time lesbians have been addressed exclusively and in such depth.

Sophia Chauchard-Stuart and Sheridan Nye

Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism

Mica Nava

Sage: London 1992,
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This book provides a journey into the development of feminist thought by bringing together a collection of Mica Nava's writings (and lectures) from the early 1970s to 1992, providing commentary (sometimes developed, sometimes brief) after each chapter. It begins with the family and tours through youth provision, including the controversial article (from *Feminist Review*) on a girls' project and responses to lesbianism; it then addresses responses to sexual abuse and ends with three essays on consumerism. It thus moves from concerns with the state to subjectivity; from generalization to contradiction, ambiguity and inconsistency, showing in passing how theoretical language changes.

The book tries to combine two very difficult tasks. Firstly, it contextualizes the collection of essays within the political climates and theoretical landscapes of the time of their writing. The book itself is a product of its time. The opening introductory sentence admits a debt to postmodernist thinking, declaring that the book is part of an acknowledgement that all knowledge and intellectual production is fragmentary and transitory. By contextualizing each piece of work the book charts a path through a number of conflicting feminist debates. This gives the reader a sense of legacy, permanence and change to the current debates.

Secondly, it tries to tie in the subjective formation of the author into this wider landscape, by linking and exploring the relationships between history, desire and knowledge. This is achieved by centralizing psychoanalysis. This process of contextualizing can be seen as part of the more recent reflexive concerns with situating the production of knowledge (as discussed in the work of Sandra Harding, Nancy Harstock and Donna Haraway). A brave and honest attempt is made by Mica Nava to view herself as both a product of and producer of the text. She also problematizes the position of the reader by making obvious the reader's psychic registers. I would recommend the introduction as compulsory reading for any feminist methodology course in which questions such as 'how do I know?' and 'why I thought what I thought' are raised. It also fronts the ethical and ideological imperatives in the evaluation of intellectual works.

The chapter commentaries also refer to the *feelings* which block or enable us to write. Feeling brave, Mica Nava argues, is a prerequisite for writing against any orthodoxy. Fortunately she has felt brave enough to challenge some important 'truths' that were ossified in the name of feminism. For instance, Mica Nava problematizes feminism as a moral code. Every time she searches for the certainty articulated in some feminist positions all she finds is contradictions. She believes, however, that agency and contradiction can co-exist. She is also highly critical of the responses to her work which have used sexual preference as a form of moral high ground for the purposes of moral regulation. The excessive voluntarism that is

attached to sexual desire by these moral positions is made apparent. Mica Nava shows that it is far more complex; desire, she argues, is not subject to rational-political choice. It would have been useful to have more on this debate as a great many feminist calls to action assume a rational subject. Yet as work by Valerie Walkerdine suggests, this rational subject may just be another fantasy of the desire for mastery or control.

The difficulty of increasing the complexity of theory for understanding actions, meaning and everyday practice, and the increased fragmentation of positions which depend on the agency and unity required by feminist action, present a very real problem for feminism. Complexity may lead to quietism; naive beliefs in unity may ignore differences and inequalities. In this case, thankfully, theoretical sophistication does not stop Mica Nava from trying to put her feminist principles into practice. It is interesting to note in an analysis informed by feminism how gender moves in and out of central focus, often as a result of institutional incorporation and safety.

The theoretical landscape presented is specific to feminist cultural studies. And it is clearly a feminist cultural studies which is informed by a political commitment – a socialist one. Two themes are constant throughout the book. The first is of feminism facing outwards, towards heterosexuality and masculinity as something to be dealt with in their complexities rather than being abdicated from. The second theme is the

continual concern to understand the nuances and ambiguity of meaning. This proves particularly controversial when dealing with sexual abuse. Rather than reducing arguments to generalizations, by exploring her own experience of rape and of her dealings with a young man's sexual abuse, Mica Nava explores the complexities of meaning and action. For many people, she argues, the experience of sexual abuse may be less important than is often thought. To centralize it only serves to reproduce sex as the privileged site of all truth. Her long-term feelings about being fraudulent in/as English are experienced as far more traumatic than one bodily invasion.

No doubt this analysis will raise a few feminist hackles. Had the commentaries been more fully developed, and I dearly wish they had, many of the criticisms could easily be countered. At a time when many challenges to traditional orthodoxies seem to go up their own orifices with tales of fragmentation, ambiguity and inconsistency, it is useful to read something that retains a sense of feminist commitment to action – even while recognizing that this in itself may be contradictory. By increasing the complexity of feminist analysis through the reflexive positioning of ourselves and others in the production of knowledge we may be able to produce suitable political responses which account for complexity, difference, nuance, contradiction and ambiguity.

Beverley Skeggs

Managing Women

Sue Adler, Jenny Laney and Mary Packer

*Open University Press: Buckingham
1993, ISBN 0 335157807, £10.99 Pbk*

This book reports a study of women who wield power in educational institutions, that is, female managers.

The 'Managing' in the title, then, is to be read as an adjective modifying the active 'Women' and not a verb acting on a passive object. (It did occur to me to wonder whether the authors were hoping that some male managers, puzzled by the behaviour of their female subordinates or peers, might read and learn from a book