

'privilege' is particularly important in many places at the present time, given widespread capitulation to the view that 'education' is no more than a training in skills that will prove useful in the production of markets, goods and wealth.

The latter point also leads me to resist, in part, the criticism many of the authors make of the way that feminist studies within the university may function as 'home'. I can agree that there is a need to undermine those social relationships which function as a bastion of middle-class privilege. I can also appreciate the well-chosen metaphor which alerts us that, together with the comforts offered by an academic 'home', such an environment can threaten to limit us through the imposition of obligations, conventions and ties. However, having entered university as a young, working-class woman, and later located myself within feminist studies (particularly as fashioned by 'stand-point science'), my experience is that I have needed the sense of security, confidence and (temporarily fixed) identity they have afforded me in my struggle to find a personal and politi-

cal voice. I would, therefore, tend to agree with the suggestion in Susan Heald's chapter that it may be necessary to construct a new 'home', based upon changed and firmer foundations, to support the activities of feminist academic research.

This book could certainly be recommended as useful reading on postgraduate and even some undergraduate courses that are informed by the principles of feminist pedagogy and research. The compelling accounts of personal struggles with academic institutions and practices also make it a potentially useful resource for Ph.D. students, as a support through difficult times in their research. I shall recommend to my students that it is read alongside articles such as Angela MacRobbie's one on the politics of feminist research in *Feminist Review* No. 12.

**Karen Henwood**

#### Reference

BANNERJI H. (1987) Introducing Racism: Notes Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism. *Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche féministe* Vol 16, No. 1.

## Feminist Epistemologies

Edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter

*London: Routledge 1993  
ISBN 0 415 90451 X £12.99 Pbk  
ISBN 0 415 90450 1 £35.00 Hbk*

You might say that the problems of feminist epistemology are the problems of a political project hoist by its own petard. It's one of the very basic tenets of feminism that propositions commonly presented as 'objective' knowledge are all too often highly value-laden assertions which both arise from and perpetuate situations of domination and oppression: this tenet has been seen to apply not just to assertions of 'knowledge' about the inferiority of women made by medical, scientific, academic and

other establishments throughout history, but also, more recently, to 'knowledge' claims made by feminists themselves which have arisen from and perpetuated forms of domination within feminism and between women along axes of race, class, age, ability and difference. The epistemological problem which emerges from this long, fierce and often painful history now is: if, as feminism has claimed, assertions of 'knowledge' are so often both producers and guarantors of domination and power, how can feminism itself legitimately claim to be a site of 'knowledge' about the oppression of women or, indeed, about anything at all? And if feminism *cannot* make such a claim, how can it continue as a political project for the liberation of

women from what it says it *knows* to be injustice and oppression?

The essays in this collection represent a variety of 'takes', from a number of different angles, on this striking problem: having destabilized, if not destroyed, the 'objectivity' of dominant establishment 'knowledge', feminist thought is in search of some stable epistemological ground(s) of its own. The result is a lively and eclectic book which manages both to provide an overview of a certain section of the feminist debate on epistemology as it currently stands and at the same time to make a fresh contribution to that debate. I say a 'certain section' because, as the editors state in their introduction, the essays here come from a particular area of feminist academia – from what the editors call 'the uneasy alliance of feminism and philosophy'. This restriction gives the collection coherence and focus without, however, producing homogeneity or narrowness of interest. As the editors warn, different readers will have different reactions to the collection: some of the issues presented and approaches taken will seem obvious and even 'old hat' to feminists but new and disconcerting to 'mainstream' philosophers, and vice versa. I certainly found this to be the case, and although I consider this to be far more of a strength than a weakness for the collection as a whole – both in terms of the eclecticism and heterogeneity I have already mentioned, and as an illuminating example of interdisciplinarity in action – the effects of that mix of 'feminist' and 'mainstream' in some cases is not always to feminism's benefit.

For example, four of the eleven essays in this collection develop, in various ways, the view that knowledge is produced by communities rather than individuals, a view which departs from the traditional philosophical approach to epistemology and which the four authors here claim have various advantages for feminist epistemology. However,

while some of these essays present arguments which are both intellectually persuasive and politically insightful – particularly that by Elizabeth Potter, who combines a deft use of Wittgenstein to feminist ends with a startling revelation of the hidden agenda of sexual politics behind that most 'objective' item of scientific knowledge, Boyle's Law of Gases – others, in elaborating community-based epistemologies into coherent philosophical accounts, seem to lose sight of that function of *power* in traditional knowledge claims which makes epistemology an issue for feminism in the first place. Appealing to debate between 'epistemological communities', or to 'public standards', as a means for settling conflicting knowledge claims (as suggested in this collection by Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Helen E. Longino respectively) takes little account of the very real power that dominant 'epistemological communities' – which, after all, include both government agencies and multinational 'scientific' corporations – wield over those many other epistemological communities (not just women) whom they oppress.

The other epistemological debates which appear in the collection include the epistemological status of non-propositional knowledge – 'knowing who' or 'knowing how' rather than 'knowing that' – and the attribution of epistemic privilege to socially marginalized groups, an attribution perhaps most famously made by standpoint epistemology, which is set out here in a new essay by Sandra Harding. Harding's essay is accompanied by a critical reply from Bat-Ami Bar On which is fine and sharp-edged both politically and intellectually and which is for me the highlight of the collection, with implications not just for standpoint epistemology but for all those feminisms which make use of the tropes of 'margin' and 'centre' in their analyses of oppression, tropes which are now common but which,

according to Bar On, are philosophically and politically questionable.

The questions of feminist epistemology are crucial to feminism, both theory and practice, and rescuing feminism from epistemological nihilism is one of the most urgent tasks now facing feminist thought. This collection presents an engaging and informative picture of how that

task is progressing in a number of directions, with the breakthroughs and the difficulties in that progress, and will be of very great interest, use and relevance to all readers concerned with the thorny question of what feminists know.

### **Merl Storr**

### **Shifting Scenes: Interviews on Women, Writing and Politics in Post-68 France**

Edited by Alice A. Jardine and Anne M. Menke

New York: Columbia University Press  
1993  
ISBN 0 231 06773 9 \$16.50/£9.50 Pbk

### **Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing**

Hélène Cixous; Translated by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers  
New York: Columbia University Press  
1993  
ISBN 0 231 07658 4 £13.50 Hbk

*Shifting Scenes* is a collection of interviews with fifteen French women writers and theorists including Hélène Cixous, Marguerite Duras, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig and Christiane Rochefort. The interviews were conducted and introduced by Alice A. Jardine and Anne M. Menke, who work in Modern Languages departments at Harvard and Swarthmore College respectively. The 'America meets France' dimension of this work is perhaps its keystone, and is one of the major themes of the introduction, where the editors refer to their own, albeit ambivalent, complicity with the American desire to revise the French canon, and their interviewees' shared desire to question the relevance of their 'American' questions. The publication of this

book in America is in itself an expression of the cultural gap which has perhaps become its major subject, for it is unlikely that such an anthology would have attracted equivalent institutional support in Paris. We are therefore presented here with the paradox of the existence of a canon of contemporary French women writers in American universities and of the almost complete absence of any equivalent in France, coupled with the questioning of the value and meaning of such a phenomenon by many of the writers themselves. Jardine and Menke make it perfectly clear that their choice of writers is very much related to their perceived significance in American academic circles, and, along with the nature of the questions posed, this seems to suggest that the Paris/New York axis rather than 'post-68 France' is the real cultural context for this work.

The sense of witnessing the encounter of alien cultures is compounded by the fact that the editors' concerns as women working within the academic institution are not necessarily those of the French writers, many of whom, whether by choice or as a result of politically motivated exclusion, are very much outside it. This encounter is presented in the form of interviews in an attempt to avoid the 'third-person pronouns, past-tenses, and "fixing" of narratives' characteristic of 'History'. The final text is none the less a literary production rather than an attempt to record the original social