

Abstract for gender and class article

This article examines the treatment of women's oppression in feminist theory, focusing on the engagement of second wave feminists with the concept of class and its relation to gender. This examination is carried out with reference to British and French feminisms, identifying the main trends and shifts that have developed over the last 35 years and noting that while these are undoubtedly influenced by a particular national context they are also shaped by increasing European integration and social, political and cultural exchanges at a global level. The authors find evidence of a number of similarities in the questions that feminist theorists have asked in Britain and France but also demonstrate that there exist significant differences. They conclude that areas of convergent theoretical interests will extend along with cross-border flows of peoples and information.

GENDER AND CLASS IN BRITAIN AND FRANCE¹

If the main concern of all feminism across time and space has been the struggle to gain equality and autonomy *for* women, the issue of inequalities *between* women has been either emphasised or sidelined, depending on movement and context. This article sets out to assess feminist theory's treatment of women's oppression, focusing on the engagement of feminists with the concept of class in relation to gender over the last 35 years in France and Britain. Since the number of writings discussed is large, the reader is directed to detailed analyses *via* the notes.

The study of British and French feminisms within a European area studies context is relevant and interesting for two reasons. First, the traditional area studies emphasis on specialist single-country studies must give way to cross-national perspectives as European integration (both institutional and symbolic) combined with increasing cross-border flows of information, goods, services and people both within and into Europe means that previously classically sovereign nation-states are affected by the influence of surrounding states. Second, in this instance, France and Britain are worthy of comparison because, although each of these two nation-states has distinct political histories and cultures, the French and British feminist movements exhibit as many points of commonality as difference.

In both Britain and France, second wave feminism emerged against a background of radical left politics and inherited and modified aspects of its theory and practice, its

¹ With thanks to the referee for detailed and constructive comments.

divisions and conflicts. Theories of gender were thus constructed in relation to theories of class, whether they adopted, modified or rejected Marxist theory and methods. A comparison of the two countries reveals many similarities in terms of the debates which have taken place and the questions which have been posed. British and French feminists, at various times and in various ways, have asked whether the primary source of women's oppression is capitalism or patriarchy; how class and gender intersect (sometimes with other sets of social relations) to produce women's oppression; and what the relation is between the public and the private and between the labour market and the domestic sphere in the construction of class and gender.

This comparison also reveals a number of differences, however. During the 1970s, French feminist theory was dominated by radical² materialist feminism against a backdrop of conflict within the women's movement between radical materialists and class struggle feminists. This was in contrast to British feminist theory and practice which in the early years were highly influenced by socialist/Marxist feminism. A second notable area of divergence is the question of multiplicity of oppressions and intersections of sets of social relations, which, due to the influence of American feminism, played a central part in British feminist theory throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s, and only began to be recognised in France (*via* Quebec) in the 1990s. There is also a striking difference in the amount of feminist research which reaches publication in the two countries. Women's studies may struggle in Britain in relation to other disciplines, but in France the obstacles presented by a more intransigent university system with more rigid disciplinary

² Radical, in a feminist context, referring to the belief that the source of women's oppression is patriarchy, rather than class. This distinction is developed later in the article.

boundaries make it even harder for feminist academics to undertake and disseminate their work. Furthermore, its impact on mainstream thought is slight. Finally, the comparison reveals instances of exchange between French and British feminist theory. This has been sporadic and uneven and has had specific resonances in the receiving country. Translations of and commentaries on some of the main French materialist feminist texts are now available in Britain³, and individuals have been in contact since the 1970s, some maintaining a close working relationship. Diana Leonard and Christine Delphy's co-authored book, *Familiar exploitation*,⁴ disrupts the British/French divide. In France, however, there is still a clear distinction between theorists who read English and are familiar with debates taking place in English-language feminism, and those who do not. Interestingly, North American feminist theory when it is in French (i.e. from Quebec) is frequently accepted without comment, but when it is in English it is rejected or compartmentalised as 'Anglo-Saxon'.⁵

³ Christine Delphy, *Close to home: a materialist analysis of women's oppression*, (translated by Diana Leonard), London: Hutchinson, 1984; Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, sexism, power and ideology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995; Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins, *Sex in question: French materialist feminism*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1996; Stevi Jackson, *Christine Delphy*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1996.

⁴ Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard, *Familiar exploitation: a new analysis of marriage in contemporary Western societies*, Cambridge: Polity, 1992.

⁵ In the *Dictionnaire critique du féminisme*, Danièle Kergoat's sources for her entry on 'sexual division of labour and social relations of sex' are almost exclusively French, in contrast to Danièle Juteau's entry on 'ethnicity and nation' which overviews a largely Anglo-American literature, in which the category 'women' is challenged by black and postmodern feminists, leading to theories of intersections and non-additivity (meaning that multiple sources of oppression cannot simply be added together; their effect, if anything, is multiplicative). Juteau, though, is Chair of Ethnic Relations at the University of Montreal, Quebec. (Helena Hirata, Françoise Laborie, Hélène Le Doaré, Danièle Senotier (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique du féminisme*, Paris: PUF, 2000).

The movement of people and ideas across national boundaries has blurred the notion of 'British feminism', 'French feminism'⁶ or any other national feminism. Ironically, theory influenced by poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, and wrongly referred to as 'French feminism' has played a very minor role in feminist theory and practice in France. This is now widely recognised in the social sciences, although the misnomer and consequent distortions persist in literary and cultural studies. There is no pure 'national' theory which can be described and compared with another. But neither is there a universal feminist theory which is *not* influenced by its national origins, whether this influence is institutional (greater difficulties for feminist theorists in the French university system and publishing than in Britain, for example), cultural/linguistic (the resistance in France to the term 'gender') or political (for example, the relative positions and influence of women in parties and trade unions on the left). We argue, therefore, that it is still valid and indeed necessary to situate discussions of feminist theory within the social, political and cultural context in which it developed. However, the movement of theory, particularly within the academic communities of the US, Britain and Australia, means that some of the articles which have had the most impact on British feminist thought were not written in Britain. It would nevertheless be senseless to exclude them. In addition, British and French feminisms have both been situated in relation to American feminism and exposed in

⁶ See Gill Allwood, *French feminisms*, London: UCL, 1998, pp. 41-4.

different ways and at different times to its influence, whether this has meant taking on board, borrowing from, or reacting against aspects of it.⁷

During the early-mid 1970s, feminist theory was closely related to grassroots activism. By the end of the decade, as the movement demobilised and academic feminism gradually became established, this link became weaker, and during the 1980s, the split between the two was evident and, for some, a major cause for concern. Writings referred to here as ‘theory’ are therefore diverse and historically specific, academic publications gaining prominence during the period discussed. They are also chosen from those parts of British and French feminism which engaged specifically with the relation between gender and class and are therefore not representative of the whole spectrum of feminist thought in either country.

Background

One of second wave feminism’s fundamental tenets was that throughout history women have been structurally subordinated to men. Gender has therefore been seen to mark a crucial division in society between those who appropriate and exercise power (men) and those who are subjected to it (women).

From the late 1960s a number of feminists had argued that all women, once deprived of any other socio-economic and cultural advantages they may enjoy, are oppressed by the

⁷For example, as early as 1970, the far left periodical *Partisans* devoted a double issue to women’s liberation and included a large number of American feminist contributions (*Partisans*, no. 54-5, July-October 1970).

patriarchal system under which they live. In the body of theory that it began to develop in the 1960s, early American second wave feminism (which was to influence feminisms in other countries) argued that fundamentally women's oppression, which was tied to sexual difference, flowed from the centrality of biological reproduction. Thus it was asserted that patriarchy's institutionalisation of biological reproduction (through marriage, the family and so on) had resulted in barriers against women's entry into the public realm of production, that it continued to shape women's aspirations and expectations as to their role(s) in society and advanced their entry into the lowest echelons of the economy.

However, as feminist theory evolved, the meaning of its central element 'reproduction' began to be challenged in the early 1970s so that its almost exclusive association with 'biology' ceased and it came to be used in the context of women's relation to economic, political and socio-cultural structures. Socialist/Marxist⁸ and other materialist feminists in Britain and France (including Michèle Barrett,⁹ Sheila Rowbotham,¹⁰ Juliet Mitchell¹¹

⁸ One could debate at length over the distinctions between the terms 'socialist' and 'Marxist'. For the purpose of this article, both socialist and Marxist feminisms draw from the methodology and methods in the social sciences and from the Marxist tradition of materialist theory, choosing to emphasise the importance of history and society in determining the roles that women play and the position they occupy within socio-economic and political structures. Some add to or replace elements of these methodologies and theory with interpretations which derive from psychoanalysis, e.g. Juliet Mitchell. Furthermore, while socialist feminism (encompassing both activist inspired and intellectual theory) can be said to consider gender and class as important elements in the analysis of women's position and roles in contemporary society, Marxist feminism, a sub-set of socialist feminism, subscribes more closely to the Marxist analysis of class as an over-riding determinant of relations of exploitation and oppression.

⁹ Michèle Barrett, *Women's oppression today: problems in Marxist feminist analysis*, London: New Left Books, 1980.

¹⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Women's consciousness, man's world*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; *Dreams and dilemmas*, London: Virago, 1983.

and Christine Delphy¹²) firstly stretched the concept of reproduction to include within it all that women did in relation to housework and raising children and secondly demonstrated how the concept of reproduction in its 'stretched' form helped to understand links between gender and the economy. These feminists highlighted what classic Marxist theory left out: that an enormous amount of work was being carried out, for free, within the private sphere of the home, by women. While this work may not have generated surplus value¹³ and thus counted as productive labour as in the classic Marxist account, it did contribute to the sustenance and reproduction of capitalism. They began to talk about the sexual division of labour and the ways in which it assigned work to men and women along the principles of separation (men undertook work in the productive, public sphere while women carried out work within the private, reproductive sphere) and hierarchy (work done by men carried a higher value than work done by women). They also began to reassess other elements of Marxist theory. Consequently, gender and class came to be considered together in the writings of the theorists mentioned above and in the activism of large parts of the feminist movement in Western Europe at least. It should be noted that the reassessment of Marxist theory in relation to women was reinforced and strengthened by high levels of working-class women's trade union activism during the late 1960s and early 1970s throughout Europe.¹⁴

¹¹ Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and feminism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

¹² Delphy, *Close to home; L'Ennemi principal: Tome 1*, Paris: Syllepse, 1998; and *Tome 2: Penser le genre*, 2001.

¹³ Surplus value is extracted from a worker when s/he is paid less for a commodity produced than its true value which is measured in terms of the labour power (or amount of socially useful labour time) expended by the worker in producing it.

¹⁴ In both Britain and France, the women's liberation movements emerged in the immediate aftermath of a period of intense working-class activity. In Britain, women workers were involved in the famous Ford

The influence of the Marxist paradigm in feminist theory and politics of the early to mid-1970s weakened. From the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, second wave feminism and the body of ideas which underpinned it evolved further and moved away from making and maintaining links between gender and class. This was due to factors common to both countries as well as to certain country-specific influences. First, among the common factors was the gradual legitimising of second wave feminism's ideas and its entry into society and state at all levels; second, the questioning within the feminist movement of old left style Marxist/socialist theory when it became clear that the working-class struggles of the late 1960s and early-mid 1970s had failed even to dent the divisions and hierarchies upon which capitalism was built. More specifically, in France, Marxist theory was being discredited along with the party (the Parti Communiste Français - PCF) which had claimed the right to be its sole official proponent. In addition, from 1981, feminist theory and action was affected by the presence of a Socialist government (as discussed later). In Britain, the development and predominance of radical feminist theory¹⁵ came to represent a strong intellectual force within academic women's studies. Even more

sewing machinists' equal pay strike of 1968 (from which point the British women's liberation movement is dated), the Leeds clothing workers' strike of 1970 and the British Post Office telephonists' strike of 1971. In France, women participated massively in the workers' strikes of May/June 1968 (especially in the clothing and food industries and in highly feminised sectors such as post and telecommunications) and continued to be involved in various strike actions in the early 1970s, for instance at the Lip factory in Besançon.

¹⁵ Radical theory, best represented in the writings of American feminists such as Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone and later Mary Daly and Dale Spender, falls into the category of non-materialist theory. It contends that women's oppression is due to the dominant ideology of patriarchy which is not a product of class society and more specifically capitalism. In France, however, radical feminist theory at this time was

significantly there was a shift to questions of culture and identity within academic feminism, resulting from the growing influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism and from the critiques of feminism by black and Third World women, which highlighted the issue of multiplicity and diversity and detracted from the dualism of gender and class.

While radical feminism gained ascendancy from the mid-1970s, it was nevertheless criticised for failing to account for divisions and inequalities between women. Some of the most vehement criticism came from black women and was fuelled by events which made their presence and position visible. Such events included the Mexico 1975 UN conference in honour of International Women's Year. The conference highlighted massive inequalities between its participants, especially between those from the West and Third World countries. Many Third World country participants argued that they had more in common with men of their own class and colour than with the Western feminists present.

In Britain, strikes waged in favour of union recognition by Asian women at Grunwicks (in Willesden, North London), in 1979 and at Chix (in Slough, South West London), in 1980 sent similar messages to white radical feminists. The visibility afforded to black women in these circumstances inspired the setting up of separate black women's organisations such as the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) and the Southall Black Sisters in 1979 and as a result black feminists in

materialist. It also viewed patriarchy as the primary source of women's oppression but this conception of patriarchy had a materialist base.

Britain have, over the last fifteen to twenty years, forced the issue of gender and class along with that of race back into feminist theory.¹⁶

In France, three key factors have prevented feminists from considering the concept of gender along with those of class and race. First, the election and re-election of Socialist governments in the 1980s and 1990s¹⁷ obliged feminists, along with the wider left, to rally to left-wing governments and abandon class rhetoric and politics. Second, the 1980s and 1990s marked the entry and rise of the racist extreme right in French politics. The reaction of progressive forces, including feminists, to racist politics was to denounce any emphasis on difference and ‘anglo-saxon’ strategies of multiculturalism and to fall back on the strong traditions of universalism which underpinned French republicanism. This explains the hostile position of a large proportion of French feminists in 1989 to three Muslim schoolgirls who were excluded from a school in Creil (in Oise, north of Paris) for wearing headscarves seen to challenge the principles of a secular republican education. Third, the late arrival (after 1973/4) of non-European migrant women and their status as dependants of a socially and politically excluded male migrant community has meant that a second generation of confident, upwardly-mobile women able and willing to challenge the predominance of the categories of class and gender has only just started to emerge.

The struggle for the ascendancy of class: 1968 - 1978

¹⁶ See, for example, Avtar Brah, ‘Difference, diversity, differentiation’, in J. Donald & A. Rattansi (eds.), *Race, culture and society*, London: Sage, 1992.

¹⁷ The year 1981 saw the election of the first Socialist government after 23 years of right-wing rule. This was followed by Socialist victories in 1988 and 1997 (interrupted by a conservative majority from 1993-7).

In France and Britain, the early years - 1968 to 1970 - of the feminist movement were marked by the influence of American radical feminism in which gender was clearly privileged over class so that the question of inequalities between women was glossed over. But from 1970 socialist/Marxist feminists began to apply Marxist theory to women's oppression and fought to place class at the heart of feminist activism and theory.

Early American second wave feminism, which was unequivocally opposed to any kind of class analysis of women's oppression, argued that the latter was caused by patriarchy or male power.¹⁸ Patriarchy was seen as ubiquitous and ahistorical in that it was reproduced through psycho-social conditioning within the family, a feature common to all economic and social systems in history. Thus, as patriarchy or male domination existed over and above the particular economic system in which it operated, then women's oppression could not be explained by class or through Marxist analysis. Furthermore, if women wished to liberate themselves from this oppression, they had to wage a sexual struggle and a separate revolution from that of class.¹⁹ In Britain these ideas were taken up by small groups of women for example the Tufnell Park Group, made up of mainly American women who were later to have an important influence upon the London Workshop²⁰ in which the issue of gender and class politics would be fiercely contested:

¹⁸ See Kate Millet, *Sexual politics*, London: Sphere, 1971.

¹⁹ See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of sex*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1971, p. 11.

²⁰ The London Workshop consisted of several London-based feminist groups which organised action around issues such as equal pay. It was not a cohesive group in terms of any theoretical position as it included Maoists, Trotskyists, anarchists, Labour Party activists and others. It produced the newsletter *Shrew*.

We were mostly political, mostly not Marxists because our experience and identification was American new Left of the first half of the sixties type, i.e. before Marx and Lenin.²¹

In France, early theories of patriarchy found acceptance with radical feminists²² who asserted that all women belonged to the same class under the system of patriarchy or phallocracy in which all men were implicated in oppressing women. The main enemy, they claimed, was patriarchy and not capitalism.

However, while the concept of patriarchy went largely unchallenged in the USA, this was not the case in either Britain or France. The American women's movement had emerged and developed in a political context which lacked a strong labour movement, and any tradition of left-wing party politics (mainstream or otherwise) which may have existed had been destroyed during the period of McCarthyite witch-hunts. The British and French contexts were very different. Britain had a relatively strong labour movement, with approximately fifty per cent of all workers belonging to a trade union in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While unionisation rates were not high in France, the labour movement had developed within a tradition of militancy and was highly visible as a result of workers' activism. Moreover, as mentioned previously, both Britain and France had in the early 1970s witnessed high levels of strike action, in which women played an important role. This led large numbers of women on the left and those in trade unions to

²¹ Cited by Rowbotham, *Dreams and dilemmas*, p. 35.

²² In France, the radical tendency of the Women's Liberation Movement (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes - MLF) was called 'féministes révolutionnaires'.

view class struggle as a significant part of the fight for women's liberation and they began to discuss women's oppression within left-wing organisations for the first time. Sheila Rowbotham recalls how the fledgling International Marxist Group's women felt able to raise the question without being dismissed:

The Fords (sic) women ... helped to make the question of women's specific oppression easier to discuss on the left. ... Very defensively at first and with no theoretical justification, only our own feelings, women on and around the student left began to try and connect these feelings to the Marxism they had accepted only intellectually before.²³

One finds then that Marxist/socialist and materialist feminists, in raising the question of women's oppression, began to question early American theories of patriarchy that had inspired certain sections of the women's movement in France and Britain. It is impossible to summarise here all the theories that were formulated in criticism of early patriarchy theory. What follows, therefore, is a selective examination of the theories of those who made singularly important contributions to debates about gender.

Britain

Distinctive socialist/Marxist contributions during this early period included those of Sheila Rowbotham, Selma James²⁴ and individuals (often men) writing for the *New Left Review*.²⁵ Their writings were linked by the question of whether or not Marxist concepts

²³ Rowbotham, *Dreams and dilemmas*, p. 34.

²⁴ Mariarosa Dallacosta and Selma James, *The Power of women and the subversion of the community*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972.

²⁵ For example, Wally Seccombe, 'The Housewife and her labour under capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 83, 1974, pp. 3-24.

could be applied to the situation of women in order to ascertain the causes of their oppression: is it capitalism or patriarchy that determines women's subordination *vis-à-vis* men? In order to make sense of the attempts by feminists such as Rowbotham to work within a Marxist framework, it is useful to remind ourselves of how classical Marxism views women's oppression.

Classical Marxist theory would argue that class, which comes into being through relations of exploitation²⁶ and oppression, is the major determinant of women's oppression. Marxist theorists who attempted to explain women's specific exploitation under capitalism argued that women form a 'superexploited' part of the working class which is segregated according to the needs of capitalist expansion. In its never-ending search for profits, capitalism creates two categories of worker of which the first, mainly men, is situated in a capital intensive sector of the economy where complex tasks requirespecial training and experience and where relatively well paid workers acquire sector-specific (often firm-specific) expertise and enjoying stable employment conditions hence often becoming a fixed factor of production in the same way as the capital equipment with which they work. The second category of workers is to be found within a labour intensive sector (light manufacturing and services) within which semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, in poor, increasingly casualised working conditions, attached to low pay and status, multiply in response to rising demand for goods and services but which can be sharply reduced during periods of economic stagnation. The majority of working women find themselves in this second category. Women therefore can constitute

²⁶ In Marxist theory, exploitation occurs when 'surplus value' is extracted as illicit profit from the worker.

a significant part of a reserve army of labour to be used and discarded as required by capital.²⁷ Women's only strategy to rid themselves of the relations of superexploitation and hence oppression is to join working-class struggle against capitalism.

While Marxism accounts for women's superexploitation and oppression within the framework of the forces of capitalism, it does not explain why women end up in the second category described above. Why are men not confined in the same way to the reserve army of labour? What are the forces which place women in a superexploited position *vis-à-vis* men? These are the questions that Marxist/socialist and other materialist feminists found unanswered. In order to find solutions, they began to examine other areas of activity in which women operate, i.e. those of household labour and childcare. These areas were ignored by classical Marxism on the premise that while work carried out within them helped to sustain capitalism, it did not produce surplus value and hence could not be seen as productive labour.

Marxist/socialist feminists began to formulate what came to be known as domestic labour theory. One of the key features of this theory is a recognition of the family as a central institution within capitalism. Marxist feminists looked to the work of Friedrich Engels²⁸ who had argued that the family in its nuclear form had emerged under capitalism because capitalists required legitimate heirs in order to pass on their property and thus guarantee the continuing development of capitalist production. Women therefore had to be

²⁷ Referred to by Marx as the 'industrial reserve army'. For an explanation of the different forms of the 'relative surplus-population' see Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974, pp. 600-603.

controlled in marriage (through ideology based on naturalist or biological thinking) so that the owners of the means of production could be sure who their true heirs were. Building on Engels' analysis of the family, socialist/Marxist feminists argued that women are subjected to a unique form of oppression by virtue of their exclusion from paid work and their confinement to the domestic sphere in which not only did they undertake the original task of reproducing legitimate heirs but they also, and more importantly, cared for the existing labour force and reproduced and nurtured future generations of workers without which capitalism was unable to develop and continue. Hence the family acted almost as a 'sub-mode of production' of capitalism. While men as individuals may gain from this division of labour, the principal beneficiary of unpaid domestic work is the capitalist class; and, while the general imposition of the nuclear family by capitalism meant that all women were controlled regardless of their class, the primary source of women's oppression was the exploitation of one class by another. For Rowbotham and other Marxist/socialist theorists, in the early 1970s at least, it was clear that women's liberation was not possible without the struggle for socialism.

Domestic labour theory held sway as a counter-response to early American patriarchal theories of women's oppression in early-mid 1970s Britain. It did not, however, gain acceptance in France, or if it did so among Marxist feminist activists, it did not lead to the publication of a body of work.

²⁸ See his *Origin of the family, private property and the state*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.

France

The French women's liberation movement, the MLF, emerged out of and was greatly influenced by the post-68 far left. This affected its discourse and practice, and explains the significance of one of the main sources of conflict within the movement throughout the 1970s: the disagreement over the cause of women's oppression.²⁹ According to 'class struggle' feminists, the primary source of women's oppression was capitalism, whereas for 'radical' feminists, it was patriarchy.

Class struggle feminists were very active at the grassroots level. *Cahiers du féminisme*, produced by women associated with the Trotskyist Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR), appeared from 1977 until 1998, and class struggle feminists organised neighbourhood and workplace groups and women's sections of trade unions. They tried to instigate a feminist consciousness on the left, and there are some signs of success in the eventual adaptation of left and trade union policy on women and gender issues. They also brought some awareness to the feminist movement of the experiences and concerns of working-class women.

Theoretical production within the class struggle wing of the movement took place primarily in the Cercle Elisabeth Dimitriev, which was formed in May 1971 by women from the Trotskyist Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire (AMR). They were active both in left and feminist politics, although the strain of this 'dual activism' and the suspicion with

²⁹ The other main divisions were around sexual difference, opposing the differentialist 'Psychanalyse et Politique' and social constructionists, the most ardent of whom formed the *Questions féministes* collective;

which they were treated within the MLF and within their left organisations, led to most abandoning one or the other by 1977.³⁰

Radical feminists were more theoretically orientated than class struggle feminists and produced the longest running feminist theory journal: *Questions féministes (QF)/Nouvelles questions féministes (NQF)* (1977-97). It was in this journal that the work of radical materialist feminists such as Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Colette Guillaumin appeared. Rejecting the idea that the only or primary source of women's oppression is capitalism, these theorists were nevertheless heavily influenced by Marxism and applied aspects of Marx's method to their analysis of women's oppression.

QF feminists argued that the type of Marxism which was being articulated by the PCF could not explain why it was women, and not men, who occupied specific positions within capitalism. Marxism had difficulty accommodating women, so 'the family' was usually seen as a unit, the class of the man applying also to his wife/daughter. Inequalities within the family were attributed to ideology and explained in more or less explicitly biological or naturalist terms.

QF rejected all forms of biological or psychological explanation for women's oppression: its source, they argued, lay in social relations of sex which had a material base in the

and around sexuality, opposing, on the one hand, 'political lesbians' who believed that heterosexuality was collaboration with the enemy and, on the other hand, heterosexual and lesbian feminists who did not.

³⁰ Ruth Stegassy, 'Un désir d'ouverture', *Libération*, 17 February 1978, p. 11.

appropriation of women's labour by men. Just as within capitalism, the labour of the proletariat is appropriated by the capitalist class, so in patriarchy, the labour of women is appropriated by men. However, there is a difference in that it is not just women's labour that is appropriated, but their bodies which produce this labour.³¹ They claimed that the division of humanity into men and women was not natural and was therefore not a legitimate justification for the sexual division of labour. They argued that the appropriation of women's labour by men within the family constructed two sex classes in antagonistic relation to one another and gave social value to the otherwise insignificant anatomical differences between them.³² Genders, like classes, exist only in their relations to one another.³³ They used the concept of patriarchy to refer to the structural oppression of women by men, which could not be accounted for in terms of its use for capitalism or in terms of ideology with no material base.³⁴

QF feminism was marked not only by its relation to Marxism, but also by its separation from differentialist feminism,³⁵ the main proponents of which were associated, at least

³¹ Colette Guillaumin labels this appropriation 'sexage' from 'esclavage' (slavery) and 'servage' (serfdom). See Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir*, Paris: Côté-femmes, 1992, p. 16. The appropriation is both private (occurring within marriage) and collective (enacted by the whole sex class of men).

³² Christine Delphy, 'Le patriarcat, le féminisme et leurs intellectuels', *Nouvelles questions féministes*, no. 2, October 1981, pp. 59-74.

³³ For example, Colette Guillaumin, 'Question de différence', *Questions féministes*, no. 6, September 1979, pp. 3-21.

³⁴ Christine Delphy did not deny the role of ideology in the construction and reproduction of social relations of sex, and Guillaumin developed a detailed critique of 'the ideology of nature' which legitimates the material appropriation of women's labour force both individually within marriage and collectively by the whole sex class of men, but this is not the same as attributing women's oppression solely to ideology.

³⁵ See the editorial of the first issue of *QF* in 1977, which contains a critique of this 'néo-féminité'.

briefly, with the group *Psychanalyse et Politique*.³⁶ These two oppositions clarified *QF*'s goals: the eradication of patriarchy and therefore of the sex classes men and women.

Christine Delphy argued that the site of women's oppression is the domestic mode of production, which exists alongside the capitalist mode of production and within which women's labour is appropriated by their husband/partner. It is this exploitative labour relationship which gives rise to the classes 'men' and 'women':³⁷

The concept of class [...] implies that each group cannot be considered separately from the other, because they are bound together by a relationship of domination; nor can they even be considered together but independently of this relationship [...] The concept of class starts from the idea of social construction and specifies the implications of it. Groups are no longer *sui generis* constructed before coming into relation with one another. On the contrary, it is their relationship which constitutes them as such.³⁸

The idea that women constitute a class of their own was a radical challenge to mainstream sociology, which, whether Marxist or not, had always seen class as rooted outside the domestic sphere and had always seen members of the same family as belonging to the same class. Although feminists recognised that gender divisions cut

³⁶ Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray all passed through the group, although Cixous was the only one to maintain relations with it, publishing all her work with its publishing house (*des femmes*) between 1976 and 1982.

³⁷ For a detailed and useful analysis of Delphy's work, see Jackson. For an introduction to and selected articles by other French materialist feminists, see Leonard and Adkins.

³⁸ Delphy, *Close to home*, pp. 25-6.

across class divisions, they nevertheless tended to see gender and class as very different forms of inequality requiring different sorts of explanation. Delphy, however, saw each as rooted in a mode of production – domestic and capitalist – and each as examples of the oppression of one group by another. She thus applied the methods developed by Marx for class analysis to the analysis of the oppression of women. And in doing so, she attracted virulent critiques from Marxist feminists who continued to insist that the primary social division was class and that women were simply superexploited within the class system. A major criticism of Delphy's domestic mode of production theory was that it insisted that *all* women experienced patriarchal oppression, thus minimising the divisions between them. But, according to Delphy, regardless of the differences in standard of living, and regardless of their class location within the capitalist mode of production, women occupy the same location within the domestic mode of production and therefore constitute a class of their own:

The appropriation of their labour within marriage constitutes the oppression common to all women. Destined as women to become ‘the wife of’ someone, and thus destined for the same relations of production, women constitute but one class. When they participate in capitalist production, women enter additionally into a second relation of production [...]. Within the [proletariat], they constitute a superexploited caste, as is well known. This superexploitation is clearly connected to their specific, familial exploitation as women.³⁹

³⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

Delphy's strength is in challenging the deeply engrained and rarely questioned notion that certain things are natural and therefore immutable: for example sexual difference and women's oppression. The representation of these things as natural, with the consequence that all we can hope to do is to tame them, is, she states, the very essence of ideology.⁴⁰

One of the weaknesses in her focus on the domestic mode of production as the means and the site of women's oppression was that it gave no indication of its relations to other systems of oppression beyond coexistence. Delphy fully recognised the existence of other systems of oppression, but insisted that her aim was to explain the workings of patriarchy as an *example* of a system of oppression. So although she could demonstrate that all women, whatever their social class, were oppressed by the sex class men (and in most cases by an individual man), she could not demonstrate the ways in which women are to different degrees oppressed within capitalism, and not infrequently by other *women*. Delphy's focus on women's common oppression was undoubtedly emphasised by the existence of an active and vocal class struggle tendency in the French women's movement. In her refusal to cede to their relentless insistence on the divisions between women and the unity of the working class, she also ignored other divisions between women, insisting that an understanding of the domestic mode of production would improve our understanding of oppression in general and of the struggles necessary to overcome it.

⁴⁰ Delphy, 'Genre et classe en Europe', in *L'Ennemi principal: Tome 2*, pp. 293-317. This is an abridged version of an article published in 1996 'Marxisme, féminisme et enjeux actuels des luttes en France', in Jacques Bidet and Jacques Texier (eds.), *Colloque Marx international*, Paris: PUF 1996.

During the 1970s, French and British feminist theory did not develop in isolation from one another. Some of Christine Delphy's papers were translated and circulated at the National Women's Liberation conferences she attended⁴¹, and members of the *Questions féministes* collective⁴² participated in a series of workshops with British feminists. In 1979, prominent feminist sociologists and Marxist/socialist feminists Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh published a review of Christine Delphy's work in the first issue of *Feminist Review*.⁴³ The following year, a detailed response appeared in the same journal⁴⁴, and translations of both the original critique and Delphy's reply were published in *QF*.⁴⁵

According to Barrett and McIntosh, Delphy had misunderstood Marxism and misused the concept of 'mode of production' which cannot accommodate two modes existing side by side, since this would produce a state which was both patriarchal and capitalist. In their understanding, the term could only be of use if it implied a dominant mode in any historical period by which the state could be defined. They also argued that Delphy had not explained the relation between women's domestic exploitation and their exploitation within capitalism. This, they claimed, was because she had not related the ideological to the economic. This led her to insist on patriarchy's independence from capitalism and on the priority of the struggle against women's domestic exploitation rather than against

⁴¹ A number of national Women's Liberation conferences were held in the 1970s, of which the first founding conference was held in Oxford in 1970 and the last in Birmingham in 1978. 'The Main enemy' was translated and distributed at the 1974 National Women's Liberation conference.

⁴² Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Monique Plaza.

⁴³ 'Christine Delphy: towards a materialist feminism?' *Feminist Review*, no. 1, January 1979, pp. 95-106.

⁴⁴ Delphy, 'A Materialist feminism is possible'.

their exploitation as workers or their ‘oppression in ideology’⁴⁶. Barrett and McIntosh also criticised Delphy’s portrayal of women as a class, which, they argued, hides the differences between them and overemphasises the economic at the expense of an analysis of the influence of ideology. Finally, they criticised Delphy’s work for ignoring childcare and consequently the whole question of the reproduction of the labour force, which was a central concern for contemporary British feminists, as shown above.

In addition to a careful response to each aspect of Barrett and McIntosh’s review, Delphy’s robust and lengthy reply⁴⁷ continued her critique of the left’s refusal to analyse gender and of Marxist/socialist feminists’ acceptance of the subordination of women’s struggle to class struggle. She argued that Barrett and McIntosh misconceive Marxism and that the real purpose of their critique was ‘the exemption of men from all responsibility for the oppression of women’. Delphy criticised the tendency of Marxists and Marxist feminists to adopt a religious attitude to the writings of Marx and to see them as a whole which is either accepted or rejected. She stated that there is a confusion between the materialist method and the Marxist analysis of capitalism which is one of the possible applications of this method, and she reiterated that what she was attempting to do was to construct a materialist analysis of women’s oppression. It is this project that Barrett and McIntosh dismissed.

⁴⁵ *Nouvelles questions féministes* no. 4, Autumn 1982.

⁴⁶ Barrett and McIntosh, p. 97.

⁴⁷ Delphy, ‘A Materialist feminism is possible’.

This review played a significant part in constructing a view in Britain of French materialist feminism. Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins write: 'Indeed, so powerful was the Marxist feminist critique of Delphy's work that there was a general failure to recognise the parallels between her 'dual systems' approach and that proposed by Heidi Hartmann⁴⁸ which was accorded great significance in feminist debates'.⁴⁹ This will be discussed below, as will Delphy's own move away from this position.

By 1978, it was becoming clear that the left-wing struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s to change the world had failed to produce real change for women and consequently there began a questioning of socialist/Marxist theories. In France, socialist/Marxist feminism represented by the class struggle tendency attempted, between 1974 and 1977, to shape the MLF into an organised and highly structured force which had a stake in French political and social life but it failed to do so. In the face of sustained opposition from the radical feminist wing of the movement, socialist/Marxist feminists either left the MLF or moved closer to the position of the radical feminists. In Britain, although socialist/Marxist feminism occupied more stable ground, it was constantly under attack from radical feminists who were initially involved in small, predominantly London-based organisations such as the Tufnell Park Group, the Camden Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the London Workshop and others and who later entered socialist publishing collectives such as *Shrew*, *Red Rag* and *Socialist Review*. For example, at a Women and Socialism

⁴⁸ Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union', *Capital and class*, no. 8, 1979, pp. 1-33.

⁴⁹ Leonard and Adkins, p. 10.

conference held in Birmingham in 1974, socialist/Marxist feminists were put in a defensive position:

... socialist women were challenged to demonstrate their commitment to women, all women, even fascist women, and to put women above 'politics'.⁵⁰

As such attacks grew more frequent between 1974 and 1978, socialist/Marxist feminists yielded to radical feminism on both theoretical and practical levels. This evolution was amply demonstrated in the Communist influenced women's magazine *Red Rag* which moved from a commitment to mixed working-class organised struggle towards cross-class women's liberation politics. Other prominent socialist/Marxist feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham, while not explicitly siding with radical feminists, nevertheless launched an attack on 'Leninist organisation', appearing to claim that change on the left could only be effected by women and the experience of the women's movement.⁵¹ It would be fair to state that the battle over gender and class, in both Britain and France, was not simply a product of the ideological positions of women in feminist politics but that such ideological positions evolved because the mainly educated, middle-class

⁵⁰ Sally Alexander and Sue O'Sullivan, cited by Lindsey German in *Sex, class and socialism*, London: Bookmarks, 1989, p. 178.

⁵¹ This position was put forward in Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright in *Beyond the fragments: feminism and the making of socialism*, London: Merlin, 1980. This publication was the inspiration behind the 1980 conference of the same name. Many years later Lynne Segal admitted that the publication and the conference allowed many feminists to justify 'their dismissal of class and labour movement politics' and to confirm 'their own more sectarian libertarianism, in opposition to any and all organisational and political structures'. See Lynne Segal, *Is the future female*, London: Virago, 1987, pp. 209-10.

women who were involved found it difficult to bridge class differences between themselves and working-class women at a practical and hence theoretical level.⁵²

Fragmentation: the 1980s

If the 1970s were characterised by the development and visibility of movement feminism and the production of a significant body of theory, then the 1980s marked a different course which was characterised by the legitimisation and institutionalisation of feminism and the deradicalisation of the movement. This was discernible in both Britain and France but developed in different contexts. What stood out in both countries, in the 1980s, was the replacement of big ideological and strategic debates within the movements by diverse and isolated issue-specific projects with long-term goals. Theory, increasingly divorced from grassroots activism, was produced by feminist academics. In Britain, the dominant theoretical influence during the 1980s was post-structuralism and theories of difference. Gender was increasingly seen as just one of a multitude of markers of identity, which needed to be theorised together. In France, Marxist paradigms continued to act as a referent amongst intellectuals.

In Britain, with the election of the right-wing Thatcher government and its political onslaught on progressive forces, radical feminists abandoned collective grass-roots activism believing that gains made in the 1970s could only be protected through entryism into state and civil society institutions. One institutional setting into which radical feminism made a successful entry was that of the academy. The 1980s saw the

⁵² The issue of abortion and the campaigns waged around it - in both countries - was, for a short time perhaps, a rare example of the bridging of the gap between women of different social classes.

establishment of women's studies courses and research in several institutions of higher education in Britain, and feminists in a variety of disciplines introduced feminist analyses and gender issues into their teaching and research. Women's studies research came to focus on single issues rather than 'grand theory'. Thus the big 1970s debates on gender and class were replaced by the study of violence against women, women's employment and so on and the study of such issues was underpinned primarily by patriarchy theory. Feminist activism, where it occurred, also focused on single issues. Examples are the Greenham women's peace protest which emerged in the early 1980s and the Miners' wives campaign against pit closures of the mid to late 1980s. Such single issue activism appealed to radical feminists of different persuasions.

In France, the demobilisation of collective grass-roots feminism and the entry of feminists into institutions was caused not only by divisions within the feminist movement but also by the establishment by the Socialists of the first Ministry for Women's Rights in 1981. The latter, it was believed, could be used to protect the achievements of the 1970s and to further feminist demands. The initially ambitious agenda of the Ministry was inspired by a radical feminist thinking and a number of feminists became involved as policy advisors in the areas of women's employment, education and training, health and social welfare. Feminist research was finally recognised by the universities and the CNRS⁵³, and although it originated in the MLF, it was no longer so closely associated with activism and movement debates.

⁵³ 'Centre national de la recherche scientifique', the national centre for scientific research. The first feminist research conference with official recognition and sponsorship was held in Toulouse in 1982 and was

In Britain and France, the emphasis on individual effort within institutions marked a shift away from collective solutions to women's oppression and hence from class struggle to primarily gender politics. The rise of identity politics, however, in the US and subsequently in Britain, led to the fragmentation of gender politics which could no longer be considered independently of ethnicity and sexuality, in particular. Feminist research projects were carried out in relative isolation and took off in different directions. During the 1980s, feminist theory, in common with feminist activism, became more fragmented and issue-centred. In France, however, unaffected by debates around multiplicity, some attempt was made to develop and refine the earlier big theoretical debate started by Delphy.

France

Some feminists building on the theoretical base constructed by the *QF* feminists, notably those involved in the Atelier Production Reproduction (APRE), argued that social relations of sex were not restricted to the domestic sphere, but were transversal, in other words, that they operated throughout society and cut across all other social relations including class.⁵⁴ They argued that labour and capital are gendered and that the sexual division of labour is one of waged labour's structural components.

followed by a series of research programmes and the establishment of a limited number of posts in women's studies.

⁵⁴ See for example, Danièle Combes and Dominique Fougeyrollas-Schwebel, 'Cadres théoriques d'analyse des rapports sociaux de sexe', in *Cahiers de l'APRE*, no. 3, September 1985, pp. 101-23.

Danièle Kergoat's⁵⁵ study of the lives and work of working-class women examined the relation between the social and sexual division of labour and argued that in order to understand the specific position of working-class women, it was necessary to examine the way in which employers use skills women have acquired from domestic labour, but do not reward them on the grounds that they are innate, not learnt. Margaret Maruani⁵⁶ analysed the relations between working-class women and the unions. These theorists examined the sexual division of labour which operates a public/private divide, attributing domestic labour to women and waged labour to men, and, within the labour market, operates a highly gendered segregation both vertically and horizontally. They looked at the social construction of women's and men's work, which had nothing to do with the tasks themselves and everything to do with the power relations involved in their definition.

The idea that the spheres of production and reproduction are linked came to replace the opposition between work and non-work.⁵⁷ These two workplaces (of production and reproduction) place men and women in unequal social relations, and the relation between production and reproduction can only be understood in terms of the social relations of sex. French feminists working in the 1980s did not try to demonstrate that housework is productive⁵⁸, but that domestic labour and waged labour are interdependent. The sexual

⁵⁵ Kergoat, *Les ouvrières*, Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982.

⁵⁶ Margaret Maruani, *Les Syndicats à l'épreuve du féminisme*, Paris: Syros, 1979.

⁵⁷ Margaret Maruani, *Travail et emploi des femmes*, Paris: La Découverte, 2000, p. 46.

⁵⁸ Christine Delphy had argued this in the early 1970s, although the effect was to disrupt the productive/non-productive opposition when applied to domestic labour. See for example 'L'ennemi principal', *Partisans*, no. 54-5, July-October 1970, pp. 157-72 and 'A Materialist feminism is possible'.

division of labour and social relations of sex in the family play an important part in producing inequalities in the workplace, but Maruani stresses that the family does not explain everything: the labour market does not simply reproduce a division of labour which originates elsewhere; it produces inequalities itself.⁵⁹ Feminists continued to ask why women are situated as they are in the sexual division of labour and how class exploitation interacts with gender exploitation. They examined the segregation of the labour market and women's concentration in a limited number of jobs and at the bottom of every hierarchy.

Feminist research in 1980s France emphasised the gendered nature of economic and social relations. Also, research (for example that of Kergoat) produced towards the end of the decade attempted to re-establish links, severed in the early 1980s, between theory and grass-roots activism. This was made possible by the fact that the period between 1986 and 1989 bore witness to the emergence of a number of organised or coordinated protests within the French public sector, notably in education, transport and health, in which women either participated in large numbers or in which they were the predominant force.⁶⁰ French feminists did not, however, engage with ethnicity and its interaction with gender and class, and this stands out as the most striking difference between feminist analyses in Britain and France during the 1980s.

⁵⁹ Maruani, *Travail et emploi des femmes*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ These protests, organised and structured outside of the main trade unions, came to be known as 'coordinations'. Of these the most successful coordination was that of the French nurses. See Danièle Kergoat, Françoise Imbert, Hélène Le Doaré and Danièle Senotier, *Les infirmières et leur coordination 1988-1989*, Paris: Editions Lamarre, 1992. See also Khursheed Wadia, *The French nurses' protest of 1988-*

Britain

In 1980s Britain, feminist academic research, building on patriarchy theories, but recognising their limitations, searched for a way of combining an analysis of gender oppression with that of other oppressions experienced by women. What came to be known as 'dual systems theory' was consolidated in two American publications: Heidi Hartmann's 'The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism'⁶¹ and Zillah Eisenstein's collection *Capitalist patriarchy and the case for socialist feminism*.⁶² They both attempted to show how capitalism and patriarchy combine 'in a healthy and strong partnership'⁶³ to produce women's oppression. Heidi Hartmann argued that the terms of the bargain between men and capitalists change over time and may in certain circumstances be in conflict, but on the whole men and capitalists benefit from women's position in the sexual division of labour. The theory was well received by British socialist feminists who saw in it the potential for a resolution of the class/gender conflict.

However, other developments were diverting feminist attention from the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. While white, Western feminists were explaining and developing theories of patriarchy in the academy, other women were beginning to raise issues of differential power between not only women and men but also women and

1989: *applying a definitional model*, Centre for Research in European Studies Discussion Papers, Wolverhampton: University of Wolverhampton/HLSS, 2000.

⁶¹ Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism'.

⁶² Zillah Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist patriarchy and the case for socialist feminism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979.

⁶³ Hartmann, in Jaggar and Rothenberg, p. 196.

women. First, black women developed a critique of the dominance of the movement by white feminists and their definitions of 'feminism' and 'feminist' issues and struggles. Further allegations were made, and feminism stood accused of being not only white, but middle class, heterosexist and ethnocentric.

The second development which took place around the same time was the growth of interest in poststructuralism and postmodernism. Questioning 'grand narratives' and concepts of universalism and truth, these theoretical trends raised questions within feminism about the categories 'men' and 'women', about the meaning of power, and about the feminist project itself. There was an increase in discourses of sexual difference and of multiple differences, the deconstruction of binary oppositions and the blurring of categories, including gender.

The combined effect of black, working-class and Third World criticisms of Western feminism and the challenges posed by postmodern theory was to question the category 'women' and challenge the white middle class heterosexual feminism which was seen to exclude many women and ignore oppressions which intersected with gender oppression in varying ways. Many feminists began to focus on differences between women, to the extent that it became unclear what exactly held them together as women.⁶⁴ In theory, these differences included class, but in practice, differences which were more easily theorised in terms of culture and identity (and especially race and sexuality), rather than economic inequality, received more attention.

⁶⁴ See Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminism and the contradictions of oppression*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989 for a thorough and engaging exploration of this question.

Although much of the theoretical energy generated by the espousal of aspects of poststructuralist and postmodern thought was channelled into work whose immediate political impact is either absent or unclear, it has also undeniably produced debates, concepts and frameworks which have enriched feminist theory and practice, especially in the recognition of differences between women, and in particular differences of 'race', ethnicity and ability. However, the cultural emphasis of much of this work has sidelined class. Diana Coole⁶⁵ and Anne Phillips⁶⁶ argue that class is not readily integrated into the conceptual frameworks produced by the discourses of difference, which focus on the recognition of differences without requiring either a consideration of their relative worth or any kind of social justice as a basis from which to recognise them. This is discussed in more detail later in this article.

At the same time as these developments were taking place, feminists interested in the study of work were moving away from the idea that the central conflict is between labour and capital and developing an understanding of gender as an organising principle of work relations. The construction of gender was seen to take place in the public sphere of work as well as in the private sphere of the family. They examined the segregation of the workforce and the construction of jobs as 'women's work' or 'men's work' with consequent material effects in terms of pay and status.⁶⁷ And they challenged the idea that gender was 'an ideological addendum to a class-structured mode of production' or a

⁶⁵ Diana Coole, 'Is class a difference that makes a difference?', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 77, May/June 1996, pp. 17-25.

⁶⁶ Anne Phillips, *Which equalities matter?*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999.

set of relations confined to the domestic sphere or the family. Instead, gender was increasingly perceived as a deep-seated feature of production itself.⁶⁸ Here some points of convergence can be identified between the work of French feminists such as Kergoat and that of certain feminists in Britain.⁶⁹

In the 1980s, feminists showed that the interrelations between class and gender are complex, but cannot be underplayed, as they are in orthodox Marxist theory and other theories of class and social stratification. These relations are historically and geographically specific and interact with other social relations. At certain times and in certain places, women's interests as women may predominate. But many Third World, black and working-class women have struggles which they share with working-class and other men, rather than with all other women.⁷⁰

It was during the 1980s that the greatest divergence could be seen between British and French feminist theory. In Britain, women's studies and feminist research, although struggling in comparison with other disciplines, occupied a far stronger position than their French counterparts, and this resulted in a much higher rate of publications. The emphasis on the differences between women represented a radical shift in focus in comparison with the 1970s and dominated debates throughout the decade. As has been

⁶⁷ Linda McDowell and Rosemary Pringle, *Defining women*, Cambridge: Polity, 1992, p. 156.

⁶⁸ R.W. Connell, *Gender and power*, Cambridge: Polity, 1987, p. 103.

⁶⁹ See for example Jackie West (ed.), *Work, women and the labour market*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

⁷⁰ Ramazanoglu, p. 101.

demonstrated above, this shift did not take place in France, where resistance to the recognition of multiple differences has, for the reasons discussed earlier, been strong.

The reassertion of class: the 1990s

In the 1990s, feminist theory moved towards a serious reconsideration of class as a determinant of women's oppression. This shift was the result of a number of socio-economic and politico-cultural factors. First, on a global level, as the gap between the wealthy nations of the industrialised world and the impoverished nations of the developing world has become more visible (through flows of economic migration and refugee movements) international agencies have increasingly identified women of the economically exploited classes as the key players in the redistribution of wealth. Hence the UN Family Planning conference of 1994, held in Cairo, and the women's 1995 Beijing conference called for the empowerment of women at the bottom of the social pyramid. Second, the fall of the Communist bloc in 1989 and the subsequent adoption of Western models of economic development highlighted inequalities between East and West and pushed a new generation of (mainly East) European feminists to question inequalities between women in Europe. Third, large-scale economic liberalisation and restructuring in Western nations including Britain and France has impacted disproportionately on women, especially those in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. In the 1990s, the proportion of women in part-time jobs and on short-term contracts increased significantly and women became the most likely victims of unemployment. Fourth, and in more country-specific terms, as far as Britain was concerned the Conservative government of John Major made young single mothers a prime target in its 'back to

basics' attack on supposedly declining moral standards. These young women were mainly of working-class background. In France, the organised protests of the late 1980s, involving large numbers of women workers, continued to spill over into the 1990s, calling attention to the difficult economic situation of the latter. The combined effect of these factors made it impossible for feminists to ignore the question of class and its relation with gender. Race and ethnicity also continued to occupy a place in feminist theory, particularly in Britain, as the focus on non-European migrant women increased with the debates on the Single European Act and its application in the European Union from 1992 onwards.⁷¹ In France, the consideration of race/ethnicity and gender has finally begun to take place within studies and debates on citizenship and nationality.⁷²

As far as France was concerned, by the mid-1990s, feminist research was taking place in a relatively favourable environment. Public interest had been stimulated by the debate around the underrepresentation of women in the political elite (the parity debate), and the media were unusually supportive of some broadly feminist ideas. European funding had been obtained for overtly feminist research projects, which were unlikely to have been supported by the conservative French university system. There were numerous conferences, an increasing number of publications, and clear evidence of dialogue across disciplines. The parity debate did not only raise the profile of gender issues and feminists,

⁷¹ See Avtar Brah, 'Re-framing Europe: en-gendered racisms, ethnicities and nationalisms in contemporary Western Europe', *Feminist Review*, no. 45, 1993, pp. 9-29; Kum-Kum Bhavnani, 'Towards a multicultural Europe? 'Race' nation and identity in 1992 and beyond', *ibid.*, pp. 30-45.

⁷² See for example, Interview with Anne Golub, Mirjana Morokvasic, Catherine Quiminal, 'Evolution de la production des connaissances sur les femmes immigrées en France et en Europe', *Migrations société*, vol. 9, no. 52, July-August 1997, pp. 19-36.

it also acted as a framework in which other feminist debates took place. Thus, the question of class re-emerged in socialist feminist critiques of the focus on elite politics and the career progression of a minority of women who possessed the resources necessary to participate at this level. Again, race was absent from the debate, except when called on to justify opposition to claims for representation of particular social categories.⁷³

France

Rigidly systemic analyses of class and gender had by this time been replaced with increasingly nuanced interpretations of the interactions between them. Christine Delphy, for instance, no longer situated her work in opposition to Marxist/socialist feminism and, as a consequence, developed ideas which had only been mentioned briefly in her earlier work. In *Familiar exploitation*, which she published with Diana Leonard in 1992, Delphy no longer focused exclusively on the domestic sphere. Delphy and Leonard argued that gender and socio-economic differentiation are constructed both in the family and in the market systems. Men, they argued, benefit from the exploitation of women's work in the domestic *and* the capitalist modes of production. Delphy now admits that the exploitation of women's domestic labour is not enough to explain even their economic exploitation; and that gender is the result of several systems of oppression, of which economic exploitation is just one. She describes capitalism and patriarchy as intertwined in reality, but maintains that it is still important to make an analytical distinction between them,

⁷³ For a more detailed discussion of this debate, see Gill Allwood, 'Popular conceptions of gender and the parity debate', in John Marks and Enda McCaffrey (eds.), *French cultural debates*, Monash Romance Studies, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001, pp. 8-21.

since the concept of patriarchy and of a mode of production separate from capitalism makes women visible, whereas in traditional Marxist analysis, they do not exist. Patriarchy operates in the world of work as well as in the family, and the labour market needs to be analysed both as a capitalist and as a patriarchal structure. She argues that when women work outside, as well as inside, the home, their economic exploitation takes place within the domestic *and* the capitalist mode of production.⁷⁴ Relinquishing her patriarchy first position, Delphy now presents a more complex analysis of the relations between capitalism and patriarchy:

In Western countries today, the two systems exist back-to-back: they mutually support and reinforce one another in a vicious circle, the origins of which it is difficult to identify at any particular time.⁷⁵

Other French feminist researchers have tried to expose the gendered nature of class and have focused in particular on the working class and the labour movement.⁷⁶ Danièle Kergoat, for example, criticises mainstream studies of the working class, which still ignore women, unless it is to highlight specific differences that are then attributed to their nature. She argues that the segregation of the labour market and discrimination against women in terms of pay and promotion cannot be explained in terms of their location in relations of production. The exploitation of women workers is not just greater than that of men, but different: 'Clearly, being a woman is a classification in itself. It may not be

⁷⁴ Delphy, 'Genre et classe en Europe', p. 299.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 302. See also Delphy and Leonard, pp. 159-60.

⁷⁶ Kergoat, *Les ouvrières*; 'Les absentes de l'histoire', *Autrement: ouvriers, ouvrières* no. 126, January 1992, pp. 73-83; Helena Hirata and Danièle Kergoat, 'La classe ouvrière a deux sexes', *Politix: la revue*, July/August/September 1993, pp. 55-8.

written down, but it definitely has tangible effects'.⁷⁷ Despite the fact that the working class is clearly gendered, unions continue to behave as though it were homogenous, or rather, they mention gender only as a specificity and not as a fundamental division which structures the working class. Kergoat's work on coordinations shows how, as a form of protest, they challenge the traditional labour movement, which refuses to recognise the existence of women workers, projecting a largely mythical model of the French working man and ignoring both heterogeneity and changes within the working class.⁷⁸

French feminist research on work in the 1990s has focused on the radical transformation of the labour market, especially the rapid increase in the number of women in part-time jobs. The labour market is still highly segregated, vertically and horizontally, and women are less well paid and more often on temporary contracts. Feminists have demonstrated that gender is not a natural difference which affects some aspects of women's work, but a fundamental division which structures the working class, and they argue that class is inherently gendered.

Britain

British socialist feminists, although never absent from the debate, were somewhat drowned out by the cultural emphasis of the 1980s. However, by the mid-1990s, struck by the widening gaps between rich and poor, ignored in the increasingly vibrant debates around democracy and citizenship, Anne Phillips, Lynne Segal and others returned to the

⁷⁷ Kergoat, 'Les absentes de l'histoire', p. 78.

⁷⁸ Claudie Lesselier, 'Travailleuses', *M*, no. 53-4, April/May 1992, p. 89.

unresolved, and in many ways forgotten, question of class and its relation to other forms of oppression.

The legacy of the concern with difference which dominated many areas of theory in the 1980s is that class, gender and ethnicity are now seen by many as intermeshed and interdependent. Studies of the segregation of the labour market and of the relations between women's paid and unpaid work have shown that class and gender cut across each other in many ways. As Nira Yuval-Davis argues:

Gender, ethnicity and class, although with different ontological bases and separate discourses, are intermeshed in each other and articulated by each other in concrete social relations. They cannot be seen as additive, and no one of them can be prioritized abstractly. [...] Contrary to what the notion of patriarchy suggests, women are not usually just passive recipients and non-participants in the determination of gender relations. Probably more importantly, not all women are oppressed and/or subjugated in the same way or to the same extent, even within the same society at any specific moment.⁷⁹

The danger with the growing attachment to a language of difference, however, is that it may 'block consideration of the continuing inequalities of class, or, as sometimes seems more likely, encourage a jumbling of different kinds of differences with no attempt at distinction'.⁸⁰ In other words, the recognition of differences can lead to a depoliticised celebration of diversity with no consideration of structural inequalities. Similarly, the

⁷⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and nation*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1997, p. 8.

⁸⁰ Anne Phillips, *Democracy and difference*, Cambridge: Polity, 1993, pp. 6-7.

notion that class and gender intertwine can shift attention from the very real class differences between women. Ruth Lister argues that in order to avoid a disconnected set of inequalities or a hierarchy of oppressions, it is important to emphasise the interrelationships between different sources of oppression, 'that these interrelationships can be either mutually reinforcing or contradictory, and that they can shift over time. Where these sources of oppression do coincide, the relationship is better described as multiplicative rather than additive.'⁸¹

In an article entitled 'Is class a difference that makes a difference?', Diana Coole points out that, although class often appears in the list of differences between women, it is rarely discussed further. She argues that it fits awkwardly into the discourse of difference, which is more suited to the discussion of race, gender and 'a whole range of lifestyle and identity diversities [...] Moreover, equality has itself become suspect in so far as it is associated with sameness and imperialistic inclusion.'⁸² Partly as a result of the fact that discourses of difference have been constructed in opposition to Marxism, their exponents have gone out of their way to sideline class and privilege other differences. But Coole argues that criticisms of Marxism's failings should not turn into criticisms of class itself. 'For if Marxist analysis tended to reduce all difference to class difference, is there not something about class itself, and the very power of its social divisiveness, that tends to overwhelm other differences?'⁸³ Coole demonstrates that class cannot be integrated into discourses of difference, and this has serious implications, given the hegemony of these

⁸¹ Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: feminist perspectives*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1997, p. 77.

⁸² Coole, pp. 18-19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

discourses amongst political radicals. The result, she claims, has been to silence economic difference as a significant form of differentiation. Class difference is therefore occluded, and the need for a new set of theories which could articulate it is denied. She calls for a shift from cultural and literary studies back to the social sciences and for a renewed theorisation of class which is not restricted to an analysis of positions in relation to capitalist production. Class cuts across other diversities like race and gender, and this is why feminists cannot abandon economic analysis completely in favour of questions of identity.

This article struck a chord with feminists who were uneasy with the shift away from the more overtly political concerns of early second wave feminism, but also with those who had always included class in the somewhat standard list of differences which were understood to interact with gender, but who then unwittingly excluded it in their analysis as they focused instead on ethnicity, race, sexuality and ability. Following Diana Coole's intervention and the work of the American Nancy Fraser⁸⁴, British socialist feminists stress that differences are not simply or always cultural variations or identities in need of recognition; in the case of economic inequalities, the appropriate response is not recognition, but redistribution. Lynne Segal, for example, writes, 'in a world of intensifying inequality, any concern with either gender justice or the fate of women

⁸⁴ See Nancy Fraser, 'From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age', *New Left Review*, no. 212, July/August 1995, pp. 68-93. This article, and Fraser's book, *Justice interruptus: critical reflections on the 'postsocialist' condition*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, have exerted a tremendous influence on British socialist feminist thought. See for example Lynne Segal, *Why feminism?*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999; Anne Phillips, *Which equalities matter?*, Cambridge: Polity, 1999.

overall must also engage us in social struggle for economic redistribution, alongside (and enmeshed with) issues of identity, involving cultural recognition and respect.⁸⁵

Socialist feminism has always been entwined with a politics of social transformation. Identifying the causes of oppression is a necessary step in devising a strategy to overcome it. Lynne Segal writes:

Fearful of totalizing generalizations we may be, and cautious we must be, but the most central global axes of economic exploitation and cultural oppression continue to construct and reconstruct themselves in the interrelated terms of ‘gender’ (tied in with sexual orientation), ‘class’ (tied in with nationality and ethnicity) and ‘race’ (tied in with nationality, ethnicity and religion) within what is the currently *ever more* totalizing control of a transnational capitalist market. The invocation of specific differences can serve broadly based transformative ends, but only as part of *some wide political project* seeking to dismantle these basic structures of domination.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Segal, p. 34.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

The main aim of this article has been to discuss the treatment of gender and class as determinants of women's oppression in British and French feminist theory over the last 35 years. In this respect an attempt has been made to chart the main shifts in theory and to relate them to changes in feminist politics and activism and to the contexts in which the latter have arisen.

It has been demonstrated that the development and shifts in theory which have occurred in each country are closely tied to the national context and to the impact of the social, economic and political culture and institutions on women's lives. However, what is also clear is that British and French feminist theory's treatment of women's oppression in terms of gender and class is related to factors that are common to both countries. In addition, it has been demonstrated that there has been considerable convergence between the interests of French and British feminists involved in this area of theory, although in many cases the work is taking place in parallel with little or no interaction or exchange.

It would be fair to state that French feminist theory has been more affected than its British counterpart by institutional constraints, limited publishing opportunities and a cultural resistance to gender theory. In a political and cultural environment which is highly resistant to discourses of difference and in particular multiculturalism, French feminists, for the reasons explained above, have tended to ignore the interaction of race/ethnicity with gender and class, and have been less interested than their British counterparts in the cultural aspects of gender. Intersections of oppression, which have

been on the British and American feminist agenda since the early 1980s, were until recently largely unexplored in France.

However, both British and French feminisms are increasingly exposed to and involved in international movements, protests and debates. In addition, more recently, feminist politics and activism in France has seen the construction of various solidarity networks and movement coalitions around the issues of unemployment and social exclusion, and the rights of migrants and people of migrant origin, and in this respect it can be said that French feminism is beginning to respond to Anglo-American and Third World feminist critiques of its previous refusal to consider women's oppression at various intersections of gender, class and race/ethnicity.

While national contexts will continue to shape feminist politics and activism and the theories which arise from them, there is little doubt that extended economic, political, cultural and social exchanges at the international level will provide a common basis from which increasingly convergent theoretical interests will emerge.