

neglect. It is feminism, therefore, that must take the active part in forging any relationships with these theories, determining the terms on which they are entered. Feminists who have drawn on them may rightly want to object to a metaphor which suggests an unprincipled,

total, and passive mental yielding. If we have been seduced, then this must be shown through analysis of the uses made of those theories by feminists.

**Terry Lovell**

## **Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence**

Linda Gordon

*Virago: London, 1989*

ISBN 1 85381 039 8, £11.99 Pbk

As a survivor of family violence I was attracted to Linda Gordon's book from the start. Here, I hoped, would be a coherent study that would put the issues into a clear historical and political context. I have always held Gordon's work in high regard and was pleased that it was she who should tackle this minefield of theoretical and methodological problems. In many ways I have not been disappointed: it is a very good study. In another way, however, I have serious reservations.

The research is based on case records from three social-welfare agencies in Boston between 1870 and 1980. Using case records in this way is an innovative approach. They are analyzed lucidly with extracts from written and photographic records. Major stages of the growth and professionalization of welfare agencies are charted, and there is a particularly good chapter on the contradictions and 'double binds' which plagued single mothers. Throughout, Gordon pays careful attention to gender issues, both with reference to the social-work agencies and to their clients.

Gordon's central thesis is that family violence, and definitions of family violence, have been historically and politically constructed.

This is an important riposte to sociobiological and psychological theories which dominated the field for some time. She illustrates, for example, how the initial definition of 'child cruelty' became redefined as 'child neglect', as a result of which blame shifted from fathers to mothers. 'Moral panics' such as we have witnessed at Cleveland are, she argues, seldom about any actual numerical increase in abuse, but rather about wider political crises.

The title betrays the other central aim of the book: to obviate simple social-control theories about welfare policies and to highlight and applaud women's *agency*: 'one of the most striking findings of this study is how often the objects of social control themselves asked for intervention from child-protection agencies' (6). She argues that family members negotiate power among themselves and turn to agencies to help in their problems. This is why she rejects the use of patriarchy as a concept, except in its limited meaning of traditional father-headed households.

What troubled me most, however, was the way in which Gordon draws general conclusions from a limited and quite narrow data source. The case records are all based on social workers' representations of the poor and destitute. That in itself is a problem which Joan Scott takes up elsewhere (*Signs* Vol. 15, No. 4, Summer 1990). Gordon generalizes about family violence *overall* as if poverty and family violence were, and are, inextricably connected. While not wishing to contest that much family violence does

correlate with poverty, I do want to make clear that not all family violence, by any means, does, and that, of course, not all the poor have violent families.

To digress to my own childhood: I grew up in the USA in the 1950s. My parents were middle-class WASPs. Poverty was never an issue for us, yet there was a great deal of family violence – primarily incest, inflicted by my father. Rape and abuse, however, were not named as such, but were hidden in secrecy. The experiences were repressed, buried deep in the unconscious. We were never seen as, or defined as, an abusive or even a problem family: no discourses existed for middle-class families such as ours at that time. Because there was no language, direct resistance was impossible. Certainly, heroism was out of the question. My resistance took the path of school phobia and epilepsy. The problem became medicalized and psychiatrized. I became the problem.

In other words, some family violence had, and has, nothing to do with poverty. I think, in my case, it had *something* to do with psychology. I think it had even more to do with a number of discourses which were current at that time: while my mother was reading D. H. Lawrence and *Fear of Freedom*, my father was reading *Lolita* and *The Bad Seed*. Songs like 'My Heart Belongs to Daddy' were popular. Freud, of course, had provided the perfect cover for male violence. My father gave my sister a book about the Oedipus complex for her thirteenth birthday. Regardless of my own past, there is now a great deal of evidence that incest is not a class-specific phenomenon.

Of course, there is very little historical data about family violence and using case records is an interesting way to explore some of the issues. But to generalize from these is to misrepresent both the poor and family violence. It bolsters a recurring tendency to locate family violence,

but especially incest, 'out there'. Professionals acknowledged its existence for a long time, but as something that existed elsewhere: among the poor, or immigrants, or in rural backwaters, never in one's own backyard. Largely as a result of second-wave feminism and important revisions of psychoanalytical theory, these assumptions have now been well and truly challenged. Gordon, I am sure unwittingly, brings us dangerously close to them again by correlating family violence with poverty in this way.

But if social class cannot explain family violence, could patriarchy? Most family violence is male violence, and this is disguised by the term "family" violence'. Although mothers do abuse children, as Gordon shows, it is significantly less and is rarely sexualized. If patriarchy is defined as both an age and a gender relationship it might be more useful. Although admittedly universalistic and transhistorical, at least it does convey a sense of the way in which family violence is strongly gendered. Patriarchy, rightly politicizes it.

Poststructuralist theory is another way into the problem. Social-welfare discourse on families and violence was only one among several – although certainly the most relevant to the poor. In the case of incest, psychiatric discourse labelled it as fantasy. Books like *Lolita* extolled and eroticized sexual abuse of girls; books like *The Bad Seed* helped lay the blame firmly on to girls themselves. Representations of women in films, TV and advertising made them 'kittenish', babylike and further confused and conflated boundaries between women and children by both sexualizing girls and 'enchinding' women.

The problem with poststructuralist theory, however, is that it doesn't leave adequate conceptual space for power and power relations. All discourses are equal but some are more equal than others. They explain a lot, but not, for instance, why

my mother spent twenty years in a mental hospital, where she died, while my father, who became a professor of science, lives a life of luxury retirement in Florida. Discourse doesn't tell us enough about men's privileged positions, it doesn't explain why and how certain discourses carry more weight, more cogency than others.

It seems to me that no one theory has yet adequately accounted for family violence. It needs to be broken down into smaller conceptual categories. Ironically, Gordon *does* do just this, and does it well, but then

lumps them all together under the rubric of 'family violence'. Yet incest and wife-beating, child neglect and child-battering cannot necessarily be explained in similar ways. What is clear is that they need much more research and thought before any one theoretical paradigm can be used to explain them all. I suggest that what may be needed is a new paradigm altogether. Linda Gordon's book has made an excellent and pioneering start to this project.

**Diana Gittins**

## **Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory**

Nancy Fraser

*Polity Press in association with Basil*

*Blackwell: Oxford, 1989*

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In her introduction to *Unruly Practices*, Nancy Fraser, the American philosopher and critical theorist, locates her work in relation to the state of American academia: 'It is fashionable nowadays to decry efforts to combine activism and academia. Neoconservatives tell us that to practice critique while employed by an education institution is a betrayal of professional standards. Conversely, some independent left-wing intellectuals insist that to join the professoriat is to betray the imperative of critique. Finally, many activists outside the academy doubt the commitment and reliability of academics who claim to be their allies and comrades in struggle' (1). These are issues also familiar to feminists outside America which often crystallize into questions of the accountability of feminist academics to the broader women's movement. Fraser's aim is to be a politically critical academic who recognizes

that radicals in universities do 'find themselves subject to competing pressures and counter pressures . . . do internalise several distinct and mutually incompatible sets of expectations'. A reading of *Unruly Practices* from outside the American academic context left me wondering about the possibilities and limits of politicized critical practice in the United States. Is it possible to cross the boundaries between academic criticism and activism outside higher education? How important are questions of style, accessibility and audience? Is it enough for a socialist feminist to write in ways that assume considerable prior knowledge on the part of readers and are taxing even for other academics? Certainly there must be a space for such work but what, ultimately, are its politics?

The essays collected in *Unruly Practices* were first published in various American journals between 1981 and 1988. Divided into three sections, the essays undertake a critical engagement with various aspects of contemporary social theory. Part one deals with crucial aspects of Foucault's work: his concept of power, the question of his 'conservatism' and his 'body language'. Readers who are already familiar with Foucault's texts will find these essays interesting,