and reformulation.

A second failing of the distributive paradigm of justice, according to Young, is its over-extension of the concept of distribution. Justice, she writes, is seen by some theorists to be co-extensive with the idea of distribution. “This,” she observes, “entails applying a logic of distribution to social goods which are not material things or measurable quantities... It reifies aspects of social life that are better understood as a function of rules and relations than as things.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, theorists who cling to this paradigm must do violence to such immaterial things as prestige, self-respect and authority, in order to protect the integrity of their conceptual scheme. For example, she demands “[w]hat can it mean to distribute rights that do not refer to resources or things, like the right of free speech, or the right of a trial by jury?” Similarly, she contends, we cannot always talk sensibly about distributing opportunity: “Opportunity is a concept of enablement rather than possession; it refers to doing more than having.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

If all that matters are things and their distribution, we come to see people as social atoms to which the flotsam and jetsam of material goods adhere. Furthermore, our attention is drawn to the end-state pattern of distributed goods. But for many issues of social justice, Young maintains, “what is important is not the particular pattern of distribution at a particular moment, but rather the reproduction of a regular distributive pattern over time.”<sup>30</sup> According to Young, a comprehensive theory of justice should be able to assess and evaluate processes as well as patterns. Ultimately, then, the distributive paradigm is deeply flawed and leads to an inadequate theoretical conception of human beings, the meaning of equality, and the requirements of justice.

Young, together with Charles Taylor in his essay “The Politics of Recognition,” has forcefully defended the view that when it comes to human equality, the amount of material goods we possess perhaps matters less – or matters in a different way – than the amount of recognition and respect from others around us that we enjoy. Taylor has argued that we are the inheritors of a powerful moral ideal called the ‘ideal of authenticity.’ It demands that we each, as individuals, must discover and live our true, unique lives. “There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way,” the ideal of authenticity decrees. “I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me*.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, because my identity is formed in a dialogical way – that is, through my relationships with others – the ideal of authenticity requires that other people recognize me for who I am.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 30.



The ideal of authenticity connects to the new paradigm of justice because finding my own authentic identity is only made possible through social relationships. As Taylor notes, “my discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition.”<sup>32</sup> The thrust of Taylor’s essay is that human identities and identity formation are properly the subjects of justice because the recognition of identity is central to equality and freedom:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.<sup>33</sup>

Our individual identities are not private or trivial, and their discovery depends on the actions of others. Unlike the politics of distribution, which centres on the distribution of equal amounts of important material and intangible goods, the politics of recognition is centrally concerned with equality of recognition: Do people recognize me for who I am? What does it mean for my fundamental human equality if recognition fails?

Whereas under the distributive paradigm, some aspects of our identity – say, our sex or ethnicity – are (sometimes) thought incidental to the pursuit of human equality, Young and Taylor have argued that denial of or blindness to human differences is a barrier to true equality. We cannot bracket those characteristics that distinguish us from other people because our identities are formed, in part, by our membership in different social groups.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 25.

Young maintains, “the ideal of the just society as eliminating group differences is both unrealistic and undesirable. Instead justice in a group-differentiated society demands social equality of groups, and mutual recognition and affirmation of group differences.”<sup>34</sup> Since our group memberships are central to our identities, any notions of human equality and any systems of justice for attaining it must be attentive to our differences borne of group membership; it cannot ignore them.

The appeal of cultural justice to oppressed groups resides in the fact that it affirms and celebrates them for what they already are and the important qualities they already possess. However, as I will show in Chapter 2, this property of cultural justice means it presents theoretical inadequacies and strategic pitfalls that threaten a feminist project. Nancy Fraser’s conceptualization of the opposing “logics” or tendencies of both types of justice clarifies when feminists ought to pursue economic egalitarianism through redistribution rather than gender difference through symbolic processes of cultural justice.

### 1.3 Dilemmas of Justice

The title of a recent volume of feminist essays captures many writers’ exasperation with the sometimes contradictory effects of feminist strategies for gender justice. *Beyond Equality and Difference*<sup>35</sup> suggests we have exhausted ourselves trying to render persistent inequalities between people, arising from sex, race and class, into equalities. As the editors to the volume note in its introduction, the equality/difference dilemma contains an inherent tension: “On the one hand, the issue concerns whether or not a feminist politics based on a goal of equality... aims to assimilate women to men, to erase gender difference and construct a gender neutral society,” while “[on] the other side lies the question of whether or not a

<sup>34</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> Gisela Bock and Susan James, eds., *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

feminist practice based on the ideal of difference... plays into the hands of a tradition that has used the notion of female difference to justify inequality and aspires to a goal which is not, after all, desirable.”<sup>36</sup> Nancy Fraser has addressed head-on this inherent tension facing not only feminist movements but also other marginalized social groups, so it is worth reviewing her organization of the debate at some length.

Fraser writes that we should imagine a kind of spectrum of social injustice. At one end sit social groups whose main complaint is that they are oppressed because of their socio-economic identity. These groups, of which the working class is the archetype, suffer “socio-economic maldistribution” which includes such things as low incomes, distasteful jobs, or exploitation and domination in their workplaces.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, such groups seek redistributive justice, or political-economic restructuring, which might include “redistributing income, reorganizing the division of labour, subjecting investment to democratic decision-making, or transforming other basic economic structures.”<sup>38</sup> At the other end of the injustice spectrum sit those groups whose main complaint is that society devalues or oppresses them on the basis of their cultural identity. These groups, of which homosexuals may be the archetype, suffer cultural injustice or “the injustice of misrecognition” which reduces them to a despised class, subject to discrimination, harassment and violence.<sup>39</sup> The remedy for this type of injustice is “some sort of cultural or symbolic change ... [such as] ... upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bock and James, “Introduction: Contextualizing Equality and Difference,” *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” 436.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 437-38.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 434. This formulation of questions of justice does not, of course, satisfy all feminist concerns. Some would argue that the two archetypes discussed here – socio-economic and cultural injustices – are inadequate for addressing some aspects of gender oppression, such as wife-beating. Feminists have argued that what is peculiar to women is that they are so intimately involved with their ‘oppressor’ in domestic partnerships, and that harms such as domestic violence grow out of this relationship. Iris Young critiques Fraser’s framework as

Fraser acknowledges that these “ideal-typical” social groups that are clearly subject to only one of the two primary forms of injustice probably do not exist. However, the schema is useful in permitting us to pinpoint the different dynamics at play in the oppression of different groups of people. Furthermore, her schema is very useful when it comes to interpreting the injustices faced by those groups located closer to the centre of the spectrum. Issues of injustice become rather murky here because these groups are simultaneously subject to the injustices of misrecognition and maldistribution. Fraser argues that gender and race are bivalent collectivities: “They are differentiated as collectivities by virtue of *both* the political-economic structure *and* the cultural-valuational structure of society.” Thus, we can trace the disadvantages or injustices bivalent collectivities face to both political economy and culture: both sorts are “primary and co-original” forms of injustice.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, these groups require both redistributive and recognition remedies.

Fraser argues that elaborating a symbolic or stylized picture of social injustice helps us to identify which strategies are most useful for ending different sorts of injustice. A group – such as the working class – subject to maldistribution or injustice based on its socio-

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being too “binary” or dualistic, causing her to reduce myriad injustices to her two overarching forms (“Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser’s Dual Systems Theory,” in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, ed. Cynthia Willett (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 54). Young argues that her own framework, which posits five distinct “faces” of oppression – one among them is violence – is more adequate for theorizing injustices (54). Young’s framework *is* more nuanced in some respects. But positing five distinct faces of oppression might sometimes efface important connections between them. Moreover, *contra* Young, domestic abuse is an injustice that seems to lend itself very well to a distributive logic: household violence is very unevenly distributed, with women (and children) suffering stunningly greater amounts of abuse at the hands of their male partners than vice versa. Another way of putting it is to say that personal security is distributed in much greater amounts to men than to women. However, this does not address the source(s) of domestic abuse or other forms of male violence against women. While feminists will probably never agree on a single source, some have argued that women’s (and their children’s) economic dependence on their domestic partners can be a key factor in permitting such abuse to be perpetrated. Is this injustice *reducible* to economic injustice? Probably not. Yet studies have shown that increasing women’s economic independence from their spouses gives them greater bargaining power and status within the family. For a good overview of the main approaches to male violence against women, see Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), Chapter 6.

<sup>41</sup> Fraser, 438.

economic identity has an interest in abolishing that identity. Since injustice is rooted, in this case, in differences that the group do not find particularly meaningful or valuable (say, high poverty rates, low income, and poor health), justice lies in a process of “group de-differentiation.” Fraser argues that the logic of justice in this case is to “put the group out of business as a group.” Social justice is achieved when the group is abolished; when the group is no longer different from the rest of society on such things as gaps in income, wealth, employment opportunities, power and authority, health care and nutrition.<sup>42</sup> However, the logic of justice in the case of groups discriminated because of their cultural identity is just the opposite. Despised groups such as homosexuals do not want to “de-differentiate” their group, to put it out of business as such; instead, they seek to uplift or revalue their cultural identity in the view of mainstream society. The logic of justice in this case is to “valorize the group’s ‘groupness’ by recognizing its specificity.”<sup>43</sup> This process can involve amplifying a group’s cultural identity or difference from the mainstream.

Not surprisingly, finding appropriate strategies for justice is especially difficult when it comes to bivalent identities such as gender or race. Since women and people of colour suffer injustices of both maldistribution and misrecognition, they encounter what Fraser calls a “dilemma of justice.” The dilemma consists in the fact that the logic of the remedies for the two forms of injustice pull against each other. “Feminists,” she writes, “must pursue political-economic remedies that would undermine gender differentiation, while also pursuing cultural-valuational remedies that valorize the specificity of a despised collectivity.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 438-442.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 442.

'Dilemma' is defined as a choice between two equally unfavourable alternatives.

Although Fraser asserts that bivalent groups face a dilemma of justice, the disciplinary shift within feminism from the equality to difference tradition indicates that many feminists believe the dilemma can be resolved in favour of cultural justice.<sup>45</sup> Michele Barrett articulates the essence of this shift in her observation that feminists have moved from a concern with "things" to a concern with "words." Feminism, she writes, has "traditionally tended to see 'things' – be they low pay, rape or female foeticide – as more significant than, for example, the discursive construction of marginality in a text or document."<sup>46</sup> Now, however, it appears that feminism has shaken its materialist trappings (represented by the "general assumption that economic relations are dominant"<sup>47</sup>) to embrace the study of "words," in particular, analyzing "processes of symbolization and representation."<sup>48</sup>

The tendency in feminist political theory to abandon materialism and egalitarianism mirrors mainstream political theory. Anne Phillips argues that political philosophy has witnessed a "parting of the ways between political and economic concerns."<sup>49</sup> She observes that we no longer try to address economic inequality but instead, have turned our attention to

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<sup>45</sup> I have tried to establish this in a preliminary way in section 1 of the paper. Quantitatively, it might be difficult to prove that more feminist political theorists are writing from the difference tradition than from the equality tradition. Qualitatively, however, the suspicion that equality feminists feel they are in the minority is suggested by the sometimes defensive, embattled or frustrated tone of their writing. See, for example, Sylvia Walby's essay "Post-Post-Modernism? Theorizing Social Complexity" in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, 31-52. Taking issue with the fragmentation and anti-essentialism engendered by some difference and postmodern feminisms, Walby complains that "the post-modern critics go too far in asserting the necessary impossibility and unproductive nature of investigating gender inequality. While gender relations could potentially take an infinite number of forms, in actuality there are some widely repeated features and considerable historical continuity" (36). Susan Bordo's essay "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism" (in *Feminism/Postmodernism* ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 133-156) and Martha Nussbaum's "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism" (*Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 202-246)) are two further essays that convey a sense of embattlement, as these authors' perspectives represent a contemporary equality feminist tradition.

<sup>46</sup> Michèle Barrett, "Words and Things: Materialism and Method in Contemporary Feminist Analysis," in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, 201.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>49</sup> Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* 1.

extending political or democratic equality. By shifting to 'political equality,' Phillips says theorists mean to include in their analyses the "gender, racial or cultural hierarchies that subvert equal citizenship."<sup>50</sup> Our neglect for economic equality is not very surprising, given the "crisis of socialism, the collapse of self-styled communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and the associated disillusionment with the socialist project in political movements of the Western world."<sup>51</sup> Neither is our neglect of economic concerns necessarily negative: Phillips observes that the trade-off for socialist and redistributive projects has been a period of "marked innovation" in deepening democracy.<sup>52</sup> These innovations in the area of political equality are profoundly encouraging, and a growing number of feminists address the important implications democratic theory has for feminism.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Phillips sounds a note of alarm about our new enthusiasm for political equality when it appears to come at the expense of any concern for socio-economic equality.

For starters, she writes, the idea that socio-economic and political equality are interdependent has a long and respectable history. The "notion that political equality is subverted by the persistence of economic inequalities is not peculiar to the Marxist tradition,"<sup>54</sup> according to Phillips. Many leading post-war democratic theorists – including T.H. Marshall and Robert Dahl – identified "social inequality as the main obstacle to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 4. Phillips cites numerous ways that we have expanded and challenged our traditional understandings of liberal democracy, both on the ground and in theory (*Which Equalities Matter?*, 4-6).

<sup>53</sup> Obviously, a great deal could be said on this point. Important contributions to the literature on women's representation and democratic equality include Anne Phillips' *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) and *Engendering Democracy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991); and Virginia Sapiro, "When are Interests Interesting? The Problem of Political Representation of Women," in *Feminism & Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 161-192. In addition to her pathbreaking book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Young is a prominent contributor to the expanding debate over deliberative democracy's relevance to feminism. See, for example, her book *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?*, 8.

development of democratic equality.”<sup>55</sup> Democrats’ commitment to underlying economic equality should not be surprising, argues Phillips, since democracy “implies a rough equality between people in their influence on political affairs, and this expression of political equality rests on and reinforces profound notions about social equality.”<sup>56</sup> But despite their historical interdependence, current treatments of political equality tend to occlude its connection to economic equality.

We have shifted away from purely economic theories of justice because some social groups suffer harms that simply do not reduce to issues of class or income distribution. As Phillips puts it, there are “harms we do to one another that are independent [of economic conditions]: nastinesses that have no economic rationality; hatreds that have no reference point in material conflicts of interest; dislikes that arise out of thin air.”<sup>57</sup> This is true for all socially disadvantaged groups, including women. Thus, it is clear that harms arising from the devaluation or suppression of women’s gender identity require the group try to reclaim and revalue the characteristics or activities that are originally the source of the group’s devaluation. As Fraser has argued, the “logic” of justice, in these cases, does seem to call not for reducing the group’s difference to achieve sameness-equality, but celebrating that difference.

Maintaining that there is an economic dimension to gender identities and gender inequality does not preclude viewing gender’s political dimensions. Critics who favour more political solutions to women’s subordination sometimes argue that redistributive strategies such as pay equity or affirmative action represent crass, reductive neo-Marxist understandings of oppression, viewing economic reform as the fundamental “base” and any

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 86.



possible political reform as merely tinkering with the relatively unimportant “superstructure.”

But this criticism hides the extent to which these critics themselves *assume* an ethic of economic egalitarianism to underpin their arguments for political justice. The difference is that these critics give rhetorical primacy to political reform, while quietly admitting that economic egalitarianism is indispensable for the coherency of their theories. Iris Young, for example, in the space of 260 pages, powerfully defends the possibilities of political reform for uplifting marginalized groups. However, in one short paragraph, she admits that economic redistribution must be a “first priority” for any program seeking social justice.<sup>58</sup> Thus, she designates economic redistribution – the need for the “immediate provision of basic material goods for people now suffering severe deprivation” – as *the* pre-eminent concern of justice but then, rhetorically, at least, neglects to develop this insight. While I do not doubt that Young is strongly committed to economic egalitarianism, her work – as well as others – tends, at best, to make economic equality instrumental to political equality, and at worst, is distressingly nonchalant about the enormous injustices of class that remain in our societies.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Several theorists have recognized and responded to the blithe treatment some democratic theorists give to economic egalitarianism. Writing about deliberative democratic models of citizen participation, Jack Knight and James Johnson observe that “deliberation presupposes equality of resources needed to ensure that an individual’s assent to arguments advanced by others is indeed uncoerced. Here we have in mind such factors as material wealth and educational treatment” (Jack Knight and James Johnson, “What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 281). They maintain that other conditions of substantive equality need to be met before we should be confident that individuals’ obvious substantive social inequalities could be neutralized by the procedural political equality promised by democratic models, thereby making decisions taken by democratic bodies legitimate. Similarly, James Bohman considers and discards several conditions for substantive social equality that need to be met before we can embark on projects for deliberative democracy, before he settles on a notion of equality of capability (James Bohman, “Deliberative Democracy and Effective Social Freedom: Capabilities, Resources, and Opportunities,” in *Deliberative Democracy*). This is a complex understanding of equality (which I will say more about in Chapter 3) but I raise these points here to demonstrate that even those theorists most excited about the prospects of political equality recognize that certain conditions of economic equality (however broadly defined) must exist *prior to* projects of political deliberation.

Similarly, foregrounding socio-economic inequality when considering gender does not preclude us from considering cultural inequality. In fact, many equality feminists do just that to show that activities coded as feminine are usually assigned less value than those coded masculine.<sup>60</sup> Equality feminism pinpoints the cultural dimension of women's economic marginalization in order to reveal and try to change the male bias inherent in the differential valuing of human activities.

It might be harder, however, to separate the cultural from the economic dimensions of gender inequality than it is to separate the political from the economic. Women face injustices that are not easily categorized as purely cultural or purely economic harms. Many of the apparently non-economic injustices oppressed groups face are not separable from an economic basis. Phillips observes that it is likely that "any group that becomes a focus of resentment or object of disparagement will turn out to differ on some scale of economic comparison: to be more heavily concentrated, perhaps, in certain occupations than others, or more likely to live in a particular part of town."<sup>61</sup> Is the fact that women are concentrated in low-wage, low-status jobs a consequence of – or contributing factor to – the cultural devaluation of women? Even when we are relatively comfortable assigning a particular harm to the cultural injustice heap, the requisite strategy – i.e. amplifying or celebrating difference – does not always seem appropriate.<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, it is positive that we have proliferated the dimensions by which social inequality is understood. But feminists ought to be cautious about assuming that we can abandon economic egalitarianism as a principle central to feminism. Surely it is an

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<sup>60</sup> Marilyn Waring's important book *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) might be one of the best examples of this strategy. Waring shows how the world's economic systems of accounting are laden with cultural biases against women.

<sup>61</sup> Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?*, 86.

<sup>62</sup> More will be said on this point in Chapter 2.

understatement to claim that the economic dimension of gender inequality has staying power, even if cultural and political dimensions complicate it. With these remarks about the current jockeying of different equalities for the pre-eminent normative status, I intend, in the remainder of this chapter, to unsettle any consensus that cultural justice should take precedence over economic justice in feminist strategies for women's liberation.

#### 1.4 Inequality not Difference: The Economic Dimension of Gender

Many second wave feminist critiques of North American society understood the injustice oppressing women to be primarily of the socio-economic or maldistributive kind. Shulamith Firestone, for example, argued that women constituted a "sex-class," suffering dual oppressions based on the collusion of patriarchy and capitalism.<sup>63</sup> Although today the gender gaps in labour force participation rates, wage rates and gender-based occupational segregation do not seem to provoke feminist outrage, in the 1970s they were critical concerns. For example, Rawls published his famous book on distributive justice, *A Theory of Justice*, in 1971, just a year after Canada's Royal Commission on the Status of Women produced its report on the distribution of jobs, income, rights, and access to services to Canadian women and men. The findings showed that the distribution of these important goods between genders was very uneven. The Report observed that women "held less than one per cent of the top corporate positions in Canada."<sup>64</sup> Not only was there a gender gap in terms of occupation, with men concentrated in higher-status, higher-paid jobs than women, but there was also a gender gap in wages for similar work. According to the federal Department of Labour, "[a]verage hourly industrial wage rates for men exceeded those of women in nearly all similarly described occupations for which data were available in

<sup>63</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970).

<sup>64</sup> Florence Bird et al, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa, 1970), 28.

1971.”<sup>65</sup> For example, in Vancouver, women’s average weekly salary rates were less than those of men in all reported office occupations: female accounting clerks made \$96, male \$110; female bookkeepers made \$123, male \$161; female senior clerks made \$125; male \$167.<sup>66</sup>

Ultimately, second wave feminism sought an equality of outcome or result in terms of women and men’s socio-economic status.<sup>67</sup> There were, of course, glaring problems with feminism’s devotion to the project of securing for women the same rights and opportunities as men to participate in paid work. The ways in which this project was actually counterproductive to women’s equality is exhaustively rehearsed and need not be examined in detail.<sup>68</sup> However, two important criticisms can be dealt with here. First, critics argue that this movement was essentialist. Insensitivity to differences among women meant that labour force ‘equality’ for women and men was primarily a white, middle- and upper-class women’s movement – or, perhaps, dream – since privileged women’s public participation often depended on less privileged women replacing them in the home. Besides, poor women and women of colour often already were in the paid labour force. Second, critics maintain that it was an assimilationist project. The emphasis on paid labour as the standard for sexual equality meant women would simply be conscripted into a masculine, individualist, competitive, market-dominated world. “Assimilationist strategies,” according to Anne Phillips, presume “women can regain their self-respect and raise their social valuation by

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<sup>65</sup> Women’s Bureau of the Canada Department of Labour, *Women in the Labour Force 1971 Facts and Figures* (Ottawa, 1971), 61.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

<sup>67</sup> In finer detail, there were actually surprising differences in terms of emphasis between different strands of feminism (Arneil, Chapter 5; 163-185). These differences among second wave feminisms, while significant at the time, are much less so today. At the height of second wave feminism, it was probably safe to say that substantive socio-economic equality between the genders was a common principle.

<sup>68</sup> However, in section 1, I attempted to sketch the main objections that difference feminism has had with the equality feminist project. This section revisits, in greater detail, two of those points.

participation in the previously male world of work, and that they will make themselves equals by breaking into the previously 'male' spheres of education, employment and politics."<sup>69</sup> Feminists have noted that this strategy asks women to "simulate the activities of men in order to be equals. Why is assimilation the necessary condition for equality? Why is the convergence always one-way?"<sup>70</sup>

How valid are these critiques of equality feminism – as it operates within a distributive justice, equality framework – today? Not very, according to some feminists. Here, I can only assert that contemporary equality feminism is not the essentialist project it sometimes was in second wave thought; unfortunately, space does not permit me to actually *show* that that is the case. However, writers from a variety of perspectives who have surveyed contemporary feminist political theory insist that the essentialist critique no longer applies. Susan Moller Okin, for examples, takes "up the gauntlet that [anti-essentialist feminist Elizabeth] Spelman throws down" by demonstrating how a variety of Western feminist ideas about justice and equality respond sensitively to differences presented by race, class, nationality and religion.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Laura Brace and Julia O'Connell Davidson argue that while feminists who fit within the equality feminist tradition used to produce essentialist or homogenizing theories of women, today those defects are rarely observed. They cite a series of researchers who seek "to locate the diversity of women's experience in the contemporary world within theoretical frameworks that allow for the identification of underlying structural mechanisms that shape difference, as well as commonalty..."<sup>72</sup> In other words, most substantive theory today recognizes women's diversity and the

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<sup>69</sup> Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?*, 91.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Moller Okin, "Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences," *Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (1994): 5-24.

<sup>72</sup> Laura Brace and Julia O'Connell Davidson, "Minding the Gap: General and Substantive Theorizing on Power and Exploitation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1048.

contradictory effects of class, race and gender but is still able to pinpoint “the realities of exploitation and its material bases...”.<sup>73</sup> Finally, like Okin, Brace, and Davidson, Susan Bordo claims that most feminist theorists responded quickly to accusations of essentialism and learned how to build flexibility into their theories of gender inequality in order to take account of other axes of oppression.<sup>74</sup>

As for the assimilationist tendencies of second wave feminism, this criticism, too, rarely applies to the contemporary egalitarian feminist project. Phillips argues that we need to distinguish assimilation, which is bad, from “convergence,” its far superior alternative. Convergence – a more elegant term than Fraser’s ‘group de-differentiation’ – has the same implications, however. Convergence, argues Phillips, is a transformation in the conditions of life for both women *and* men:

Sexual equality... does depend on convergence. It depends on men and women being equally distributed across all the activities and roles in society (including the labour and pleasure of caring for others) so that the difference of sex, as Mary Wollstonecraft once put it, is confounded, and we can differ as individuals rather than as representatives of a sex. Assimilation is certainly no answer, but that is because assimilation is by definition one-way.<sup>75</sup>

Convergence is particularly appealing when we come at injustice from the politico-economic dimension of gender – specifically, the sexual division of labour. Phillips’ support for convergence is rooted in her intuition that it is “hard to maintain the conviction of equal worth for both sexes when women and men are segregated into different occupation, and expected to act such different parts in their social and domestic lives.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 1047-48.

<sup>74</sup> Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Scepticism,” 133-141.

<sup>75</sup> Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?*, 94.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 94.

As far as work in the public sphere goes, men continue to be concentrated in higher paid, higher status sectors, while women are concentrated in low-pay, low-status ones. In terms of the actual labour force participation rates of women and men in Canada, however, there remains only a slim gender gap. The distribution of unpaid work in the private sphere, however, is another matter. Indeed, second wave feminism did not overlook the domestic or private sphere as an important location for gender inequality. For example, the Royal Commission's Report noted that more "goods and services are produced without pay in the home than anywhere else and most of this production is carried out by women.... [O]ver half of the adult female population, roughly comparable to 45 per cent of the paid labour force, are employed full-time in the care of their families and homes."<sup>77</sup> While the gender gap has diminished since the 1970s in both the paid labour force and in the domestic context, some feminists have pointed to the private sphere as the source or explanation of those sexual inequalities that persist.

It is important to note here that feminist philosophers have observed that there is no natural connection between women and the work of raising children and keeping house. Certainly, only women bear children, but after the labour of pregnancy and childbirth, it is social *convention* that ensures women take primary responsibility for childcare and housework. A great deal of feminist scholarship maps out how capitalist societies fundamentally depend on women's unpaid reproductive and productive work in the household for their functioning. A great deal more maps out the ways in which the state manipulates this sexual division of labour at critical historical moments. For example, as many historians have explained, the state underplayed the importance of women's maternal

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<sup>77</sup> Bird et al., 30-1. The report also notes that "experts" have "estimated that the number of hours spent every year in household functions alone is greater than the number worked in industry" (31).

role as childbearer and housekeeper when it needed munitions workers during World War II, and then it subsequently amplified the glory and status of these same roles and responsibilities in the post-war era. Thus, even though the association of women with unpaid domestic labour is largely conventional, it produces and reinforces – in capitalist societies, at least – a spectrum of social, economic and political inequalities between women and men.

This reality makes some feminists a little bit impatient with the view that women and men can live substantially different lives without contradicting our ideals of human equality. As Phillips argues, anything short of a strictly equal distribution of unpaid work will continue to produce unjustified inequalities of income and power. “Underlying all the sexual inequalities in the labor market is the persistent association of women with care work, and I can see no way out of this short of equalizing this work between women and men. This,” she writes, “is an argument for strict equality.”<sup>78</sup>

We should not put a gloss on the unequal distribution of unpaid, caring work between women and men by presuming that it is merely a manifestation of sexual differences, uninformed by any insidious sexism. It is entirely appropriate to understand some “differences” in the lives of women and men as inequalities, whether they are inequalities of opportunity or outcome or both. Phillips argues that the

accident of being born male or female no longer carries significant consequences in the field of legal entitlement, and has rapidly decreasing consequences in the field of education. It still has very significant effects, however, on the responsibilities the individual assumes for care work, and on the positions the individual occupies in employment or politics. Sex remains a major predictor of an individual’s life chances, and wherever this is the case, there is a *prima facie* case for equalization.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Phillips, “Sexual Equality and Socialism,” *Dissent* (Summer 1997): 34.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 36



If we believe that human talents for different activities are distributed randomly among individuals in a society, without regard to sex or race, Phillips maintains, then we should find it unacceptable if we discover a persistent connection between a group of people and a certain kind of work. Young has criticized two properties of distributive justice: its overextension of the concept of distribution (for example, to abstract things such as opportunity and rights) and its attention to the end-state pattern of resources and opportunities. But these properties make it possible to identify the kinds of indefensible social inequalities, by race and gender, referred to above. As Phillips explains, “there is no significant space between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes when it comes to sexual or racial equality. If the outcomes turn out to be statistically related to sex or race, then the opportunities were clearly not equal.”<sup>80</sup>

It would be a distortion to understand women’s association with unpaid work as an instance of purely cultural injustice. The problem is not that women are prevented from engaging in desirable activities such as child-rearing or caring work, but that, due to myriad social constructions and conventions, their near-exclusive performance of these activities is *compulsory*. The injustice here is one of maldistribution: the work must be done, but there is no good reason why women overwhelmingly are the ones who do it. Insofar as gender identity manifests maldistributive harms, the appropriate political strategy is, in Fraser’s terms, to “put gender out of business.”

Much like class, gender justice requires transforming the political economy so as to eliminate its gender structuring. Eliminating gender-specific exploitation, marginalization and deprivation

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 36.

requires abolishing the gender-division of labour – both the gendered division between paid and unpaid labour and the gender division within paid labour.<sup>81</sup>

Since the unequal distribution of unpaid labour in the private sphere expands into injustice for women in all spheres of life, the solution here is to find ways to equalize the distribution of unpaid work.

There is a variety of reforms that could initiate or support a more equitable distribution of unpaid caring work. Restructuring workplace patterns is critical to equalizing the sexual distribution of unpaid work. The state could encourage or even force employers to introduce a whole range of measures that would facilitate a more equitable distribution of unpaid labour. Flex time, equal maternity and paternity leave benefits, on-site daycare, leave time for the care of elderly or unwell family members: feminists and governments have identified all these as important measures to change the distribution of unpaid labour.

The emphasis difference feminism places on uncovering and celebrating women's differences sometimes goes along with an assumption that women and men can live very different lives without that reality having any effect on sexual equality. In some instances, difference feminism actually endorses a separate-but-equal doctrine. Since women possess special qualities and skills (whether through shared *experiences* of mothering, for example, or the more deterministic notion that women share innate moral codes), then perhaps it is appropriate for women to be dominant in some spheres while men dominate other spheres.<sup>82</sup>

There are two problems with a philosophical acceptance of separate spheres. First, the sexual division of unpaid labour is incompatible with our ideals of sexual equality since in “no system of segregation can a foundation of belief in the moral equality of those who are

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<sup>81</sup> Fraser, 439.

<sup>82</sup> I will explore this tendency further in Chapter 2.

in any way separated from each other be stable,” writes Phillip Green. “The worldly logic of separate spheres leads inexorably either to the open assertion or to the concealed assurance that one of those spheres is superior, and the other inferior.”<sup>83</sup>

Second – and ironically – this notion is incompatible with a feminism that is truly respectful of women’s differences. If it is the case that women are, in many respects, as different from one another as they are from men, then we should not expect to find women voluntarily conforming to sex-typed patterns of behaviour. If we *do* find that women’s daily activities manifest some widespread patterns – say, being disproportionately responsible for childcare and housework – then that ought to be a clue that *something* – some force, structure, practice, belief or a combination of all these – somehow makes it compulsory for most women to do this activity even when their obvious diversity would appear to counsel against it. When we theorize about women’s inequality as it is rooted in the sexual division of unpaid labour, we should ensure these theories respond to the complexities highlighted by issues of political and cultural injustice. However, the reality remains that women as a group are primarily responsible for unpaid, domestic work while men as a group are not. Perhaps some can rationalize this phenomenon as simply a manifestation of sexual difference, but I believe it represents sexual inequality.

IN THIS CHAPTER, I have suggested that feminist thought divides into two traditions that can be labelled equality and difference feminisms. I have also suggested that those feminist traditions are at least partly embedded, respectively, in the dual modes of theorizing justice: justice as redistribution and justice as recognition. Thus, the trend among feminists,

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<sup>83</sup> Phillip Green, *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1985), 97.

like their counterparts in mainstream political theory, is to drop the economic dimension of (gender) inequality from analyses of social justice. The contemporary feminist climate is not overly kind to strategies that undermine group differentiation; feminism has a lot of ground to make up in theorizing women's differences from men as well as the identity differences that divide women.

As I have argued above, the separation of economic equality from political equality contributes to feminist antipathy to the notion of 'putting gender out of business,' following the logic of socio-economic redistributive justice. When the economic dimension of gender is eclipsed by its cultural dimensions, as it is in a great deal of contemporary feminist theory, it is not surprising that many prefer strategies that actually amplify or celebrate gender differences. However, I have argued that political strategies to eliminate differences between groups of people are compatible with our contemporary ideals of sexual equality. Egalitarianism is an anti-feminist or anti-woman force only when it tries to assimilate women to a male norm. More authentic processes of convergence, or de-differentiation, by which stereotypically male and female modes are blended, cannot be viewed as anti-feminist or anti-woman.

Feminism needs to maintain links with economic egalitarianism in order to deal with the gender injustices that arise out of women's economic inequality. The distribution of unpaid domestic labour demonstrates that feminists ought to retain a notion of sameness-equality. Thus, equality feminism is superior to difference feminism for identifying and theorizing the economic dimension of gender inequality, but perhaps difference feminism gets its own back when it comes to the cultural dimensions of gender inequality. I will test this hypothesis in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 2

### FEMINISM AND CULTURAL JUSTICE

CHAPTER 1 BRIEFLY introduced the idea that difference feminism and cultural justice share concern for difference, identity and recognition. This chapter will explore in greater depth cultural justice and identity politics, and their relationship to a particular form of difference feminism, which I have called ‘cultural feminism.’ Iris Young has observed that in “recent years the ideal of liberation as the elimination of group differences has been challenged by movements of the oppressed. The very success of political movements against differential privilege and for political equality has generated movements of group specificity and cultural pride.”<sup>1</sup> These changes in our politics and our *understandings* of our politics are behind the new paradigm of cultural justice outlined in Chapter 1.

Young’s ‘politics of difference,’ Charles Taylor’s ‘politics of recognition,’ and Will Kymlicka’s ‘multiculturalist’ politics are three of the most famous accounts of the rise of identity politics in western liberal democracies.<sup>2</sup> Although they use different terms for the new politics, I believe these theorists share a common normative belief: each defends the notion of differentiated citizenship. The core of this belief is that the ideal of the “difference-blind” liberal democratic state is mistaken because our different group affiliations – our cultural backgrounds – are deeply constitutive of our identities as individual citizens. Consequently, public institutions should not ignore our identity-related differences, but instead should recognize and embrace them, perhaps through the extension of different sets of rights to different groups of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 157.

<sup>2</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*; Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,”; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

While some theorists, such as Taylor, primarily account for the rise of identity politics, others, such as Young and Kymlicka, attempt to provide us with ways to actually evaluate and address the claims advanced by identity groups. For theorists who assume a liberal, constitutional democracy as background, it is clear that if a minority or cultural group's claims would violate the basic rights and freedoms of its own members or non-members, it would be unacceptable. Thus, most proponents of identity politics and cultural justice who operate within a liberal, democratic context share some basic beliefs about how collectivities should behave towards one another and towards their own members.

In the first section of this chapter, I develop a fuller account of theories of differentiated citizenship, relying mainly on Kymlicka's attempt to reconcile liberal theory with the demands for group rights. I show how Kymlicka's model conceptualizes minority groups' rights-claims as falling into two general categories: 'externally protective' and 'internally restrictive' group rights. Although Kymlicka uses these categories primarily to organize and interpret rights claims, I argue that we can also draw from them rules for evaluating the claims and positions advanced by collectivities. Externally protective rights-claims concern inter-group relationships, such as the relationship between the majority and minority culture, and between different minority cultural groups. Internally restrictive rights-claims concern intra-group relationships, primarily the relationship between the group and its members. Particularly when it comes to extreme behaviours and claims, there is a considerable degree of consensus among identity theorists about what constitutes acceptable relationships between and within groups. For example, I cannot imagine any theorist would agree that it is acceptable for one group to enslave another. But I shall also argue that many theorists agree on subtler notions of what constitutes acceptable claims and behaviours. In

other words, I argue that there are shared notions of what constitutes good identity politics and bad identity politics. In terms of inter-group claims, good identity groups are opposed to domination and oppression, and in favour of integration.<sup>3</sup> In terms of intra-group claims, good identity groups are opposed to oppression, essentialism and foundationalism. Bad identity politics, on the other hand, advocates segregation or separatism between groups, views group members as largely uniform in term of their identity and interests, and understands the group to be static over time.

In the second section, I elaborate on cultural feminism, which is a subset of the difference feminism introduced in Chapter 1. The aim of cultural feminism is to embrace and celebrate many of the values, virtues and characteristics – such as pacifism, patience and a capacity for nurturing – that women are said to share. Although feminism as a whole is sometimes viewed as a form of identity politics, this perception arises from the false notion that all feminists want to retain women's "groupiness."<sup>4</sup> In fact, as I have argued in Chapter 1, many forms of feminism hope to eradicate that which provides the rationale for conceptualizing women and men as different creatures, namely, gender. 'Equality' feminism, to borrow Nancy Fraser's phrase, wants "to put gender out of business."<sup>5</sup> Cultural feminism, on the other hand, finds value in gender differences, and its ambition, shared with other identity groups, is to "maintain and cherish distinctness, not just now but forever."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There is an important exception to this norm. As Kymlicka and others argue, First Nations groups in Canada and North America, and 'national minorities' more generally, can legitimately demand isolation from, rather than integration within, the larger society, whereas other cultural groups such as immigrant minorities, cannot. I shall discuss this issue below.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, characterizes feminism in this way (Eric Hobsbawm, "Identity Politics and the Left," *New Left Review* 217 (May/June 1996): 39. I think it is wrong to view feminism as a whole as a form of identity politics because it is so ideologically fractured, and because there are important strands within it that reject the premise that women's liberation (or men's for that matter) lies in maintaining or amplifying gender differences.

<sup>5</sup> Fraser, 438.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, 40.

Third, I argue that cultural feminism often reflects bad identity politics. In terms of inter-group behaviours, I claim that cultural feminism advocates isolationism or separatism, rather than integration. In terms of intra-group behaviours, I argue that cultural feminism often suffers from essentialism and foundationalism. In the final section, I question the relevance of multiculturalism models to feminism in a more general way, arguing that some of the assumptions and strategies that hold true for cultural groups are inapplicable to gender inequality and oppression.

## 2.1 Identity Politics

The recent claims for cultural justice reflect the development of new norms about the obligations of the liberal democratic state. The longstanding and dominant view among western political theorists is that the state should be 'blind to difference.' This view holds that the best way for the state to recognize and respect each person's equal dignity and freedom was for it to guarantee all citizens the same basic citizenship rights, regardless of their particular group affiliations. As Amy Gutmann explains, "On this view, our freedom and equality as citizens refer only to our common characteristics – our universal needs... for 'primary goods' such as income, health care, education, religious freedom, freedom of conscience, speech, press, and association, due process, the right to vote, and the right to hold public office."<sup>7</sup>

Recently, however, some theorists have argued that this is a limited view of what citizens need to live decent lives and what the state therefore properly owes them. These objectors argue that the dominant view ignores the role that people's distinct cultural contexts or communities play in their formation as citizens in modern societies. This view

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<sup>7</sup> Amy Gutmann, "Introduction," in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4.



holds that “most people need a secure cultural context to give them meaning and guidance to their choices in life.”<sup>8</sup> This presumption of the importance of cultures to individuals grounds identity theorists’ belief that a cultural context is akin to all the other primary goods that the state guarantees its citizens. Consequently, under this view, the state is obliged to help a minority group preserve its culture because it constitutes a primary good. “Recognizing and treating members of some groups as equal now seems to require public institutions to acknowledge rather than ignore cultural particularities, at least for those people whose self-understanding depends on the vitality of their culture.”<sup>9</sup>

These ideas about multicultural citizenship and the obligations of the state inform the paradigm of cultural justice. Its most basic normative principle is that public institutions should not be blind to difference, but instead, should explicitly recognize and extend respect to our cultural identities. Responding to this normative principle, political theorists have developed many different models of multicultural or differentiated citizenship. According to K. Anthony Appiah, the “major collective identities that demand recognition in North America currently are religion, gender, ethnicity, ‘race,’ and sexuality.”<sup>10</sup> Some models, such as Young’s, are broad enough in scope to capture the concerns raised by the spectrum of groups in Appiah’s assessment. Her analysis also ranges in context from state to city level.<sup>11</sup> Others are more limited in scope. For instance, many models primarily speak to *cultural* identity groups only, by which I mean ethnic, racial and religious collectivities, and sideline questions of class, gender, sexuality and so on. Some may restrict themselves to the formal constitutional and legal accommodations made to identity groups, and ignore more informal

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>10</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, 151.

<sup>11</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, especially Chapters 2 and 6.

innovations in cultural pluralism. Whatever the parameters, in general, these theorists are attempting to organize and interpret the rights-claims that emanate from cultural groups.

Both critics and defenders of identity politics have pointed out that it can lead to a sort of communitarian politics, whereby the good of the group trumps the good of the individual. However, other theorists – Will Kymlicka most prominent among them – have argued for the reconciliation of group-based minority rights with liberalism and liberal-democratic systems.<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that his model does explicitly sideline non-ethno-cultural groups.<sup>13</sup> However, I have chosen to rely on it here because of its influence among other theorists<sup>14</sup> and its elegance. Thus, this discussion should not be understood as a critique of Kymlicka's model, but rather more of a description of one widely regarded theory that can give us an entry-point into identity politics and the types of claims advanced by minority groups for cultural justice.

Kymlicka argues that there are two main sources of cultural diversity in modern societies. The first arises from the "incorporation of previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures into a larger state."<sup>15</sup> His term for these groups is 'national minority.' The second source of cultural diversity is immigration. Kymlicka argues that immigrants typically "coalesce into loose associations" which can be called 'ethnic groups.'<sup>16</sup> Against this background of social diversity, Kymlicka outlines three kinds of special group rights:

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<sup>12</sup> The essence of Kymlicka's argument is that group-differentiated citizenship rights are measures that allow *individuals* to choose their own version of the good life by sustaining rich, diverse cultural backgrounds against which an individual evaluates and possibly alters her version of the good. The ability of a scheme for differentiated citizenship to deliver meaningful life contexts to individual citizens not only meets liberalism's demand that the rights and freedoms of the individual be respected, it actually enhances that ambition.

<sup>13</sup> Kymlicka, 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Moller Okin, for example, calls Kymlicka "the foremost contemporary defender of cultural group rights" (Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 11).

<sup>15</sup> Kymlicka, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

polyethnic, special representation and self-government rights. Polyethnic rights refer to those measures that help “ethnic groups and religious minorities express their cultural particularity and pride without it hampering their success in the economic and political institutions of the dominant society.”<sup>17</sup> A well-known example of such a right includes exempting Sikh men from helmet laws so that they can wear their turban. Special representation rights refer to the idea that a certain number of seats should be reserved for minority groups in public assemblies so that they may express their views and interests. Finally, self-government rights “typically take the form of devolving political power to a political unit substantially controlled by the members of the national minority, and substantially corresponding to their historical homeland or territory.”<sup>18</sup> Different patterns of rights-claims emerge from different cultural groups. For example, Kymlicka writes, indigenous groups may claim both self-government and special representation rights, while an “oppressed group, like the disabled, may seek special representation, but have no basis for claiming either self-government or polyethnic rights.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, this could become complicated.

Kymlicka helps us to overcome the potentially confusing intricacies of these patterns by focusing instead on the function and meaning of rights-claims. Essentially, he argues, rights-claims come in two forms: external protections and internal restrictions. “External protections,” he explains, “involve inter-group relations – that is, the ethnic or national group may seek to protect its distinct existence and identity by limiting the impact of the decisions of the larger society.”<sup>20</sup> Internal restrictions, on the other hand, involve intra-group relations:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 36.

“the ethnic or national group may seek the use of state power to restrict the liberty of its own members in the name of group solidarity.”<sup>21</sup>

Kymlicka argues that a liberal theory of minority rights is more sympathetic to ‘externally-protective’ claims because they often work to promote fairness and equality between the minority and majority groups, by reducing the vulnerability of the former to decisions taken by the latter.<sup>22</sup> However, there are limits. Kymlicka (and many other identity theorists) stipulates that such claims must not “enable one group to oppress or exploit other groups, as in apartheid”<sup>23</sup> or slavery. As for internally-restrictive rights-claims, Kymlicka argues that these are not easily reconciled with liberalism because they are designed to limit the freedom of individual group members. Such rights are sometimes invoked to retain a group’s purity of traditions or customs. The genital mutilation of girl children is frequently cited as the sort of practice that must not be permitted regardless of how critical to traditional culture a group claims it to be.<sup>24</sup> Slightly less extreme, but still deeply objectionable to a liberal theory of minority rights are groups which would deny education rights to girls or discriminate against individuals who have renounced the group’s religion.<sup>25</sup> “In short,” Kymlicka writes, “a liberal view requires *freedom within* the minority group, and *equality between* the minority and majority groups.”<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, many identity theorists will agree that liberal regimes must reject the extreme claims that groups advance. But what about claims that are less extreme than the ones

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>24</sup> The issue of female genital mutilation is taken up by Okin and several of her respondents in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* While some (e.g. Bhikhu Parekh, “A Varied Moral World,” 71) try to make room for adult women to choose clitoridectomy, virtually no one argues that a group’s “right” to inflict such a custom on children is defensible. See also Okin’s reply, 124-125. I also address this issue in Chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup> Kymlicka, 36; Chapter 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 152. Italics in original.

mentioned? Here, I want to argue that many theorists agree on subtler notions of what constitute acceptable claims and positions in identity politics. In the evaluations that identity theorists make of different groups' claims, I detect some shared assumptions. First, Kymlicka's 'external protections' – which are outward-looking claims – concern inter-group relationships, such as the relationship between the majority and minority culture, and between different minority cultural groups. As I have suggested above, good identity politics are opposed to domination, and theorists agree that it is wrong for one group to oppress or dominate another group. But since this rule still leaves a lot of room for different kinds of interactions, are there finer rules of engagement upon which theorists agree? When groups *do* engage with each other in non-conflictive ways, there are still better and worse ways to do it.

Perhaps the worst way, in the view of many identity theorists, is to forcibly assimilate groups into the majority culture. As Young argues, an assimilationist strategy – the strategy that she claims is typical of difference-blind liberalism – seeks to transcend differences by asserting that public institutions should only respond to and express what is common to all citizens. One of the main reasons this “assimilationist ideal” is unjust, Young argues, is that since the strategy “aims to bring formerly excluded groups into the mainstream... [it] always implies coming into the game after it is already begun, after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself according to those rules and standards.”<sup>27</sup> Even one of multiculturalism's strongest critics, Brian Barry, suggests that assimilation – when it involves “immigrants [having] to do all the work” of changing to adapt to the surrounding

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<sup>27</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 164.

culture – is unfair.<sup>28</sup> Barry goes on to suggest that the task of bringing minority groups into mainstream society “may at least as much involve the host population in having to change its attitudes and practices”<sup>29</sup> as would the minority group.

This process of cultural change from both sides, as it were, is often referred to as ‘integration,’ and it appears to be the favoured dynamic among many identity theorists.<sup>30</sup> Kymlicka argues that many of the rights-claims advanced by ethnic groups should be understood as attempts by the group to integrate into society, not to stand apart from it. Without exemptions (such as “the right of Jews and Muslims to exemptions from Sunday closing legislation, or the right of Sikhs to exemptions from motorcycle helmet laws”), some minority groups “would be disadvantaged (often unintentionally) in the mainstream.”<sup>31</sup> Measures that enable minority group integration, by modifying the dominant culture’s public institutions, thus help to secure just treatment for cultural minorities.

But there are reasons besides cultural justice that theorists support integrative models. One reason explicit or implicit in some theorists’ work is that integration means individuals from all cultures have the opportunity to enrich their lives by drawing on traditions and

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 72. However, Barry is much more equanimous than Young about the possibility that some cultures will disappear because their members have chosen to assimilate with the dominant society. He also asserts the need for a fuller conception of shared citizenship and national identity than do some identity theorists, who feel that a “purely legal conception of nationality” (e.g. “passport nationality”) is all that a state can justly ask of its citizens (77).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Kymlicka, Chapters 5 and 6; Lucius Outlaw, Jr., “‘Multiculturalism,’ Citizenship, Education, and American Liberal Democracy,” in *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, especially 392-396. Moreover, a great deal of recent feminist scholarship concerning the representation of minority or disadvantaged groups in legislative and other political bodies could be seen as promoting a politics of integration, since much of it argues that cultural justice depends on groups being included in these institutions so that they may represent their own interests and perspectives in the public sphere. See, for example, Iris Young’s “Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips, 401-429; Melissa Williams, *Voice, Trust and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Kymlicka, 97.

values from other cultures.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, many theorists do underscore the notion that integration is the preferred mode – that is, represents good identity politics – because it is the most just mode, requiring and expecting change from both the majority and minority cultures.

There is a third possible dynamic inter-group relations may take: the creation or maintenance of isolated or segregated cultural groupings. The kinds of social groups that theorists have in mind seem to affect their opinions about the acceptability of separatism in liberal democracies. In other words, the boundaries of what are acceptable claims may shift, depending on how a collectivity is theorized. The failure of many theorists to adequately distinguish between national minority groups such as First Nations peoples, on one hand, and ethnic groups such as immigrants, on the other, represents an important theme in Kymlicka's conception of a liberal theory of minority, and one I will return to in a moment. For now, we can look at Young's treatment of separatism as a mode of inter-group relationship for a good overview of the issues involved.

Young is somewhat ambivalent about cultural group separatism. She recounts how many movements of disadvantaged social groups, from women to blacks to homosexuals, have embraced separatist strategies at some point in the history of their movement.<sup>33</sup> For example, "Black Power advocates criticized the integrationist goal and reliance on the support of white liberals that characterized the civil rights movement. They encouraged Blacks to break their alliance with whites and assert the specificity of their own culture, political organizations, and goals."<sup>34</sup> Such autonomous organizing, Young suggests, may

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<sup>32</sup> This is the notion that I think is behind Taylor's defence of a 'fused horizon' of value or standards, which he says we may develop through close study of 'the other' (Taylor, 67, 70.).

<sup>33</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 158-163.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

help to empower disadvantaged groups. However, she also notes that group separatism can lead to homogenization within a group, and subsequently to problems of privilege and hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, at the end of this discussion, she concludes that “contemporary emancipatory social movements have found group autonomy an important *vehicle* for empowerment,”<sup>36</sup> suggesting that separatism should be viewed as a transitional stage to some other more permanent social group arrangement. And, indeed, the next paragraph states, “Integration into the full life of the society should not have to imply assimilation to dominant norms and abandonment of group affiliation and culture,”<sup>37</sup> thereby privileging integration as the ideal mode of inclusion.<sup>38</sup>

While Young does occasionally refer to “American Indians” and their claims for self-government, she does not distinguish these sorts of rights-claims as different in kind from other disadvantaged groups’ claims for justice. Kymlicka notes that this is a problem for many theorists, who sometimes fail to distinguish between national minorities and ethnic groups.<sup>39</sup> In Young’s case, Kymlicka suggests that her adoption of a wider definition of ‘disadvantage’ for specifying social groups is what permits her to collapse the specific claims of national minorities into a more generic set of rights-claims:

[S]ome advocates of a ‘politics of difference,’ whose focus is primarily on disadvantaged groups, obscure the distinctive demands of national groups.... While [Young] ostensibly

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 168 and Chapter 8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 168. Italics mine.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>38</sup> In a more recent work, Young defends the idea of residential segregation (*Inclusion and Democracy*, Chapter 6). Essentially, she argues that groups ought to be able to choose to live in ethnic or cultural enclaves because such a choice may give people a measure of security they might otherwise lack if they are forcibly integrated into racially-mixed neighbourhoods. Although this might be seen as contradicting her earlier endorsements of cultural group integration, ultimately, I think it does not because she confines this discussion to geographic segregation. I believe the overall thrust of both these works is to advocate for greater inclusion (as the latest title suggests) of disadvantaged groups into society, and this is consistent with her advocacy of increased representation (i.e. integration) of such groups in shared political institutions.

<sup>39</sup> Kymlicka, 20-22.



includes the demands of American Indians and New Zealand Maori in her account of group-differentiated citizenship, she in fact misinterprets their demands by treating them as a marginalized group, rather than as self-governing nations.<sup>40</sup>

He argues that when the important differences between these two groups are adequately theorized, national minority groups' claims for autonomy – represented primarily in claims for self-government rights – are quite irresistible.<sup>41</sup> Although meeting these types of claims can represent a threat to the integrity of a nation-state, Kymlicka maintains that ignoring them can also.<sup>42</sup> The point is, he argues, that national minorities have a legitimate claim to institutional separatism, while ethnic groups do not. But even where the case is clearest that separatism is a legitimate pursuit for national minorities, Kymlicka reaffirms that this position derives from the even greater ambition of a group to formulate a relationship of equality with the larger society. As he observes, “there is no inherent connection between the desire to maintain a distinct societal culture and the desire for cultural isolation. In many cases, the aim of self-government is to enable smaller nations to interact with larger nations on a more equitable basis.”<sup>43</sup>

The foregoing discussion on group segregation is somewhat cursory. My main goal here is not to provide an exhaustive account of the debate on this issue, but instead to provide some context for the discussion of cultural feminism and separatist aims that will follow below. To foreshadow that discussion, in section 3, I will argue that cultural feminism is wrong to pursue separatism between women and men mainly because it will reproduce sexist hierarchies. In section 4, I elaborate on Kymlicka's point that failure to recognize important differences that make social groups different from one another *in kind* (at this point focusing

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 199 note 10.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., chapter 2, 103-105, Chapter 6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 181-192.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 103-04.

on what differentiates 'women' as a group from other sorts of cultural groups) leads to misdiagnoses about the best ways to redress the injustices suffered by those groups.

Finally, Kymlicka argues that collectivities sometimes press internal restrictions upon their members, in effect restricting the liberty of those individuals in the name of group solidarity. As we saw above, most theorists would agree that extreme claims – such as the right to practice female genital mutilation – are intolerable because of their oppressiveness to certain group members. However, as is the case with inter-group relations, I believe that some identity theorists also share points of view about more subtle issues of intra-group relations.

First, many theorists agree that identity claims should be anti-foundationalist. Foundationalism refers to the idea that a group is, in some sense, a naturally constituted, static entity, not something formed by its members, social processes and institutions. Conceptions of identity groups that reify those groups into static entities contradict the reality of groups as significantly defined – and re-defined – by their members and social events. As Eric Hobsbawm has argued, “identities, or their expression, are not fixed.”<sup>44</sup> He points to the phenomenon of non-ethnic groups, “all or most of whose members happen to be black or Jewish, [turning] into consciously ethnic groups. This happened to the Southern Christian Baptist Church under Martin Luther King.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, Hobsbawm argues, groups change depending on their context; he refers to the way some German citizens “became” Jews under Nazism.<sup>46</sup> Because of this flexibility in the composition and self-understandings of groups, many theorists tend to agree with some version of Young’s conception of identity group formation as fluid: “Group identity is constructed from a flowing process in which

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<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 42.

individuals identify themselves and others in terms of groups, and thus group identity itself flows and shifts with changes in social processes.”<sup>47</sup>

The second aspect of intra-group relations that garners support from many identity theorists is that good identity politics is anti-essentialist. Anti-essentialism is rooted in the recognition that individuals’ identities are complex. We all may claim multiple identities, based on our gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age and so on. This reality means that identity-related differences will cross-cut any collectivity, so attempts to pick out the quintessential quality that defines a group will always demand sublimating other differences. Thus, one of the main reasons theorists object to essentialist understandings of groups is that it will harm the freedom of some members, for example, to express other aspects of their identity. K. Anthony Appiah argues that the main social groups that demand political recognition in the United States today (groups defined by ‘race,’ gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion<sup>48</sup>) essentially produce ‘scripts’ for their members. “The problem,” he writes, “is not there is one way that gays or blacks should behave, but that there are gay and black modes of behaviour.”<sup>49</sup> Although Appiah agrees that this is an unsurprising outgrowth of disadvantaged groups’ attempts to produce positive accounts of the collectivity, he worries that this dynamic will nevertheless turn the ‘politics of recognition’ into the ‘politics of compulsion’.<sup>50</sup>

The politics of recognition requires that one’s skin color, one’s sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal means not secret, but not too tightly scripted.

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<sup>47</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 172.

<sup>48</sup> Appiah, 151.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 162-63.

A second, and related, problem with an essentialist understanding of group identity is that its assumption of the basic similarity of all members helps to mask hierarchies within a group. A great deal of contemporary feminist scholarship, for example, attempts to expose how the essentialist category 'women' obscures relationships of dominance between women along class and racial lines.<sup>51</sup> In a similar vein, Judith Butler has analyzed how the deployment of 'gender' reveals "pervasive heterosexual assumptions" in feminist theory.<sup>52</sup> She argues that feminists need to be "careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion."<sup>53</sup> This concern echoes that of Young, regarding the dynamic of group isolationism or separatism, when she noted that increasing group solidarity may create "new privileges and exclusions."<sup>54</sup>

These critiques of group essentialism return us to the discussion about group foundationalism. Attempting to define a social group according to ascriptive characteristics such as skin colour or sexual body has pitfalls, such the loss of freedom for some individual members, and the production or reinforcement of hierarchies and exclusionary patterns within the group. For these reasons, many theorists prefer conceptualizations of social groups that derive from a group's positioning in social processes and institutions.

Equipped with these general understandings of inter- and intra-group behaviours, we may now assess the extent to which cultural feminism constitutes good or bad identity politics. First, however, some explanation of cultural feminism, its roots and relationship to other strands of feminism, is in order.

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<sup>51</sup> Elisabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman* is a prominent example of this sort of analysis.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), vii.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, viii.

<sup>54</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 168.

## 2.2 Cultural Feminism

In Chapter 1, I claimed that we can identify two main traditions in recent feminist theory: the equality and difference traditions. I also explained that difference feminism itself comprises two strands of thought: one, called cultural feminism, which pays special attention to women's traditional roles and characteristics, and one which could be described as postmodern feminism. At that point, it was unnecessary to thoroughly dissect and compare the two strands, because my point was primarily to compare the equality and difference traditions, broadly conceived. Now, however, I want to return to the first strand of difference feminism and subject it to a more rigorous critique. In Chapter 3, I will take up postmodern feminism in a similar, more detailed way.

Cultural feminism represents the attempt to rediscover and revalue a distinct women's culture, and to free "women from the imposition of 'male values'."<sup>55</sup> Cultural feminism claims there are features common to all women that distinguish them from men. It has a lengthy pedigree, with its roots in first wave feminism. For example, one of cultural feminism's most celebrated moments is the suffragist struggle to enfranchise women in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in North America. Suffragists argued that women *are* different from men, and the state and public sphere should be enriched by the feminine virtues of nurturance, compassion and peacefulness; they promised that women's culture would have a civilizing effect on men's public affairs.<sup>56</sup> Suffragists' claims represented the tactical

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<sup>55</sup> Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago Press, 1987), 23.

<sup>56</sup> Of course, it should be noted that suffragists were not necessarily agitating for the vote for *all* women. Gloria Geller's interesting article about the Canadian women's movement and the fight for women's franchise reveals how racism and classism suffused the movement in the years leading up to 1917, when the War-time Elections Act was passed. (Gloria Geller, "The Wartime Elections Act of 1917 and the Canadian Women's Movement," *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* (Fall 1976): 88-107.) For example, in August 1917, the government consulted "outstanding reliable women" around the country to see whether they thought granting a universal female franchise would threaten the Conservative government's plan to bring in conscription (101). The answer

application of much deeper convictions about the natures of women and men. In other words, their rhetoric both grew out of and confirmed the prevailing ideas about women's and men's sexual difference and complementarity. Women and men are not just different in a random, trivial sense; they are different from one another in socially important and systematic ways.

Cultural feminism has continued to weave itself through feminist ideology throughout the last century and into today. In some ways, it has become quite diverse. For example, cultural feminism in the academy has distinct national characters. Britain, Australia and North America have all produced notable cultural feminists,<sup>57</sup> while some French feminism as a whole has been seen as an influential form of cultural feminism.<sup>58</sup> The tradition is also multidisciplinary, with theorists from the natural sciences, psychology, sociology and political science – among others – identifying many sources of sexual difference.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to being an academic presence, cultural feminism also has popular appeal. Its tenets are contained in many recent books, from the famously popular *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*,<sup>60</sup> to the latest bestseller, *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide to finding Intimacy, Passion and Peace with a Man*.<sup>61</sup> Judith Evans appears to have this spate of academic and popular cultural feminist texts in mind when she refers to the

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came back: suffragists were willing to waive the franchise for all women because the "foreign woman voter" and Quebec women might vote "unfavourable to conscription" (102). Geller also discusses how the British-born, professional, middle- and upper-class women who dominated the membership of suffragist organizations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century discriminated against women who were not like themselves, particularly "the pampered society women," "the prostitute class" and immigrant women (96). Thank you to Barbara Arneil for reminding me of this important dynamic in early cultural feminism.

<sup>57</sup> Segal, Chapter 1.

<sup>58</sup> Iris Young, for example, notes that French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have developed a particular kind of 'gynocentric' or cultural feminism ("Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics," 84)

<sup>59</sup> For a good overview of the ways disciplinary diversity manifests in cultural feminism, see Arneil, 193-204, or Evans, Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>60</sup> John Gray, *Men are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (New York: HarperCollins Canada, 1992).

<sup>61</sup> Laura Doyle, *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide to finding Intimacy, Passion and Peace with a Man*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

“massive ascendancy” of the tradition today.<sup>62</sup> Somewhere in between the academic and popular volumes come books such as Danielle Crittenden’s *What Our Mothers Didn’t Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman*.<sup>63</sup> Works such as these are not academic expressions of cultural feminism, but it could be argued that they are “emerging as the public face of feminism”<sup>64</sup> in recent years. One can trace a line between the ideas articulated in academic cultural feminists’ scholarship and those expressed in books such as Crittenden’s.

Contemporary cultural feminism arose in reaction to the tendency of second wave equality feminism to disparage the activities and roles most women fulfilled. Iris Young provides the most complete and succinct description of cultural feminism that I have found. She labels the tradition “gynocentric feminism.” Young writes:

Gynocentric feminism finds in women’s bodies and traditionally feminine activity the source of more positive values [than masculine values which exalt death, violence, competition, selfishness, a repression of the body, sexuality, and affectivity]. Women’s reproductive processes keep us linked with nature and the promotion of life to a greater degree than men’s. Female eroticism is more fluid, diffuse, and loving than violence-prone male sexuality. Our feminine socialization and traditional roles as mothers give to us a capacity to nurture and a sense of social cooperation that may be the only salvation of the planet.<sup>65</sup>

As with just about every tradition in feminist theory, however, a closer look at it reveals significant cleavages. Judith Evans argues that there are ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ versions of cultural feminism. Mary Daly, Dale Spender, Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin are frequently identified as being the most influential ‘strong’ cultural feminists in North

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<sup>62</sup> Evans, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Danielle Crittenden, *What Our Mothers Didn’t Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999). I discuss Crittenden’s work further below.

<sup>64</sup> Segal, ix.

<sup>65</sup> Young, “Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics,” 79.

America and Britain.<sup>66</sup> Strong cultural feminism holds that gender differences are innate or natural; that they are ineluctably based on women and men's different biological bodies. As Linda Alcoff explains, "The female essence for Daly and Rich is not simply spiritual or simply biological – it is both. Yet the key point remains that it is our specifically female anatomy that is the primary source of our identity and the source of our female essence."<sup>67</sup>

A second major feature of strong cultural feminism is its belief that women who are in touch with their real, elemental feminine selves should live apart from a world that is essentially polluted by maleness. In other words, strong cultural feminism believes "that there is a separate and benign woman-culture that must remain apart [and] that the world of men is irremediably bad."<sup>68</sup> In any case, strong cultural feminism has no real desire to put women's better qualities toward saving the world.<sup>69</sup> The ideal of male-female separatism has not been purely theoretical. Barbara Ryan recounts how some American feminist organizations of the 1960s and '70s restricted their membership to 'women-identified women' or 'political lesbians'; that is, "women who adopt a separatist lifestyle; ... women who live their lives in total commitment to women even though they do not engage in sexual relations with women; and ... lesbians who become politicized to the nature of sexism through feminism."<sup>70</sup> Indeed, lesbian separatism is perhaps the strongest expression of

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<sup>66</sup> Segal, Chapter 1; Evans, Chapter 6; Young, "Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics," 82.

<sup>67</sup> Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process* ed. Micheline Malson et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), quoted in Evans, 87.

<sup>68</sup> Evans, 79. Actually, Evans' sentence originally reads that strong cultural feminism holds "either that there is a separate and benign woman-culture that must remain apart, or that the world of men is irremediably bad," but nothing in her analysis suggests that these writers dissociate the two possibilities, so I think it is legitimate to link them as I have.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, Chapter 6.

<sup>70</sup> Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement, Ideology and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 50.



strong cultural feminism.<sup>71</sup> However, Evans argues that most “contemporary adherents of [gender separatism] would I imagine accept that total separatism is impossible. This is a simple practical point, which does not affect the fact that they would prefer not to mingle with, will not work politically with, men. They will be as separatist as societal arrangements allow.”<sup>72</sup>

Like its “strong” counterpart, “weak” cultural feminism holds that men and women are distinct, but it does not locate the source of that difference in women’s anatomy. Rather, weak cultural feminism typically describes sex differences as arising out of women and men’s differing psyches: different early childhood development as girls and boys plants the seeds of fundamental sex differences revolving mainly around the capacity for caring and attachment; these are then later reinforced later through their different experiences as mothers and fathers.<sup>73</sup> For example, as Arneil notes,

Nancy Chodorow’s psychoanalytical analysis of mothering concludes that the single distinguishing feature between women and men is their sense of distance from the world outside of them. ‘Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate’.<sup>74</sup>

Consequently, weak cultural feminism often describes a women’s culture that has as its central feature “an orientation towards caring...derived from women’s role in mothering: [its] source is the private realm, hearth and home, and women’s activities there.”<sup>75</sup> Thus,

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<sup>71</sup> Ryan notes that the question of separatism was not divisive to the feminist movement initially: “Originally, separatism from men was an essential strategy for the radical groups; the expectation was that there would eventually be ‘integration with equality’.... But a separatist organizing principle became problematic when the outer limits of this philosophy were stretched to include the adoption of a lesbian separatist lifestyle” (59).

<sup>72</sup> Evans, 79.

<sup>73</sup> Influential ‘weak’ cultural feminists in North America include Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Sara Ruddick, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Virginia Held.

<sup>74</sup> Arneil, 87.

<sup>75</sup> Evans, 91.

because gender difference is rooted not in immutable, anatomical differences, but rather in divergent patterns of early childhood development for boys and girls, and divergent experiences as parents, weak cultural feminism leaves open the possibility that sex differences may diminish if gendered socialization patterns are altered.

There is a second significant difference between strong and weak versions of cultural feminism: the latter is not separatist. Weak cultural feminists do not recommend that women forsake the imperfect "malestream" world. Instead, this strand is concerned with asking how women's qualities and values might change and improve society.<sup>76</sup> Some writers favour the view that women and men's qualities and roles tend to complement one another, which lends additional support to the idea that women's values and skills ought to be brought into the public sphere so that they may restore balance to an overly masculinist world.<sup>77</sup> Although different writers disagree on the intractability of sex differences, in general, weak cultural feminism acknowledges that women and men typically occupy separate spheres of activity in life, which produce in women skills and values that should be seen as complementary, and perhaps superior, to those possessed by men.

In the analysis that follows, I have chosen to critique authors<sup>78</sup> from the weak, rather than the strong, version of cultural feminism for several reasons. First, its writers engage more directly with politics, tackling the question of gender as it relates, for example, to the state, public institutions, citizenship and rights. Strong cultural feminism, on the other hand, tends to dwell on the psychic level of gender differences.<sup>79</sup> Its main texts are more likely to

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, Chapter 7.

<sup>77</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain's "The Power and Powerlessness of Women," (in *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, ed. Gisela Bock and Susan James (New York: Routledge, 1992)) makes recommendations along these lines.

<sup>78</sup> Namely, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Danielle Crittenden and Sara Ruddick.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Segal's description of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust* (Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, London: The Women's Press, 1979, and *Pure Lust*, London: The Women's Press, 1984): While these books

be engaged in a literature or criticism class than in a political science class. Second, it attempts to be more inclusive of all women (although its success at this goal will be questioned below). Weak cultural feminists appear to be more cognizant of, and sympathetic to, other aspects of women's identity, such as ethnicity and class. Strong cultural feminism, on the other hand, is quite exclusionary. As Segal observes about Daly's vision of women's liberation, "not only all men, but most women, are excluded from any possible creative being or salvation. The 'Painted Birds' (the stereotypically feminine), the 'token feminists' (those seeking or offering reforms for women), the 'fembots' (female robots or professional women) and a host of other 'parasites' are too 'blinded and 'damaged' by patriarchy to free themselves, and express their inner female biophilic being and spirituality."<sup>80</sup> Third, weak cultural feminism's analysis of women's history is simply more accurate – because more nuanced – than that of strong cultural feminism. Segal, for example, argues that strong cultural feminism wants to hold up women as being essentially kind, noble, generous and peaceful throughout history: "women have truly participated in history only at those times when their actions can be seen... as illustrative of 'women's values.' Women who have been jingoistic, racist, sexist or committed to privilege for their kith and kin are not seen as part of this feminist history."<sup>81</sup> Instead, such women are seen as being alienated from their true, feminine selves. By contrast, weak cultural feminist accounts of women's history are more

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contain "startling poetics of wordplay, alliteration, metaphor and punning," they promote as a "solution to male-domination an individual and psychic voyage ... out of the 'cockocratic sadostate' (18). Similarly, she criticizes Dale Spender's analysis (in Spender's *Women of Ideas (And What Men Have Done to Them)*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) because it is "purely idealist rather than [offering] any practical solutions to the universal reality of male domination" (23).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 35.

likely to admit that women's ways and women's values can be the source of both positive and negative behaviours.<sup>82</sup>

The last two reasons in particular make weak cultural feminism a more credible and reasonable tradition upon which to base my analysis. Moreover, I believe it is more representative of the tenor of contemporary cultural feminist theory as it engages with political issues. I will examine the ideas of weak cultural feminism in relation to the criticisms just made of identity politics: namely, that good identity politics seeks integration, rather than assimilation or segregation, and it avoids foundationalism and essentialism.

### 2.3 Cultural Feminism as Bad Identity Politics

Before I try to make the case that cultural feminism represents bad identity politics, some clarification is in order. I am *not* arguing that cultural feminists form an identifiable minority group in practice. Women do not form tightly knit communities as some minority groups do: this poses a problem for feminist theory that wishes to adopt a mode of cultural justice which assumes that identity politics require tightly woven groups that make, in some cases, identifiable territorial claims. These more general objections to an ethnic-group-oriented identity politics are taken up in the final section. What I *am* claiming is that cultural feminists do form a readily identifiable group in theory. It is the theory of this group that I want to critique, and where cultural feminism's theory has inspired groups in practice to behave or strategize in a certain way, I want to critique those actions too.

Identity theorists are concerned about the ways in which minority or disadvantaged groups are incorporated into the larger society. As discussed above, of three possible dynamics – assimilation, integration or isolation – many identity theorists agree that the

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<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 152-159; Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 342-345.

desired one for most collectivities is integration, remembering, of course, that Kymlicka would argue that national minority groups represent an important exception to this preference. Earlier, I explained that one of the ways Judith Evans draws a distinction between strong and weak cultural feminisms is to claim that strong cultural feminism may advocate male-female separatism. Moreover, I argued that few contemporary cultural feminists appear to believe that separatism is feasible or even necessary today to promote a specifically female identity and culture. Instead, I suggested that weak cultural feminism supports a more moderate position for inter-group relations: the 'separate spheres' or 'complementarity' approach to gender relations. This approach is apparent in Jean Bethke Elshtain's analysis of the gendered aspects of power. Elshtain is rather scornful of the traditional forms of male power, which she characterizes as "juridico-political," "bureaucratized," and "institutional" power. Male power has been met, according to Elshtain, in societies "past and present" with *complementary* female power, characterized as "domestic, sacral and informal authority"<sup>83</sup>; power which typically embraces such things as vulnerability and dependence.

While Elshtain does not advocate a return to the good old days when women and men inhabited separate spheres, exercising their different but complementary forms of authority, she does lament the encroachment of male authority into what used to be spheres of female power. Since a return to pre-secular, pre-modern life is impossible, what she wants instead is for us, men and women alike, to reconfigure power altogether; to realize a "vision of power as productive, as an incitement to both discourse and action."<sup>84</sup> But the problem – and though Elshtain does not state this, she certainly implies it – is that most men are too far gone

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<sup>83</sup> Elshtain, 116.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 118.

already, wrapped up and consumed by their pursuit of institutional power: "Worshipping penultimate power and fantasies of perfect control, we find ourselves dominated by our 'tools', our instrumentalities of violence, genuflecting at the restlessly moving altar of consumerist fantasy, obsessively seeking 'more' and 'better' and 'the best'."<sup>85</sup>

On the other hand, Elshtain suggests women will be the standard-bearers of a kinder, gentler, more feminine sort of power. It turns out the historical complementarity of sexual power bequeaths to women alone a valuable space for critical reflection upon (typically male) institutional power. Elshtain puts it this way: women's "official powerlessness grants [us] a paradoxical freedom: freedom from full assimilation into the prevailing public identity whose aims, in our day, are efficiency and control."<sup>86</sup> Elshtain admits this freedom has bad consequences, particularly for the woman who might prefer a portion of official power so that she can become "a surgeon, a president or an electrical engineer."<sup>87</sup> But for the most part, Elshtain contends, women should try to *maintain* our exclusion from the official halls of institutional male power because of the critical distance it provides.

Many equality feminists reject the separatism or complementarity position discernable in cultural feminism. Often, their rebuttals begin by citing personality and character trait studies that emphasize how wonderfully varied women and men are, in terms of the traits and values they possess.<sup>88</sup> In other words, they stress it is at least as likely that we will find as much variability *amongst* women as we find *between* women and men. Secondly, they argue, as I have more fully in Chapter 1, that it is a strategic mistake.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Deborah Rhode, "The Politics of Paradigms: Gender Difference and Gender Disadvantage," and Jane Mansbridge, "Feminism and Democracy," both in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips. I discuss these articles further below.

Deborah Rhode notes that “[h]owever feminist in inspiration, any dualistic world view is likely to be appropriated for non-feminist objectives... [T]he perception that nurturance is women’s responsibility has long served to justify women’s under-representation in demanding positions and to reinforce roles that are more separate than equal.”<sup>89</sup> In terms of inter-group relations, then, cultural feminism is representative of bad identity politics when it eschews integration in favour of isolation or separate spheres.

What about the other aspect of identity politics – the intra-group dynamics of a collectivity? Above, I noted that there are two dangers of which to be wary when it comes to intra-group relations: the tendency to think of groups as static or foundational entities, rather than entities formed by social processes and institutions, and the danger of essentialism or identity group “purity.” Cultural feminism is vulnerable to the first danger. It may reject the possibilities for women’s liberation inherent in institutional change because, it argues, sexual differences are so deep-seated. Danielle Crittenden, for example, adopts a generational perspective to argue that, despite great changes in American society, women have always wanted the same things: children, and a husband to provide for them. The average American woman, she argues, will be a mother to small children for several years. Given this, Crittenden asks, “Does it make sense for society to reinvent itself so that she can more conveniently and inexpensively delegate the care of those babies to strangers?”<sup>90</sup> If, as Crittenden appears to believe, women *are* innately, irremediably programmed to be mothers, then perhaps it would not make sense for society to “reinvent itself.”<sup>91</sup> (How daycare or babysitters pass for a societal “re-invention” is beyond me.)

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<sup>89</sup> Rhode, 353.

<sup>90</sup> Crittenden, 142.

<sup>91</sup> Crittenden is convinced enough of the essentially timeless urges of American women that she provides a kind of life agenda for the ideal modern woman. Highlights include dating boys in her teens, marrying in her early

Questioning the wisdom and usefulness of institutional change to gender equality may arise out of a suspicion of the institutions themselves. Since some cultural feminists are convinced that the route to women's liberation lies in the creation of an entirely separate women's culture, women need not bother with "malestream" institutions. Even to attempt such change runs the risk of having men co-opt women. As Audre Lourde has put it, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>92</sup>

By now, however, most identity theorists would argue that this attitude gives too much credence to the idea that social groups – both dominant and vulnerable ones – possess some kind of primordial identity in themselves and can resist change. The kind of static women's culture implied by Crittenden's recommendations for the "modern woman" is a myth, as are all cultural groups that pretend to be timeless. As Young notes, "Social groups are not entities that exist apart from individuals, but neither are they merely arbitrary classifications of individuals according to attributes which are external to or accidental to their identities. Groups are real not as substances, but as forms of social relations."<sup>93</sup>

Cultural feminism also shares with bad identity politics the problem of essentialism. As I have discussed above, many theorists agree that it is preferable for collectivities to define themselves by shared positioning in society, rather than innate, allegedly "natural," and ascriptive characteristics. The kind of essentialism typical of cultural feminism is to define and understand women wholly or largely through their roles as mothers or caregivers. Sara Ruddick's paradigmatic work on "maternal thinking" is representative of this tendency.

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twenties, followed quickly by children, and then the possibility of a career once the children hit school-age (187).

<sup>92</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

<sup>93</sup> Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 44.



Ruddick argues that the practice of mothering produces “throughout the species”<sup>94</sup> three central interests – preservation, growth, and acceptability.<sup>95</sup> According to Ruddick, maternal thought exists “for all women in a radically different way than for men... because we are *daughters...*”.<sup>96</sup> In contrast to a sexual split of understanding *within* societies, she argues “there are features of mothering experience which are invariant and nearly unchangeable, and others which, though changeable, are nearly universal.”<sup>97</sup> Most cultural feminists, including Ruddick, carefully explain that their principles are grounded in feminine values and practices produced socially, rather than biologically. However, this anti-determinist caveat is usually still accompanied by the implicit or explicit idea that “women’s ways” are superior to men’s. Distinguishing maternal from scientific thought, which is, naturally, associated with men, Ruddick maintains that the trio of maternal interests allow women – or maternal thinkers – special insights denied to others. “A mother practiced in fostering growth,” for example, “will be able to ‘see’ the effects of... injurious stratification, competitiveness, gender stereotyping, hypocrisy, and conscription to war.”<sup>98</sup>

Cultural feminism tends to present mothers as the epitome of true womanhood, true feminine culture. This is clearly true of Ruddick’s view. But it is also seen in more subtle arguments that do not explicitly make motherhood the pinnacle of women’s experience. When Elshtain, for example, contemplates the absorption of female spheres of power by bureaucratized male power, she writes that “women are left with few apparent options: to acquiesce in their historic loss of symbolic-domestic authority; to manipulate their diminished social role *as mothers* inside increasingly powerless families; or to join forces

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<sup>94</sup> Ruddick, 347.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 346. Italics in original.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 346-47.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 355.

with the men, assuming masculine roles and identities and competing for power on established, institutionalized terms.”<sup>99</sup> It is a subtle point, but these salutary women’s cultures are oddly short of single, childless or non-heterosexual women. Are we to understand that the childless, power-lunching executive is a traitor to her culture?

The heterosexism inherent to some cultural feminism represents a serious problem of exclusion for a tradition that has grappled with the other sources of difference – such as race and class – that divide women. However, differences rooted in sexuality are sometimes ignored by cultural feminism (as they are by other feminist traditions). Judith Butler, for example, argues that the maternalist focus of some feminist theory is particularly problematic because “it tends to reinforce precisely the binary, heterosexist framework that carves up genders into masculine and feminine and forecloses an adequate description of the kinds of subversive and parodic convergences that characterize gay and lesbian cultures.”<sup>100</sup>

Cultural feminism gives rather nice accounts of women’s culture. And it is not hard to see why many feminists embrace them: by crediting women with these “good behaviours” we raise them “from the level of instinct or passivity... to the level of moral choice and principled decision.”<sup>101</sup> But cultural feminism, essentialist in its tendency to view woman mainly through her role as a mother or caregiver, is flawed in at least three ways. First, it predicates women’s – never men’s – claims for justice on good behaviour. As Katha Pollitt wryly remarks,

[n]o one asks that other oppressed groups win their freedom by claiming to be extra-good... For blacks and other racial minorities, it is enough to want to earn a living, exercise one’s talents, get a fair hearing in the public forum. Only for women is simple justice an insufficient argument. It

<sup>99</sup> Elshtain, 116. Italics mine.

<sup>100</sup> Butler, 84-85.

<sup>101</sup> Katha Pollitt, “Marooned on Gilligan’s Island: Are women Morally Superior to Men?” in *Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 54.

is as though women don't really believe they are entitled to full citizenship unless they can make a special claim to virtue. Why isn't being human enough?<sup>102</sup>

Sure, we want to show that qualities such as caring and vulnerability are important characteristics of social life, but we neither want – nor need – to link them intrinsically to women. They are – or should be – important *human* values or characteristics, not feminine ones. One will only feel that the sharing around of these sorts of values is a loss to women if one tends to believe that women do not – or should not – also possess other “masculine” virtues such as rationality and competitiveness.

Second, critics argue that cultural feminism wears blinders. What makes proponents so confident that motherhood is a realm of only creative, positive power? In her critique of Ruddick's thesis, Pollitt argues that all the qualifications, limits and contradictions Ruddick would have to admit to her theory of maternal thought renders it so flexible as to be useless as a purportedly universal theory. Pollitt argues “almost anything mothers do can be explained” by Ruddick's trio of maternal interests (preservation, growth and acceptability), no matter how “cruel, dangerous, unfair or authoritarian.”<sup>103</sup> From female genital mutilation to Munchausen's Syndrome by proxy, mothers have been known to wilfully harm their children while thinking of themselves as good mothers. “[I]f all these behaviours count as mothering,” Pollitt asks, “how can mothering have a necessary connection with any single belief about anything, let alone how to stop war, or any single set of personality traits, let alone non-violent ones?”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 51. Moreover, Pollitt notes, cultural feminists discuss women's nurturing ways toward children, but rarely or never toward men. She writes, “You would never guess from [Carol] Gilligan or Ruddick that men, individually and collectively, are signal beneficiaries of female nurturance, much less that this goes far to explain why society encourages nurturance in women” (55).

Third, in addition to misrepresenting women's experiences, it also overstates women's similarities to each other,<sup>105</sup> and our differences from men. Critics, such as Deborah Rhode, point out that research fails to show the kind of sex-linked differences that cultural feminism posits. For example, Rhode maintains, "there are few psychological attributes on which the sexes consistently vary. For even these attributes, such as aggression, spatial ability, and helping behaviour, gender typically accounts for only about five per cent of the variance; the similarities between men and women are far greater than the disparities, and small statistical distinctions do not support sweeping sex-based dichotomies."<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, feminist scholars argue that where studies indicate small sex-linked differences manifest in women and men's behaviours, the participants themselves amplify those differences. Men "take pains to avoid the language and images attributed to subordinates" (i.e. women), while women attempt to conform to stereotypically feminine behaviours, thus satisfying self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>107</sup>

To conclude, I have argued that even weak cultural feminism represents "bad" identity politics in several ways. First, it argues for a mild version of male-female separatism – sexual complementarity – that contravenes the principle that good identity politics attempts to integrate social groups. Second, cultural feminism asserts group foundationalism, the idea that a group is fixed and timeless, and it ignores how social institutions and processes help to produce and therefore modify groups' characteristics and relative status. Third, the tradition promotes an essentialist understanding of women and men, and understates the differences

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<sup>105</sup> This anti-essentialist feminist theme recurs in a great deal of third wave, third world and postmodernist feminist literatures, dealing with everything from sex to employment to marriage. Anti-essentialism will be taken up again in Chapter 3. But keeping with the motherhood theme for a moment, lesbian and women-of-colour feminists, in particular, have challenged mainstream feminism to embrace non-heterosexist and non-European perspectives on the institutions of motherhood and the family. See Arneil, 182-83; Narayan, 6-13.

<sup>106</sup> Rhode, 353-54.

<sup>107</sup> Mansbridge, 155.

between women; it therefore promotes measures which might help to maintain stereotypical gender differences. At the same time, I hope that my critique has pointed to principles of behaviour for “good” identity politics, and a framework for feminism to follow in pursuing integrative and non-essentialist solutions to women’s inequality.

While the foregoing discussion does not interrogate the project of identity politics as a whole, in the final section, I question the usefulness of that project to feminism in a more general way, arguing that some of the assumptions and strategies that hold true for multiculturalist models of identity politics are inapplicable to gender inequality and oppression.

#### 2.4 Multiculturalism and Feminism

Some theorists of multiculturalism explicitly point out that their analyses pertain to ethno-cultural groups only, not all identity groups. Kymlicka is one of them. He agrees “there is a sense in which gays and lesbians, women, and the disabled form separate cultures within the larger society.”<sup>108</sup> But he emphasizes that it is very different from the way national minorities and immigrant groups form their separate cultures. He argues that these last two must be distinguished from the former groups, “who have been marginalized within their own national society or ethnic group.”<sup>109</sup> Others use the term ‘multiculturalism’ in the same way that I have used ‘identity politics’ here – as a catchall term for the politics of marginalized groups. A volume called *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, is exemplary of this practice.<sup>110</sup> Its essays engage not only ethnic, racial and

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<sup>108</sup> Kymlicka, 19.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 19. And, as we have seen, he would further distinguish national minorities from ethnic minorities, based on his belief that the former has legitimate claims to self-government and institutional autonomy while the latter do not.

<sup>110</sup> Cynthia Willett, ed., *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998.

religious groups' concerns but also issues around gender, sexuality and colonialism.

However, with Kymlicka, I do not think the terms should be viewed as interchangeable.

Gender constitutes a particular kind of social category that is not analogous to ethnicity. Some of the mechanisms that would appear to address concerns raised by ethno-cultural groups are inapplicable to gender inequalities. This is not, for the moment, to engage in the debate produced when feminism confronts multiculturalism, as in Susan Moller Okin's essay, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women."<sup>111</sup> My point here is simply to identify the ways that multicultural models obscure dynamics peculiar to gender. Although Appiah has grouped religion, gender, ethnicity, 'race' and sexuality as the most important identities in contemporary North American politics, he simultaneously warns: "That they matter to us for reasons so heterogeneous should, I think, make us careful not to assume that what goes for one goes for the others."<sup>112</sup>

First, lumping women's political movements in with minority cultural politics may present us with this paradox: women, who are not a minority in *any* culture, are said to be making demands for political recognition *as* a minority *from* the majority culture of which they are a part.

Second, while identity groups are clearly and rightfully concerned with attaining true liberty for their members, it is not equally clear that women and minorities should pursue the same strategies to that end. In her critique of Charles Taylor's essay about groups' recognition needs, Susan Wolf remarks that the "predominant problem for women as women is not that the larger or more powerful sector of the community fails to notice or be interested

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<sup>111</sup> Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" I shall discuss the intersection between multiculturalism and feminism in Chapter 3.

<sup>112</sup> Appiah, 151.

in preserving women's gendered identity, but that this identity is put to the service of oppression and exploitation."<sup>113</sup>

One reason why multicultural models of politics do not ultimately work for the purpose of gender equality is because gender has been constructed as a binary: it operates on the assumption that there are two entities – male and female, or masculinity and femininity.<sup>114</sup> Culture and ethnicity, on the other hand, is multi-faceted; there is a constellation of groups. Thus, perhaps, in multicultural societies, traditions can be celebrated for themselves – for their integral beauty, sacredness and meaning – precisely because there are more than two cultures. That is, cultural traditions and practices – such as resurrecting the tradition of the potlatch – do not automatically imply or entail *an* “other” or alternative practice in the majority culture.<sup>115</sup> While many of us would like there to be a constellation of gender or sexual cultures in the same way as there are for racial, ethnic and religious groups, many of our public institutions operate on the assumption that gender is a binary concept.<sup>116</sup> For this reason, a politics of difference is necessary insofar as it attempts to proliferate sexual and gender cultures. In the meantime, however, when cultural feminism attempts to

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<sup>113</sup> Susan Wolf, “Comment,” in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, 76.

<sup>114</sup> Of course, as Arneil notes, “there is an enormous debate as to whether or not gender is indeed a binary construct (those in the transgendered community argue that there may be a multiplicity of ‘genders’). (Private correspondence, March 20, 2002) However, I think this argument might confuse prescription for description. In other words, theorists who discuss the ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered and ‘neuter’ individuals “transgress” or “subvert” the usual binary gender identities often begin by observing how absolutely “hegemonic” those binary images of gender really are. The theme that seems to emerge from some of this literature is that the authors would *like* there to be a multiplicity of genders, but everywhere they look, they see people enacting normative masculinity and femininity (which they do, no doubt, because of extreme social pressures which make such enactments virtually compulsory, as these writers correctly diagnose). See Butler, 9-11.

<sup>115</sup> This might not be true in some extremely polarized societies, such as parts of the United States, where the black-white racial binary might operate in the same way as the male-female gender binary.

<sup>116</sup> I hope that recent debates in Canada to change the definition of marriage from a union between a man and a woman to one that would recognize same-sex spouses reflects not only attempts to enlarge our legal definitions of the ‘family’ but also challenges deeper assumptions about the individuals who constitute families. Similarly, legal successes at ‘reading in’ to the Charter prohibitions against discrimination on the basis of sexuality as analogous to prohibitions based on gender or race can be seen not just as attempts to protect homosexuals from discrimination (as important as that is), but may also speak to changing public norms about the acceptability of different enactments of gender.

celebrate women's traditional practices and values, it almost inevitably produces a hierarchical comparison with men's ways. Such a dynamic means one set of practices must be declared superior to the other, as is often seen in strong cultural feminism. Alternatively, to escape such a ranking, they must be declared separate but equal – that is, complementary – as in weak cultural feminism.

Again, this is not to declare that all multicultural models of identity politics are bad, but simply to point out that the concept of 'difference' might operate in different ways for different social groups. I believe there is more risk of continued exclusions and inequalities at stake for feminism when it deploys the concept of 'gender difference' in identity politics than there is for multiculturalism when it deploys the concept of 'cultural difference.' "For women to affirm difference, when difference means dominance, as it does with gender, means to affirm the qualities and characteristics of powerlessness."<sup>117</sup> The way forward, according to some scholars, is to dispense with the notion of difference entirely, and instead focus on relationships of oppression, dominance or disadvantage.<sup>118</sup> These approaches, it is hoped, will unite all vulnerable social groups in their different struggles to realize social equality and justice.

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<sup>117</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination," in *Feminism and Politics* ed. Anne Phillips, 301.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*; MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination,"; Rhode, "The Politics of Paradigms: Gender Difference and Gender Disadvantage."



### CHAPTER 3

## FEMINISM AND UNIVERSAL JUSTICE

A CENTRAL DEBATE in contemporary political theory concerns whether western feminist notions of gender equality and justice are applicable to non-western cultures. There are three main positions discernable in this debate. First, universalist feminism argues for the importance of feminists from a variety of contexts deploying the same concepts of analysis – such as patriarchy – in order to investigate what concerns and interests are shared by all women. Consequently, it confirms both the legitimacy of the project itself – that is, the very idea of making cross-cultural comparisons – and the concepts and frameworks employed in this scholarship. Given this commitment to both the idea and the substance of cross-cultural feminist analyses, universalist feminism would contest the very idea that we can even locate such scholarship as specifically ‘western feminism’ anymore. Assuming that feminist norms of equality and justice now emerge from every society, it would direct us to find their particular, local expressions, while simultaneously confirming their universal aspects.

Third world feminism occupies the second main position in this debate. It has an ambivalent relationship to cross-cultural feminist scholarship. For the most part, it supports the legitimacy of such a feminist project, but it does reject some of the substance of universalist feminism. Third world feminism wants to ensure that cross-cultural feminism challenges colonialism, both in thought and in action. It is centrally concerned with protecting third world women’s voices, agency and freedom to express their own particular, lived experiences.

Postmodern feminism represents the third main position in this debate. It rejects the legitimacy of both the very idea and the substance of cross-cultural feminist analyses. The idea of making cross-cultural comparisons is invalid to postmodern feminism because it

subscribes to the idea that reality is fragmented, partial and, in some senses, unknowable. To postmodernists, universalism represents the deployment of essentialist and totalizing, or “hegemonic,” stories or discourses. Postmodern feminism prefers to disrupt or subvert such hegemonic ideas, which are seen to have been damaging to the identities and experiences of women and other marginalized groups, by offering anti-essentialist discourses more friendly to the shifting, interrupted, complex nature of women’s lives.

These three positions have crystallized in a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural within states and interconnected between states. Feminism urgently needs to address the tensions produced when the rights and interests of women conflict with those of their cultures. Third world feminism and postmodern feminism have both brought important resources to the debate, reminding us about the particularity of western women’s concerns and the tendency to “colonize” non-western experiences through western discourses. But universalist feminism reminds us “no country...treats its women as well as its men.”<sup>1</sup> This fact should bring home the idea that fighting for justice and equality for all women must transcend, at some level, our cultural differences. The remainder of this essay will assess, in reverse order, the three feminist positions introduced above. I shall argue that postmodern feminism is not at all useful for addressing the problems encountered when women’s rights or interests conflict with the rights of a culture since it rejects ideas associated with universalism. I shall argue that third world feminism is a great deal more adequate than postmodern feminism in engaging these issues, but that it is flawed in several serious ways. Finally, I shall show how one specific model of justice rooted in a universalist feminist approach defeats the criticisms normally aimed at such a project. Since the issues enjoined

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 2, hereinafter WHD. She refers to a UN report that includes measures for life expectancy, wealth and education.

here are fairly complex and abstract, I will begin with an overview of the debate that simplifies and makes concrete some of the questions we are dealing with. Fortunately, such an overview is readily available in Susan Moller Okin's essay, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" and the responses to it, authored by theorists from a wide range of disciplinary and cultural backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> I turn now to this work.

### 3.1 Universalism, Particularism, Relativism: An Overview

In her essay, Susan Moller Okin argues that Western, liberal societies have something to say to other societies about fighting the oppression of women because the former have departed further than the latter from their hierarchical, patriarchal, sexist pasts.<sup>3</sup> She notes that even though liberal states continue to violate the norm of gender equality in practice, they are committed to the principle that women and men are moral equals, owed equal respect and concern. Some cultures do not accept, even in principle, the moral equality of women and men. Okin points to minority ethnic groups (both immigrant or indigenous native groups), religious groups, and formerly colonized peoples as being more likely than the dominant liberal cultures to curtail women's rights, and to approve men's superiority over women.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, she argues, such groups demand special collective rights to protect their specific cultural or religious practices from encroachment by dominant cultures. Elsewhere, she has pointedly remarked that such pleas for "respecting cultural differences" [have] become a euphemism for restricting or denying women's human rights."<sup>5</sup> Thus, for Okin, the notion that western feminists should defer to cultural-rights claims is untenable if it means leaving gender hierarchies and oppressions in place.

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum, ed., *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Okin, "Feminism, Women's Human Rights, and Cultural Differences," *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 36.

When cultural groups claim rights in order to protect practices which formally or overtly discriminate against women (such as prohibitions against paid work or preventing girls from attending school), it is relatively easy for liberals to see that such claims should be denied. However, Okin reminds us, "sex discrimination is often far less overt. In many cultures, strict control of women is enforced in the private sphere by the authority of either actual or symbolic fathers, often acting through, or with the complicity of, the older women of the culture."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the private or domestic sphere may hide these subtler forms of oppression of women and girls practiced by some cultures. Liberals must therefore be careful about endorsing group rights that might sustain oppressive practices that are hidden from view.

Many of Okin's examples have to do with how *western* governments have accommodated internal minority group's claims at the expense of gender equality. For example, she relates how the French government permitted immigrant men to bring multiple wives into the country.<sup>7</sup> But she also scrutinizes oppressive practices upheld by non-western states. For example, she notes that it is common practice in "much of Latin America, rural Southeast Asia and parts of West Africa" to pressure or even require a "rape victim to marry the rapist."<sup>8</sup> Thus, Okin is ready to defend the validity of universal feminist values to minority groups *within* a state but also *across* national boundaries.

Okin does not provide a clear framework for preventing or combating cultural practices that harm women. She does not, for example, recommend that "the West" should defend the rights of women in non-Western and domestic immigrant communities "by use of

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<sup>6</sup> Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 15.

force,” as one respondent (facetiously, I think) suggests she does.<sup>9</sup> Rather than acts of commission, Okin appears to favour acts of omission: for example, that we *not* grant group rights in cases where those special protections increase the likelihood of women’s oppression. If we do this, then some minority cultures might gradually become extinct and its members “would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture.”<sup>10</sup> This resembles the kind of “benign neglect” towards minority groups advocated by other liberal theorists. Her strongest prescription is not very strong at all: Okin apparently prefers that a minority culture “be encouraged [presumably by feminist-minded liberals in both the minority and surrounding cultures] to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women – at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture.”<sup>11</sup>

Respondents to Okin’s essay critique it from any number of angles. Some regard her focus on women and sexual inequality as arbitrary, arguing that group rights for minority cultures threaten other vulnerable individuals as well. Others maintain that she should draw a finer line between the roles of “culture” and “religion” in gender oppression, because different rationales and different solutions might apply in each case. These are interesting points and many form the basis for other debates about formulating justice and equality in complex societies. But as Joseph Raz states, Okin is probably not oblivious to these other important questions – she is “merely concerned to point out that we should fight for justice for women in other cultural groups as hard as we fight for it in society at large.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Okin’s argument represents a strong affirmative to the question posed at the outset of

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<sup>9</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, “Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/Minority Women?” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Raz, “How Perfect Should One Be? And Whose Culture Is?” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, 96.

this chapter: whether western feminist norms of gender equality and justice are applicable to non-western societies.

Among respondents who do engage Okin on this specific dimension of her essay some respond with a highly qualified 'yes,' while others give a strong 'no.' Azizah al-Hibri's essay is an example of the former response. Al-Hibri counters the idea that feminist "outsiders" to a culture are the best champions of cultural reform. Against Okin's implied argument that Western liberal feminists might be best equipped to "encourage" a culture to "alter itself" so as to reinforce the equality of women, al-Hibri maintains that those people are probably not sensitive or knowledgeable enough. In the case of Islam, al-Hibri argues that only "insiders" or members of the religion are capable of distinguishing between "religious and cultural sentiments, while recognizing the sanctity of the first and the flexibility of the second." While al-Hibri agrees that Muslim laws and doctrines have been distorted to women's disadvantage and therefore require re-interpretation and change, she maintains that only *Muslim* feminists should do this. Al-Hibri proposes a "tripartite strategy" (which includes acceptance of "modern contributions to Islam jurisprudence") to effect such change, but the most important aspect of the strategy is that Muslim women are its agents. "Such a complicated and time-consuming project cannot be truncated or cancelled owing to the impatience of secular feminists," she insists.<sup>13</sup>

Other respondents reject totally the notion that feminists should promote or impose principles of Western-style liberal feminism in non-western cultures. Sander Gilman, for example, argues that such an agenda is fundamentally wrong-headed because different cultural groups have different perceptions of the oppressiveness of certain institutions or practices around gender. He uses the issue of genital mutilation or circumcision and its

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Hibri, 44.

effects on individuals' experience of sexual pleasure as a lens to focus our attention on the way the experience of such a practice differs from culture to culture. Gilman asks us to focus not on the allegedly oppressive practices themselves, but on the meanings attached to such practices at different times and places. For example, the practice of male circumcision in Jewish communities used to be viewed as repulsive by non-Jews 150 years ago, in the same way that female circumcision is viewed as repulsive today. The dominant view at each time condemns the practice because it is said to rob those who undergo it of experiencing sexual pleasure: "Only intact genitalia can give pleasure. But," Gilman wonders, "is it possible that the projection of Western, bourgeois notions of pleasure onto other people's bodies is not the best basis for anybody's judgment?"<sup>14</sup> Gilman argues that a practice such as genital mutilation cannot be objectively identified as either good or bad, because the experience of sexual pleasure is subjective. In fact, he goes on, circumcision or genital mutilation can be normalized within a community, if it wants to do so, as long as it is hygienic about it: "The problem with ritual circumcision is the risk of infection, not the creation of 'difference'; the answer should be found in the introduction of antiseptics, as was the case with infant male circumcision in the nineteenth century... Not abolition but medicalization would seem to be the reasonable remedy for the morbidity and mortality resulting from all such practices. The question of pleasure should be left to the culture that defines it."<sup>15</sup> This is essentially an argument for cultural relativism; that is, the idea that "normative criteria must come from within the society to which they are applied."<sup>16</sup> None of us can say if genital mutilation is bad because the only legitimate standards of value for this type of thing come from the local group or individuals practicing it. Pleasure and pain are culturally-specific, Gilman claims.

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<sup>14</sup> Sander Gilman, "'Barbaric' Rituals?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum, WHD, 48.

So while al-Hibri admits that cultural practices may be wrong because they are harmful to women and therefore ought to be changed, Gilman denies this. Cultural practices can never be identified as wrong because they are always open to interpretation and re-interpretation by the peoples who practice them.

The two critiques of Okin's argument just discussed correspond to the third world and postmodern feminist positions introduced above. Al-Hibri's plea for cultural sensitivity in feminist theory reflects themes dominant in third world feminist scholarship. Gilman's argument that what should be important to feminist analysts is not a particular action or institution itself, but the *meanings* attached to the action or institution, reflects themes dominant in postmodern feminism.<sup>17</sup> Of course, these two strands do share some points of view. Both speak of the "colonizing" tendencies of western thought, for example. But they diverge in an important way. As my discussion below will reveal, many third world feminists actually collaborate in the universalist feminist project because they affirm the validity and usefulness of cross-cultural analyses, even while they critique the white, western solipsism apparent in some universalist feminist scholarship. But postmodernist feminism rejects the project before it even gets started because postmodernism insists the only valid norms and standards of value for human life are local, not universal, ones. The challenges it has made to core Enlightenment ideas, for example, about the self, represent a much more profound challenge to universalist feminism.

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<sup>17</sup> Not everything in Gilman's argument would be acceptable to postmodernism. Many postmodernists would likely object to his idea that genital mutilation calls for 'medicalization' rather than abolition because of that tradition's deep scepticism about western medicine and western science more generally. I am not actually claiming that Gilman is a postmodernist himself. But his idea that each culture should provide its own standards of value and its own meanings for particular customs resonates very deeply with postmodernism. Thank you to Barbara Arneil for helping me to clarify this point.



### 3.2 Postmodern Feminism

Postmodernism is difficult to encapsulate. This difficulty is, I believe, part of its appeal: it can be more things to more people. Undergraduate students sometimes apply the term “postmodern” in a disparaging way to texts they have found dense or difficult to understand. Newspaper columnists, on the other hand, use the term to signal approval of new trends, say, in architecture, fashion, or music; in this sense, “postmodern” appears to be a substitute for “hip.” In both cases, the writers appear to be searching for other terms, but settle on “postmodern,” hoping that it catches the drift of their meaning. In one sense, then, they may be using the term correctly, because postmodernism is centrally concerned with language and the making of meaning. As Diana Coole observes, postmodernism “evokes only a mood, style, or condition of contemporary culture, which it finds immune to representation.”<sup>18</sup>

Postmodern feminism is concerned with the way language constructs understandings of such things as gender and power within communities. Postmodern feminism holds that “hegemonic discourses” – the words and meanings that tend to dominate in a society – do not merely reflect or explain social practices, institutions and people themselves, but actually help to shape or construct them. This understanding of the world leads postmodern feminism to challenge, disrupt and subvert hegemonic discourses. In their place, postmodern feminism prefers discourses that speak to the complexity and contradictions experienced women in their daily lives. These discourses call into question both the substance and method of Enlightenment-based philosophical traditions, which rely on certain conceptions about the nature and place of the ‘individual,’ the function of reason, and the core normative liberal ideals of justice and equality. In effect, it challenges the dominant, western liberal feminist

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<sup>18</sup> Diana Coole, “Master Narratives and Feminist Subversions” in *The Politics of Postmodernity* ed. James Good and Irving Velody (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 107.

perspective reflected in Okin's essay. Postmodern feminism rejects cross-cultural critiques such as Okin's because it claims they are grounded in these liberal, Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of the individual and the world. And, as Anne Phillips has remarked, for postmodernism, the Enlightenment has turned into "a code-word for everything we ought to distrust."<sup>19</sup>

In the disciplines of political science and political theory, postmodernism represents a kind of antithesis to the school of thought broadly known as "realism." Against realists, postmodernists argue that we cannot obtain a coherent, stable, objective picture of the world because it calls into question all the underlying constructs and assumptions that ground such a worldview: rationality, the autonomous individual, the clear operation of power, and notions of progress or advancement.<sup>20</sup> The scope and depth of postmodernism's scepticism about our understanding of the world is considerable:

As far as the human sciences and their traditions are concerned..., the consequences of the postmodernist moment are to rule out of court a number of central assumptions and topoi of this domain: that the character and nature of rationality can be established by any clear-cut procedure or formula; that there can be decisive foundational supports for such conceptions; that actors' meanings and utterances can be accounted for by external causal processes; that there is available a clear-cut technical language to report the character of the social world in, separable from ordinary language activities.<sup>21</sup>

Jane Flax notes that "[p]ostmodern discourses are all deconstructive in that they seek to distance us from and make us sceptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the

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<sup>19</sup> Anne Phillips, "Universal Pretensions in Political Thought" in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> I take 'postmodernism' here to also include post-structuralism and post-rationalism. While some authors draw distinctions between these strands, I feel that they are similar enough for my purposes here to refer to them all by the most ubiquitous and expansive term, postmodernism.

<sup>21</sup> James Good and Irving Velody, "Introduction: Postmodernity and the Political," in *The Politics of Postmodernity*, 3.

self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture.”<sup>22</sup> Given the scope of the postmodern project, it is not possible here to investigate all these dimensions. However, I will look at one dimension that is especially relevant to feminist inquiry: its understandings of the self.

One central component of the postmodernist project is the deconstruction of the “liberal” or “Enlightenment” self. The Enlightenment view of the self or subject centres on an individual who is autonomous and rational. It holds that people experience themselves in this manner – that is, as individualist, autonomous, rational, independent beings - interacting with similar individuals in the world. This notion of the self is attached to similarly uncomplicated notions of the connection between the mind and body. The Enlightenment self is a unified self: body and mind cohere. This understanding of the body presumes it is “a given biological entity which either has or does not have certain ahistorical characteristics and capacities”<sup>23</sup> and which reacts to physical stimuli in predictable ways.

Robin West argues that postmodernism’s attempts to destabilize or deconstruct the liberal self generally take two forms.<sup>24</sup> The first is the claim that this liberal self is a false universal. This claim should be familiar to feminists because feminism has been centrally concerned with exposing the allegedly gender “neutral” self as a profoundly masculine concept in a variety of ways for decades. Feminism has shown how the liberal self’s complement of attributes such as reason, autonomy and independence have helped to constitute the opposite images of man and woman, and render woman inferior to man. Feminism has helped to elicit and explain the voices and identities of women, and to

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<sup>22</sup> Jane Flax, “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 41.

<sup>23</sup> Moira Gatens, “Power, Bodies and Difference,” in *Destabilizing Theory*, 129.

<sup>24</sup> Robin West, *Caring for Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 281-284.

distinguish them from the male perspectives and voices that dominate political theory.

Initially, these feminine identities and voices were drawn largely from the experiences of white, middle class women, but more recently, feminism has become a project to amplify the perspectives and experiences of *all* women. As such, feminism is understood today to be anti-essentialist: a project that constantly challenges and displaces unitary concepts, both of man and woman.

Consequently, the postmodern aim to deconstruct the liberal self is not very problematic for feminism, and indeed, feminism continues to be an important contributor to that project. However, some writers suggest that feminism should balk at the way postmodernism pursues anti-essentialism to the *n<sup>th</sup>* degree. They argue that genuine social transformation requires people to join together and work for change. And this requires us to step outside of our own unique, differentiated positions, and to ask what we share with others. Anne Phillips calls this impulse feminism's "universal pretensions." She agrees that we "can do well enough without an abstract, degendered, 'neutered' individual as the basis for our aspirations and goals. We cannot, however, do without some notion of stretching outside of ourselves, some capacity for self-reflection and self-distance, some imaginative – and more importantly, some practical – movement towards linking up with those who have seemed different."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues that without some degree of essentialism, "we are deprived of two moral sentiments that are absolutely necessary if we are to live together decently in the world: compassion and respect."<sup>26</sup> Basically, she maintains that a determinate conception of the human being involves recognizing our

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<sup>25</sup> Phillips, "Universal Pretensions," 27.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," 205, hereinafter HFSJ.

common human limits, which in turn, motivates our feelings of compassion and respect for others.<sup>27</sup>

The second claim postmodernism makes against the liberal self – the claim that West argues feminists should reject – is the idea that there is no “true self” at all. This claim asserts that one’s own very personal sense of one’s self – one’s inner essence – is no more than a social construct, as is everything in the world. As West explains, postmodernism holds that:

The liberal self, like any description of the self, is an invention, not a falsification. As such, it is subject not to claims of truth or falsity but rather to political modification. To use Foucault’s formulation, the relation between the components of selfhood – pleasure, desire, and action – may vary across time and across culture, but in every case the experience of the nexus between pleasure, desire, and action has been societally invented; it is not the experience of something which is naturally there. Thus, the self is inevitably the invention of societal powers – there is no ‘natural self’ with a ‘true inner nature’ for society either to liberate or oppress, or for a particular description such as the liberal self to either mirror faithfully or misdescribe inartfully. There simply is no ‘true self.’<sup>28</sup>

In other words, postmodernism holds that the correct reading of the self is as a political invention, so we ought to take our own selfhood to be a political invention also.

As West indicates, this radically deconstructive conception of the self makes it possible for postmodernism to rupture the liberal unity of mind/body. If bodily experiences are not really “naturally there” but are instead the product of social discourses that in some way script or invent them, then that opens up space to question the status of the body as a given, biological entity. Moira Gatens has suggested that this is a more liberatory pursuit for

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<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum, HFSJ, 237-39. More will be said about Nussbaum’s essentialist notion of the self in the final section.

<sup>28</sup> West, 283.

feminists because it goes beyond the endless equality/difference debate about the significance of women's corporeal differences from men. In other words, rather than arguing about whether women are equal to men *despite* biological differences between the sexes or *because* of them, postmodern discourses about the body transcend that debate.<sup>29</sup> Gatens argues that postmodernism views the body not as a given, but as something that is constructed by power. "Using Foucault's approach, the imaginary body can be posited as an effect of socially and historically specific practices: an effect, that is, not of genetics, but of relations of power."<sup>30</sup> She goes on to say that, following this understanding, it is wrong to hypothesize a relationship between the imagined or cultural body and the anatomical body,

since the anatomical body is itself a theoretical object for the discourse of anatomy which is produced by human beings in culture. There is a regress involved in positing the anatomical body as the touchstone for cultural bodies since it is a particular culture which chooses to represent bodies anatomically. Another culture might take the clan totem as the essence or truth of particular bodies. The human body is always a signified body and as such cannot be understood as a 'neutral object' upon which science may construct 'true' discourses.<sup>31</sup>

The idea that even the anatomical body is only an example of yet another invented discourse about selfhood makes it possible for postmodernists to call into question the predictability of bodies' reactions to stimuli. If discourses about the body script our experience of the world, then it is safe to assume that different discourses will render different physical practices with different meanings that will be experienced differently by different subjects.

Some version of this understanding of the self and the body appears to be behind Sander Gilman's objection to Okin's condemnation of female genital mutilation. Recall, Gilman argues that "the question of pleasure should be left to the culture that defines it."

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<sup>29</sup> Gatens, 129.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 131-32.

This statement echoes West's reading of Foucault, who argues that "the components of selfhood – pleasure, desire, and action – may vary across time and across culture, but in every case the experience of the nexus between pleasure, desire, and action has been societally invented." Gilman notes that critics such as "Martha Nussbaum, Yael Tamir, and Frances Kamm expressed their opposition to this practice [ritual circumcision or infibulation<sup>32</sup>] because of its impact on female sexual pleasure. But, Gilman protests, how can a member from one culture presume to know what is sexually pleasurable for someone from another culture? For these critics, "[s]exual pleasure is defined as the sexual pleasure of the speaker; sexual pleasure is defined as that which reflects the 'sensitivity' of the self as opposed to the Other. Sensitivity (of body and of spirit) is measure by the absolute notion of a physical body reacting uniformly to 'simple' stimuli. Is it not clear that even sexual pleasure is as much a reflex of the mind as of the body!"<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Gilman, these scholars' critiques represent the imposition of their own "absolutist" understandings of the "physical" body on the "other".

These postmodern claims about the self and the body are much more problematic than the first one for feminists. Calling into question the very existence of a 'true self,' postmodernism maintains that the self is only a political or social invention of particular discourses in a particular place and time. West argues that this conception of the self for feminists and for women is totally inadequate since the problem is not that discourses have

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<sup>32</sup> Gilman does not make it clear which practice he refers to here. It should be noted that they are *not* the same thing. Female "circumcision" can involve everything from "the symbolic cutting of the labia minora" (as Gilman points out, 57) to clitoridectomy, or the removal of the clitoris. Infibulation usually refers to a much more dramatic amputation, involving the removal of a girl or woman's clitoris and both the outer and inner lips of the labia. To conflate the two is a mistake, as can be seen when the issue is cast in terms of the male body: "The male equivalent of clitoridectomy... would be the amputation of most of the penis. The male equivalent of infibulation... would be the removal of all of the penis, its roots of soft tissue, and part of the scrotal skin." (Nahid Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation: A Call for Global Action* (New York: Women Inc., 1995), 9, quoted in Susan Moller Okin, "Feminism, Women's Human Rights and Cultural Differences," 49, note 5.)

<sup>33</sup> Gilman, 55.

“invented” feminine or female selfhood, but more often, those discourses have *failed* to invent them; the female self is a political void. “[W]hat women experience on a daily basis is not a socially constructed *selfhood*, but rather a socially constructed *lack* of self, a sense of selflessness.”<sup>34</sup> This is not the same thing as postmodernism’s invented, yet destabilized self; for women, this self was never there to begin with. West argues that as “we become more aware of the presence of patriarchal power, we become more aware of that which is within us – whether or not we decide to call it a ‘self’ – and of that which is vulnerable to patriarchy’s terribly destructivity.”<sup>35</sup> She maintains that feminism has provided women with the powerful practice of consciousness-raising, through which “women come to reclaim a self that is within. This ‘reclamation of that which is within’ is utterly incompatible”<sup>36</sup> with the postmodern notion of self.

Postmodern feminism recommends that we understand the body not as an ahistorical entity possessing certain critical capacities and responding to absolute, simple stimuli in predictable ways. Instead, the corporeal body is, in some sense, imaginary, and its relationship with external “realities” modified by the discourses that help to constitute it. There is no ‘natural self’ with a ‘true inner nature’ for society either to liberate or oppress. For example, Kate Nash argues that we should understand women’s oppression as constituted not only – or not even primarily – by actual relations of power in everyday lives but instead, as a product of a rigid, essentialist discourse which precludes investigating how our identities are “contingent, provisional and incomplete.”<sup>37</sup> Nash maintains we can understand “oppression as the product of a particular political discourse rather than of the

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<sup>34</sup> West, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>37</sup> Kate Nash, “The Feminist Production of Knowledge: Is Deconstruction a Practice for Women?” *Feminist Review* 47 (Summer 1994): 75.



repression of certain innate capacities.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, Nash sets up an opposition between the right kind of feminist approach – deconstruction – and the wrong kind – universalism or essentialism – which is wrong in part because it invites us to see people as having “innate capacities.” But feminism ought to be highly attentive to the repression of “certain innate capacities.” If you repress my “innate capacity” to satisfy the ache in my stomach that is hunger, I will probably experience that as a relation of power producing acute hunger, not as a discourse between us. If you repress my “innate capacity” for sexual pleasure by cutting off my clitoris, I do not think that oppression is a “product of a particular political discourse.” To me, it is torture.

Most societies tend to treat women as means to someone else’s ends. Women are often thought of as primarily “reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, [or] agents of a family’s general prosperity,”<sup>39</sup> rather than as ends in themselves. Postmodern feminism’s destabilized, decentred self does nothing to reverse these patterns. In fact, it helps to deny women’s own individuality by denying that women can come up with their own conceptions of themselves that are in some sense ‘true.’ To confirm women as individuals and ends in their own right, we need a stronger conception of the self than that provided by postmodernism. One such conception will be examined in the final section.

### 3.3 Third World Feminism

Third world feminism includes the critiques made by feminists from non-Western states, but also feminists of colour *within* Western states. Thus, for example, Chela Sandoval speaks of “U.S. third world feminists;”<sup>40</sup> this group includes African-American feminists and

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<sup>38</sup> Nash, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum, WHD, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Chela Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991).

other women of colour within the U.S., who are credited with pushing Western liberal feminism to expand its focus from the problems of white, middle-class women to recognizing the multiple oppressions wrought by the intersections of class, race, sexuality and so on. But of course the label also applies to critiques voiced by women who live in developing nations. Asian, African and Muslim feminists have all had an important stake in the emergence of third world feminism. Some theorists who self-identify as third world feminists underscore that third world feminism should be understood not as an essentialist category defined by geography or colour, but as a political position. Uma Narayan argues that western feminists who use the label do so to “call political attention to similarities in the locations of, and problems faced by, their communities and communities in Third World countries.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that third world feminists constitute “an ‘imagined community’ [to borrow Benedict Anderson’s phrase] of third world oppositional struggles.”<sup>42</sup> She maintains that it “is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender – the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. Thus, potentially, women of all colours (including white women) can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities.”<sup>43</sup>

Third world feminism has an ambivalent relationship to universalist feminism. Its concerns for protecting the diversity and agency of third world women produce this ambivalence. Third world feminism is thus characterized by its anti-essentialist, anti-paternalist and anti-colonialist stances. However, if universalist feminism avoids the

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<sup>41</sup> Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Introduction” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

problems of essentialism, paternalism and colonialism, I think it can be shown that third world feminist support for the universalist project is justified. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to show empirically that universalist feminism has become genuinely inclusive of, and sensitive to, third world women's difference and agency, I hope I can demonstrate that it is not wildly optimistic to believe this true.

One of the most obvious features of third world feminist scholarship is its concern for diversity. It wants recognition of women's diversity and the avoidance of essentialist understandings of women and gender to be front and centre in feminist analyses. Women's identity is necessarily complicated, insists Mohanty:

Women are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks. They are not 'women' – a coherent group – solely on the basis of a particular economic system or policy. Such reductive cross-cultural comparisons result in the colonization of the specifics of daily existence and the complexities of political interests which women of different social classes and cultures represent and mobilize.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the claim from third world feminism usually goes something like this: gender relations and gender oppression in different cultures manifest in so many different ways that western feminist frameworks do not adequately capture or theorize these phenomena. These frameworks tend to ignore or suppress the radical differences between women themselves and women's experiences. Indeed, third world feminists have good reason to be sceptical about the adequacy of western feminists' theories for representing and interpreting the lives of non-western women. Western feminist scholarship has been inadequate in the past. Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Mary Daly – writers of the 1950s, '60s and '70s – are

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<sup>44</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988): 206.

typical targets of third world feminists: they often point to these feminists' works as problematic because they over-generalize, over-simplify and essentialize non-western women and cultures. For example, according to Uma Narayan, Daly's discussion of *sati*, or widow-immolation in India, is an "unnuanced and totalizing picture of 'Indian culture and traditions'."<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has suggested that phenomena that may appear to suggest commonalities in women's lives, may, upon closer study, prove to have dramatically different explanations.<sup>46</sup>

Chela Sandoval goes further than both Narayan and Mohanty in her critique of "dominant" feminism. She writes that "the history of the relationship between first and third world feminists has been tense and rife with antagonisms. My thesis is that at the root of these conflicts is the refusal of U.S. third world feminism to buckle under, to submit to sublimation or assimilation within hegemonic feminist praxis."<sup>47</sup> Sandoval argues that despite three decades of U.S. third world feminist interventions into "hegemonic feminism" – i.e. white feminism – that hegemony is still largely intact. Sandoval argues that hegemonic feminist theory systematically suppressed third world feminist voices even into the 1970s. Thus, in the 1980s, Sandoval maintains that hegemonic feminism tried to cover up this suppression and hide its own racism by taking on a "final and 'antiracist' phase of feminism." This phase is usually identified as socialist feminism. "Unfortunately, however," she writes, "socialist feminism has yet to develop and utilize a theory and method capable of

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<sup>45</sup> Narayan, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 210. For example, she says the rise in female-headed households among different groups of women (Chicana, Black and White) in the United States suggests different things.

<sup>47</sup> Sandoval, 3.

achieving this goal [transforming society], or of coming to terms with race or culture, and of thus coming 'to grips' with the differences existing between female subjects."<sup>48</sup>

The impact that critiques such as these have had on western feminism cannot be overstated. They helped to turn second wave into third wave feminism, whose hallmark is attention to differences.<sup>49</sup> My point is simply that those criticisms had such a profound impact that they are much less necessary today. Mohanty's article was first published in 1984,<sup>50</sup> which means that she was relying on feminist scholarship that is almost a quarter-century old today. The errors and omissions she rightly criticizes are surely not as widespread in more recent feminist texts. Feminists have eagerly – and rapidly – incorporated different perspectives into their analyses, as Susan Bordo attests:

Contemporary feminism... has from the beginning exhibited an interest in restoring to legitimacy that which has been marginalized and disdained, an interest, I would suggest, that has affected our intellectual practice significantly. As an 'outsider' discourse, that is, a movement born out of the experience of marginality, contemporary feminism has been unusually attuned to issues of exclusion and invisibility. This does not mean, of course, that the work of feminists has not suffered deeply from class, racial and other biases. But I find Donna Haraway's charge that 'white feminists...were forced kicking and screaming to notice' those biases to be remarkable. It is a strange... conception of intellectual and political responsiveness that views white feminism, now critically scrutinizing (and often utterly discrediting) its conceptions of 'female' reality and morality and its 'gendered' readings of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>49</sup> For discussions of how third wave feminists theorize and, indeed, *live* the lessons learned through incorporating differences, see Arneil, Chapter 7, and Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, "Introduction," *Third Wave Agenda*. Heywood and Drake, for example, argue that third wave feminism consists of elements of many different strands of feminism (black, women-of-colour, working-class, pro-sex, and poststructuralist to name a few) and that it works "to come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity..." (3).

<sup>50</sup> Mohanty's essay was first published in *Boundary 2*, Vol. 12, no. 3/Vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring/Fall 1984).

culture *barely more than a decade after they began to be produced*, as 'resistant' to recognizing its own fictions of unity.<sup>51</sup>

As for Sandoval, she does not provide her readers with much evidence to support her rather stark conclusion that third world feminism "has become invisible outside of [hegemonic feminism's] all-knowing logic."<sup>52</sup> This claim seems either to deny the agency of her third world sisters or to implicate them in a conspiracy of silence.<sup>53</sup> Of course western feminists will make mistakes in their analyses and representations of women's lives and interests. But to suggest that contemporary feminist theory is as ignorant or dismissive of women's differences as it sometimes was in the 1960s, '70s and early '80s would be to give far too little credit to third world feminists' efforts in countering their mistakes.

Furthermore, the fact that poor theory does exist is not a good reason to give up on theorizing altogether, as postmodernism tends to do. There are commonalities to women's experiences, and it is feminism's job, at some level, to interpret and explain them. As Mohanty concedes, third world feminist claims should not be seen as arguments "against generalization as much as they are for careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities."<sup>54</sup>

Today, some western feminist theories do a very good job of reflecting non-western women's lives. Okin has presented one of the most spirited defenses of the universality of

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism," 141-42. Italics in original.

<sup>52</sup> Sandoval, 9.

<sup>53</sup> There is another problem with her account of hegemonic and U.S. third world feminisms' interactions. Essentially, she argues that both have developed as a form of 'oppositional consciousness': hegemonic, white feminism within dominant masculinist culture, and third world feminism within hegemonic white feminism. Given the parallelism between the two feminist movements (i.e. both arise within contexts of a more dominant culture), there is no way for Sandoval to deny that U.S. third world feminism itself could become (or already is!) a hegemonic feminism to some other interior, suppressed, oppositional consciousness. If what defines a "hegemonic" feminism is its resistance to incorporating dissenting voices, how do we know third world feminism doesn't also suppress voices within its movement?

<sup>54</sup> Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 211.

some feminist principles and concepts. With some exasperation, she declares that one “of the problems of antiessentialist feminism...is that it tends to substitute the cry ‘We’re all different’ for both argument and evidence.”<sup>55</sup> Against this tendency, Okin proposes to “put some Western feminist ideas about justice and inequality to the test... by seeing how well these theories – developed in the context of women in well-off Western industrialized countries – work when used to look at the very different situations of some of the poorest women in poor countries.”<sup>56</sup> The division of labour between women and men; the devaluation of “non-productive” household work; power dynamics within families; and different treatment for male and female children: Okin argues that all of these notions can be used to assess how just societies are in their treatment of women and men. In many instances, she finds that both western and non-western cultures are guilty of sex-discrimination and oppression of women, but often, developing countries are much worse. For example, many “Third World families... are even worse schools of justice and more successful inculcators of the inequality of the sexes as natural and appropriate than are their developed world equivalents....”<sup>57</sup> In another example, Okin consults “differential exit potential theory” to discover whether or not feminist critiques of the family hold for third world situations. This western theory has been used to explain “the ‘not uncommon’ desertion by men of the families during famines”<sup>58</sup> in the third world. Because of many women’s economic dependence on their husbands, women have little bargaining power in the relationship; they cannot make the men stay and often, they will do worse after he is gone. The same has been found true of divorcing couples in the United States, where the

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<sup>55</sup> Okin, “Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences,” 8.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

men's economic independence assures that they have more bargaining power. "The whole theory [that economic dependence makes women vulnerable to desertion and divorce] seems just as applicable to the situations of very poor women in poor countries as it is to women in quite well-off households in rich countries," Okin concludes.<sup>59</sup> Of course, the stakes are often much higher for women in the third world. Thus, far from being utterly invalid or culturally imperialist, many so-called western feminist theories and frameworks may be fruitfully – if sensitively – applied to non-western societies. What analyses like Okin's suggest is that reliance on detailed, empirical evidence must ground feminists' attempts to derive cross-cultural feminist conclusions about justice and inequality.

But are adequate or even very good reflections of non-western women's interests enough? When western feminists attempt to theorize non-western women's lives, does this not still represent feminist imperialism because it involves western eyes gazing at and assessing non-western cultures? In other words, how much ownership do non-western feminists have of these ideas? At what point do they stop being 'western' ideas and become home-grown? Some third world feminists insist we have reached that time. Because some feminist ideas are equally applicable in western and non-western contexts, we should discard the idea that these ideas are any longer exclusively western. It is an insult to imply that third world women are incapable of producing their own analyses, that they merely mirror western ideas. If "there seems to be considerable resemblance, at least at a certain level of abstraction, between the issues addressed by Third-World feminists and those addressed by Western feminists, it is a result not of faddish mimicry but of the fact that women's inequality and mistreatment are, unfortunately, ubiquitous features of many 'Western' and 'non-Western' cultural contexts, even as their manifestations in specific contexts display

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17.



important differences of detail.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, as the integration of third world feminism and western feminism proceeds, theorists from both camps confirm many central feminist critiques about the common sources of sexual inequality and oppression. Increasingly, feminists in both western and non-western countries agree that norms of gender equality are relevant to all peoples.

This last discussion moves us towards the second main source of ambivalence within third world feminism towards universalist feminism: the concern for women’s agency. Third world feminism wants to ensure that third world women are depicted as active participants in their cultures, not as its passive victims. Third world feminism sometimes claims that universalist theories come across as paternalist and colonialist because they represent western practices and customs as progressive, while non-western traditions are seen as backwards and repressive to women. Thus, for example, Mohanty indicts Perdita Huston’s well-known study of third world women because it succumbs to this problem: “for Perdita Huston, women in the third-world countries she writes about have ‘needs’ and ‘problems,’ but few if any ‘choices’ or the freedom to act.”<sup>61</sup> This argument says “a set of universal norms as benchmarks for the world’s various societies” shows “too little respect for people’s freedom as agents.”<sup>62</sup> However, as Martha Nussbaum points out, this objection itself indicates that third world feminists are subscribing to at least one universal norm: the principle that everyone should have the freedom to make choices for themselves. “[A] commitment to respecting people’s choices hardly seems incompatible with the endorsement of universal

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<sup>60</sup> Narayan, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 206.

<sup>62</sup> Nussbaum, WHD, 51.

values. Indeed, it appears to endorse explicitly at least one universal value, the value of having the opportunity to think and choose for oneself.”<sup>63</sup>

As Okin and other feminists – from both the universalist and third world camps – have pointed out, there are features of traditionalist societies that mitigate against this feminist desire to protect women’s agency. Some cultures believe that women ought to be subservient and obedient to men. Leaders of such cultures also invoke claims of paternalism and colonialism when attempts are made to promote gender equality in cultures that reject this principle. The main rationale behind this position is that group members, being more familiar with their cultures than outsiders, are better equipped to assess the authenticity of practices and traditions that are called into question. But feminists should question this assumption for two reasons. The first reason can be called the spokesperson problem: who should decide what traditions are authentic and when changes are acceptable? If the only legitimate criticisms of a culture must come from those who are members of it, feminists worry that the spokesperson’s role typically falls to the privileged men of a culture, whether western or non-western. Men, therefore, most often get the chance to explain to the dominant culture or other societies which traditions or practices are so sacred and central to the character and identity of their own culture that they must be immune to change. Feminists argue that such claims about the sanctity and significance of cultural traditions are often highly selective and self-serving. Narayan calls the pattern created by such claims the ‘myth of continuity.’ Cultural traditionalists pick and choose which cultural practices may become westernized and which are sacred. Often, she argues, those innovations condemned as western are the same ones which would see improvement in the status of women: “[S]uch ‘selective labelling’ enables Hindu fundamentalists to characterize Indian feminist issues as

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 51.

symptoms of 'Westernization' even while they skilfully use contemporary media such as television to propagate their ideological messages. Their commitment to 'Indian traditions' seems unconcerned about whether the entry of television into Indian homes affects our 'traditional way of life'!"<sup>64</sup> Thus, the privileged and powerful leaders of a cultural group may collaborate in dramatic changes to 'traditional culture' while at the same time branding women's equality activists traitors to their culture or the dupes of western feminists.<sup>65</sup>

The problem with allowing certain privileged voices to construct the character of a culture is that such a construction will certainly be partial. Thus, when third world feminists maintain that change must come from within, they must be cognizant of *which* voices from within are allowed to speak. When third world feminism posits that western ideas and values are alien to their cultures, they might simultaneously be denying traditions of resistance within the culture and implying that it is an unchanging monolith. Ann Elizabeth Mayer reminds us that "[i]f we were to take seriously the claim that one can have the principle of male/female equality only in societies in which the local culture and religion have been geared to accept such an ideal, we would have to regard equal rights for women in the West as equally illegitimate, since the struggle to introduce feminist principles went against the grain of Western culture."<sup>66</sup> We should be careful not to contribute to the reification of a culture in our zeal to avoid imposing 'alien' ideas on it. Furthermore, avoiding colonialist

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<sup>64</sup> Narayan, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Calls to retain the purity of a traditional culture appear to fall more heavily on the shoulders of women than men. For example, Partha Chatterjee has argued that during India's struggle for freedom from British rule women became the repositories of Indian spiritualism and culture. The primary requirement of the nationalist movement was to retain Eastern spiritualism, and Indian women were meant to protect and nurture that quality, that "difference," the essence of India's identity. Which reforms to permit in Indian society were decided upon by reference to a gendered dichotomy: men, and things associated with men, could be westernized, but women must never lose their spiritual virtues because that would entail the loss of India as a nation. Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 625-29.

<sup>66</sup> Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Cultural Particularism as a Bar to Women's Rights: Reflections on the Middle Eastern Experience," in *Women's Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives* ed. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183.

impositions from the west does not necessarily restore third world women's agency. As Narayan observes,

Trying to make sure that we do not claim to speak for or represent 'all women' is certainly to be recommended, but that move does not in itself guarantee that those for whom we do not claim to speak are ensured access to the means of public articulation of their own positions and interests.<sup>67</sup>

In our haste to avoid insensitive and clumsy over-generalizations about the condition of women, do we go too far and leave the very vulnerable without any voice at all, never mind a culturally-specific feminist one?

The second reason feminists should doubt that legitimate calls for cultural changes can only come from members of a community can be called the 'deformed preferences problem.' This refers to the idea that women in sexist and oppressive cultures might be so accustomed to their oppression that they are unable to formulate and articulate defenses of their own best interests. (It is also sometimes referred to as the 'false-consciousness' problem.) Oppressed people may express deformed preferences because they downgrade their expectations about what they are due. Just because some women might *choose* sexual inequality, that does not mean they are not therefore unequal.

The deformed preferences problem relates to the spokesperson problem in the sense that when women themselves are spokespersons for their community, feminists are concerned that those women represent accurately women's true interests. Some argue that older women are unlikely to be able to do so because their acceptance of their own subordination is total. Okin's concern for this problem is so pronounced that she pleads for policy-making that explicitly takes the views of young women and girls into account, "since

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<sup>67</sup> Narayan, 37.

older women are often co-opted into reinforcing gender inequality.”<sup>68</sup> Even if older women are cognizant of their own oppression, they might still act against the best interests of their daughters. For example, Narayan maintains that Indian mothers communicate contradictory messages to women of her own generation: “They give voice to the hardships and difficulties of being a woman that have marked their lives, teaching us the limitations and miseries of the routine fates that await us as women, while also resisting our attempts to deviate from these cultural scripts.”<sup>69</sup> Older Indian women try to curb their daughters’ unconventional behaviours because such transgressions reflect back on themselves, revealing their failure as mothers to raise their daughters “correctly.”

Because of the spokesperson and deformed preferences problems, universalist feminism resists the idea that only insiders should enforce change. Okin maintains that “some of the best feminist social critics are ‘inside-outside critics’; that is, persons from within a culture who at some point in life have experience outside of that culture that makes them critical of at least some of its practices. The work of many such feminists is compelling, informed by detailed knowledge and understanding...”<sup>70</sup> However, being a member or former member of a culture is not necessarily a precondition for being a critic of it, nor is it always sufficient. Outsiders, through careful and sensitive study of a society, may become legitimate, authoritative critics of some aspects of its worst cultural practices.<sup>71</sup>

Coming to terms with very little [as some women do in some cultures, for example] is no recipe for social justice. Thus it is, I believe, quite justifiable for those not thoroughly imbued with the inegalitarian norms of a culture to come forth as its constructive critics. Critical distance, after

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<sup>68</sup> Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” 24.

<sup>69</sup> Narayan, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Okin, “Feminism, Women’s Human Rights and Cultural Differences,” 46.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

all, does not have to bring with it detachment: committed outsiders can often be better analysts and critics of social injustice than those who live within the relevant culture.<sup>72</sup>

Through what she calls the “anthropologist’s route,” Okin maintains that individuals may become a “good critic of some harms done within a culture” by becoming “very knowledgeable about a culture without either becoming co-opted by it or losing the capacity to be critical of some aspects of it.”<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately, the ambivalences evident in third world feminist scholarship toward universalist feminism speak to concerns for women’s agency and voice. In the final section, I will show how one conception of universalist feminism explicitly protects and enhances the voices and agency of third world women.

### 3.4 Universalist Feminism: A Model

Universalist feminism identifies problems and concerns that it claims are common to women, regardless of cultural or national differences. Against postmodern feminism, it insists that it is *possible* to deploy concepts such as patriarchy in cross-cultural analyses; that not all theorizing must be radically localized, fragmented and partial. Against some third world feminists, universalist feminism insists that it is *appropriate* for such cross-cultural analyses to take place; that not all such theorizing is symptomatic of colonialism or repression of the ‘other’s’ voice. However, it is true that universalist feminism has a pretty small space in which it can legitimately move without becoming a totalizing project that extinguishes cultural pluralism. In his analysis of Okin’s essay, Robert Post argues that the “feminist enterprise” might lose “its status as a general set of constraints on permissible gender roles and [become] a full-blown articulation of a particular vision of gender roles

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<sup>72</sup> Okin, “Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences,” 19.

<sup>73</sup> Okin, “Feminism, Women’s Human Rights and Cultural Differences,” 47.

defined by measurable standards of equality.”<sup>74</sup> Post argues that this risk becomes more pronounced when feminists begin by saying that equality can be measured by women and men’s relative freedom and dignity, and then swapping those vaguer standards for seemingly more objective criteria such as disparities in power.<sup>75</sup>

But recall, Okin offers very little in the way of prescriptions for attaining cross-cultural feminist justice, beyond mere “encouragement” of a culture to become more egalitarian. Perhaps Post’s (and others) fears of a totalizing universalist feminism that extinguishes multiculturalism in its zeal to attain sexual equality can be put to rest by examining a more explicit set of prescriptions.

Martha Nussbaum’s work on women and justice represents one of the most developed theories of universalist feminism available. Her book, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, is the most exhaustive account of her theory to date, although she has addressed the issue in other places.<sup>76</sup> I think it defeats the concerns raised by postmodernists and third world feminists about the validity of the project as a whole and the threat it represents to non-western women’s agency.

Nussbaum cheerfully admits that her theory relies on an essentialist understanding of the human self. She argues that since we all have no trouble distinguishing humans from other beings, there must be some basic features or characteristics of humanness that are common to all peoples. This position can quickly raise the spectre of the ideal, archetypal human being. Anti-essentialists have argued that this sort of appeal to some transcendent,

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Post, “Between Norms and Choices,” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* 66.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>76</sup> See also Nussbaum’s *Sex and Social Justice*, Chapter 1; “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 242-269; “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defence of Aristotelian Essentialism,” 202-46; “Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings,” in *Women, Culture, and Development*, ed. Nussbaum and J. Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

fundamental features of humanity is arrogant and over-determinist: the ideal figure pretends to be neutral and universal only because his characteristics have been successfully defined as the referent, the 'one,' against which others are measured. But Nussbaum maintains that her essentialist understanding of humanness springs from a very humble, but fundamentally sturdy and worthwhile, foundation: our own human conversations about ourselves:

When we get rid of the hope of a transcendent metaphysical grounding for our evaluative judgments – about the human being as about anything else – we are not left with the abyss [as some anti-essentialists insist]. We have everything that we always had all along: the exchange of reasons and arguments by human beings within history, in which for reasons that are historical and human but not the worse for that, we hold some things to be good and others bad, some arguments to be sound and others not sound.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, Nussbaum insists, to go about producing a theory of the basic, essential qualities of the human being is not to aim for a lofty, idealized image of man that excludes most people. In fact, she argues, anti-essentialists themselves implicitly rely on these transcendent images as they counter-pose them to their own radically relativist or subjectivist accounts of human beings. They say, 'if we cannot have the one, true, coherent account of humanity, then we can only have our own radically individuated, isolated, subjective accounts.' Nussbaum argues that anti-essentialists prefer to say we cannot evaluate anything – such as accounts of humanness – rather than accept imperfect evaluations that spring from our own experiences. And this position, she insists, represents a "reaction of *shame* – a turning away of the eyes from our poor humanity, which looks so mean and bare – by contrast to a dream of another sort. What do we have here, these critics seem to say? Only our poor old human

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<sup>77</sup> Nussbaum, HFSJ, 213.



conversations, our human bodies that interpret things so imperfectly? Well, if that is all there is, we do not really want to study it too closely, to look into the distinctions it exhibits.”<sup>78</sup>

Once we dispense with both transcendent and extreme relativist accounts of human functioning, we can start to interrogate our common understandings of what makes us human. Nussbaum has pointed out that many of these understandings are basic and obvious. It involves the recognition that “each person has just one life to live, not more than one; that the food on A’s plate does not magically nourish the stomach of B; that the pleasure felt in C’s body does not make the pain experienced by D less painful...”<sup>79</sup> Thus, when we look at a group of people, we see that it is composed of individuals – we know where one human being leaves off and another one begins. We know that we are all mortal, and that at different stages in our lives, we are all helpless and vulnerable. These simple observations help to reinforce the individualist approach upon which Nussbaum builds her theory; one of its central principles is the “principle of each person as end.”<sup>80</sup> She maintains that this is very important to women because women are often seen and treated as means to someone else’s ends, rather than ends in their own right.

When we begin to look at ourselves closely and sensitively, Nussbaum maintains that we can produce a fairly detailed list of attributes individuals should possess in order to live fully human lives. This list constitutes her central ‘human capabilities.’ It consists of ten capabilities, ranging from the capability for life (“being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length”) to bodily integrity (“being able to move freely from place to place; having one’s bodily boundaries treated as sovereign...”) to play (“being able to laugh, to play, to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum, WHD, 56.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 5, 56, 74.

enjoy recreational activities”).<sup>81</sup> Nussbaum argues that the list reflects an “overlapping consensus” (to borrow John Rawls’ phrase) about what is essential to a worthy human life, based on years of cross-cultural dialogue with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.<sup>82</sup> Here, however, I am less concerned with the content of the list (although I generally agree with its components), than I am to demonstrate how it responds to the criticism that universalist feminism is destructive to ‘other’ women’s agency.

Essentially, Nussbaum’s version of universalist feminism protects women’s (and men’s) agency because it promotes capabilities, not functioning. Because this approach is about protecting the sphere of human choice to do or be certain things, it will never require of any woman a command performance of proper feminist practice. It does not ask her to take off the veil, for example, but it does ask that she be given the resources to make an authentic choice about whether or not she will wear it. There is room in this approach for women to choose to live “traditional” lives, which might, for example, involve hierarchical sexual relations.<sup>83</sup> Nussbaum argues that her list of capabilities represents universals “that are facilitative rather than tyrannical... [they] create spaces for choice rather than dragooning people into a desired total mode of functioning.”<sup>84</sup>

For Nussbaum, human beings’ inherent dignity is fulfilled when the essential human capabilities that comprise it are protected. That is why part of her project involves defending these capabilities as the foundation for “basic constitutional principles that should be

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 78-80.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>83</sup> This flexibility in her approach is, of course, problematic for many feminists. At the very least, it opens up the discussion above about deformed preferences. How can we be sure women really are choosing to live traditional lives if, in our view, they have not really been provided with the resources to assess other options? These sorts of questions about how choice and freedom are constrained are beyond the scope of this paper. For an interesting dialogue on the issue, see the comments by al-Hibri (44-45), Nussbaum (“A Plea for Difficulty,” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* 108-111, hereinafter PFD), and Okin’s response (125-127), in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*

<sup>84</sup> Nussbaum, WHD, 59.

respected and implemented by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, she is not just setting out these capabilities as rather ephemeral *philosophical* ideals, but instead, she maintains they represent actual *political* goals for which regimes should aim.<sup>86</sup> The issue is particularly urgent for women – everywhere in the world, “unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities.”<sup>87</sup> And it needs to be addressed particularly urgently in the developing world. As Nussbaum explains, “Gender inequality is strongly correlated with poverty. When poverty combines with gender inequality, the result is acute failure of central human capabilities.”<sup>88</sup> This attentiveness to the situations of women in developing nations, combined with its capacity to protect and support women’s scope for choice, makes Nussbaum’s model of universalist feminism one that should be acceptable to all feminists who believe in the equal worth, agency and dignity of women and men.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the fact that she defends them only as political goals represents another way that Nussbaum’s theory avoids the tyrannical tendencies that Post locates in Okin’s approach. Nussbaum’s universalist feminism departs from other feminists who aim for a more comprehensive expression of gender equality in all spheres of society. Nussbaum explains that her approach to the central human capabilities is a *political* liberal, rather than a moral or comprehensive liberal, approach. A political liberal “begins from the fact of reasonable disagreement in society, and the existence of a reasonable plurality of comprehensive doctrines about the good” (PFD, 108-109). That is, she supports the capabilities as specifically political goals, but remains agnostic about whether people ought to embrace them in other spheres of their lives. So, for example, her theory requires that citizens recognize women and men as fully equal in political spheres; but accepts that women and men might choose hierarchal relationships in other spheres. Okin, she suggests, would not accept this as a legitimate choice for women and would insist that gender equality must be pressed into private spheres as well. For Okin, Nussbaum writes, “liberal values of autonomy and dignity pervade the fabric of the body politic, determining not only the core of the political conception, but many noncore social and political matters as well” (PFD, 108). Nussbaum, in a sense, asserts that her position gives more room for individual liberty – especially, the liberty of women to make choices to restrict their liberty – than Okin’s. This is true, but I think it is easy to be a political liberal once comprehensive liberals have done all the work to establish this “given” background of liberty and opportunity by stepping beyond the borders of the “core” political matters to the “non-core” social ones. To my mind, while the theoretical distinction between liberal and comprehensive liberalism is easy to make out, the practical distinction is very fuzzy.

<sup>87</sup> Nussbaum, WHD, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

THIS CHAPTER IS LONGER than I intended it to be, and yet it is still incomplete. I have said a lot about Martha Nussbaum, but I have not once mentioned Jayamma and Vasanti, two Indian women who are the real protagonists of her book. These women's lives are marked by hardships that are likely totally alien to most western women. Jayamma, for example, carried 500 to 700 pounds of bricks on her head just about every day for 45 years to make her meagre living. Vasanti, although she is from India's middle-class, never went to school.<sup>89</sup> But for all the concrete specificity of these women's lives, they are not unintelligible to us:

In Jayamma's tenacity and feistiness, Vasanti's desire to serve the community and to show that she is a good human being, the intense desire of both to women for independence and economic self-sufficiency, Jayamma's complex pride in her family, Vasanti's affection for her female friends, the desire of both to have some money and property in their own names, in general in their search for competence and mastery and control over the conditions of their lives – we see efforts common to women in many parts of the world.<sup>90</sup>

Instead of illustrating these common efforts and aspirations, I have packaged the debate about the validity of universal feminist norms of equality and justice into three philosophical positions – postmodern, third world and universalist – to communicate the same idea. But this packaging, which attempts to compartmentalize and organize lives and viewpoints which are overlapping and confused, in a sense betrays the real strength of the universalist feminist scholarship defended here. At its best, universalist feminism displays a profound recognition for and sensitivity to the diversity and richness of women's lives, and from these observations, derives its central, non-relative principle of the fundamental equal worth and dignity of women and men.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 18, 23.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 22.

## CONCLUSION

IN THIS PAPER I have set a partial historiography of contemporary feminist political theory within a framework of two competing understandings of justice. The more recently dominant understanding – cultural justice or the politics of difference – is a deeply empowering one for groups who have been, and are, disadvantaged in society. This paradigm exposes the myth of ‘universal man’ and the corollary ideal of common citizenship, modelled on his rational, autonomous character and limited to his basic needs for a particular basket of ‘primary goods.’ The paradigm of cultural justice replaces him with an ideal of differentiated citizenship that responds to real citizens’ identity-related differences. On this view, our moral equality derives not from our common rights as citizens, but instead from the recognition that we are all equal in our differences from one another. Social justice comes to depend not on the equal distribution of primary goods or resources, but instead on the extension of equal recognition and respect to individuals, differentiated as they are along the lines of class, ethnicity, gender, religion, ability and sexuality.

However, I have argued that this deep understanding and acceptance of difference can go wrong, from the perspective of an emancipatory feminist project, in at least two ways. First, in Chapter 2, I asserted that cultural justice can be too uncritical of women’s identity-related differences, such as women’s allegedly greater capacity for caring and their greater affinity for peacefulness and cooperation. I have argued that cultural feminism’s celebration of women’s differences (as they have manifested in some cultures some of the time) may preclude critical assessment of the processes of domination that have shaped those differences.

Second, as I discussed in Chapter 3, respect for, and recognition of, differences can spiral into moral relativism. Postmodern feminism emphasizes primarily what divides women from each other, because it views the project of theorizing what unites us as overdeterminist, essentialist and colonialist. This critique, combined with its deep scepticism about the possibility of theory-making more generally, means the tradition holds a vision of politics that cannot justify its own commitment to justice.

These problems with joining feminism to cultural justice represent some of the main reasons that I have argued feminism should not abandon its longstanding engagement with the more conventional paradigm of economic or distributive justice. While agreeing that the pursuit of strict socio-equality between women and men sometimes works to women's disadvantage or contorts women's experience, in Chapter 1, I argued that that goal is sound insofar as the distribution of unpaid work is concerned. The paradigm of distributive justice makes it possible to identify when and how social institutions permit or encourage unjustified inequalities of income and power skewed by gender.

In Chapter 3, I continued to rely on distributive understandings of justice, but moved from a consideration of women's condition within a state to an international perspective. I was concerned with addressing how a conception of justice that is based on universalist understandings of the human being could be deployed by feminists in non-western cultural contexts without threatening the perspectives and agency of non-western peoples. I argued that Martha Nussbaum's framework of human capacities can do this because it asks that human beings be guaranteed the resources that enable their fundamental human capacity to make choices about their lives, rather than outlining a set of human functions that each person must enact.

Ultimately, I have argued three main points. First, that an ethic of economic egalitarianism in feminist political theory need not ignore or suppress women's differences. Second, that feminism should invoke women's collective rights or interests only in order to facilitate women's equal integration into all spheres of society, not to indicate their essential differences from men, or antipathy for 'men's values.' And third, 'universalist' feminist notions about the human self and the requirements of justice may underwrite the flourishing of all women, and need not threaten valuable cultural differences, nor individual freedoms.

There are at least two important questions about feminism, justice and equality that I have had to postpone here. The first concerns the proper relationship between (or priority to be given to) socio-economic and political equality. As Young, who sometimes appears to prioritize political over socio-economic equality, observes, "I cannot quarrel with the value of social and economic equality, but I think its achievement depends on increasing political equality as much as the achievement of political equality depends on increasing social and economic equality."<sup>1</sup> Implicit in the view I have defended here is the notion that attaining political equality between women and men is instrumental to attaining substantive socio-economic equality between them. In other words, increased representation of women in legislatures is nice, mainly because it likely signals greater socio-economic equality between women and men, and less because of what it might indicate about the political equality of the sexes. Although I am aware of the limitations of this view, it seemed like an important

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<sup>1</sup> Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship," in *Feminism and Politics*, 410.

position to defend in light of the recent feminist tendency to disparage such 'levelling' views of gender equality because they suppress women's differences.<sup>2</sup>

The other perspective tends to view greater socio-economic equality between women and men as instrumental to the overriding goal of political equality of the sexes. In other words, greater material equality between women and men is nice, mainly because it would therefore permit greater numbers of women to participate in politics, not for the objective value of socio-economic equality. I think the prioritizing of political over economic equality is captured by Young's assertion that "we should not have to wait for a society-wide commitment to basic opportunity in order to have a degree of deliberative democracy that can give moral legitimacy to many political outcomes."<sup>3</sup>

Although I touched on this question in Chapter 1,<sup>4</sup> I could not give the issue the full attention it deserves. Young's invocation of deliberative democracy is just a hint of the interest that this relatively new field of democratic theory is generating among feminists as well as mainstream political theorists. The thrust of this literature is that we should design better models of political communication for our public institutions in order to boost the political equality of different groups of peoples. Many of these models attempt to bring identity-related differences into the public sphere at the same time as they try to disable those differences (such as deep economic disparities between groups) that typically stand as impediments to political equality and efficacy. Thus, I am interested to see how well various

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<sup>2</sup> I hope I have shown how contemporary equality feminism does not intend to suppress women's differences, but only means to call attention to the persistent economic dimension of gender inequality; a dimension that cannot be remedied merely by celebrating women's culture.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Marion Young, "Justice, Inclusion, and Deliberative Democracy," in *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement* ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154.

<sup>4</sup> Pages 27-29.



models of deliberative democracy deal with the problem of dealing simultaneously with political and socio-economic inequalities.

The second question that I have had to postpone concerns the extent to which liberals' commitment to the political equality of all persons can be pressed. The debate over this question arises in the context of contemporary societies that contain both liberal and non-liberal (or, to some, illiberal) communities. Recognizing this, a core question engaged by liberal theorists is whether the liberal democratic state is justified in enforcing the norm of the moral equality of all persons not only in the public, political sphere, but also in the private sphere. This question is of utmost importance to feminists because of the perception that non-liberal, 'traditional' communities often flout the moral equality of women and girls in the private sphere.

Some liberals (for example, Kymlicka and Okin<sup>5</sup>) argue that it is important that liberalism be a 'comprehensive' moral doctrine; that is, its principle of protecting the equal dignity and autonomy of all individuals should extend into the domestic sphere because that sphere significantly determines the scope for an individual's agency, choices and interests in the public sphere. Other liberals (for example, John Rawls and Nussbaum<sup>6</sup>) defend 'political liberalism.' Political liberalism is rooted in the assumption of moral pluralism, or the notion that people can hold complete and reasonable doctrines of the good that are nevertheless incommensurable with one another. On this view, the state can demand that all people be viewed as equal moral agents in the political realm, but it must refrain from imposing this norm in non-political realms.

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<sup>5</sup> Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, especially Chapter 8; Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?"

<sup>6</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Martha Nussbaum, "A Plea for Difficulty," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, 108-111.

As I intimated in Chapter 3,<sup>7</sup> I believe that the latter conception relies on the former more than it cares to admit, but this very preliminary view remains to be explored. One possible avenue for further research on this topic concerns conceptualizations of the public and private spheres. Feminist theorizing about the public/private dichotomy has complicated that distinction in important ways. Some have argued that the private sphere is a primary locus for the oppression of women and children,<sup>8</sup> while others have tried to rehabilitate the notions of 'private sphere' and 'privacy' for feminist aspirations.<sup>9</sup> I think these competing understandings of the nature of the private sphere and its relationship to the public sphere may have significant implications for the distinction that some theorists try to maintain between political and comprehensive liberal doctrines.

Even though I shall probably continue to worry about the place of economic egalitarianism in feminist political theory, I am encouraged by these recent investigations into the priority and the scope of political equality, and I hope to be able to contribute to them. Although contemporary political theory has retreated from egalitarian principles at such a rate that one famous theorist has pronounced "equality the endangered species of political ideals,"<sup>10</sup> perhaps these investigations represent a turnaround in that trend. My focus will likely remain on feminism, however. We will have an incomplete understanding of what makes equality a durable – if currently endangered – political ideal if it is uninformed by feminism's core intuitions about the equality of women and men.

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<sup>7</sup> Page 114, note 86.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Political Children: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Distinction Between Public and Private Life," in *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Uma Narayan (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 109-127.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

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