

# Political Currents

Articles in this issue of *Feminist Review* examine some of the political currents within feminist theory and activism and within the broader context. Several articles reflect upon the theoretical resources available to contemporary feminism by examining influential liberal, conservative and spiritual strands of thought and liberal individualism and fundamentalist essentialism receive new and thought provoking critiques. There is a sustained attempt at opening up a critical space in which differences and divisions among and between feminists and our political allies (for example, between lesbians and gay men) can be addressed and refigured, enabling us to move beyond existing positions.

In 'Discursive desire' we publish an interview with the respected literary and cultural theorist, Catherine Belsey. Marysa Demoor and Jürgen Pieters interview Belsey about her feminist commitment, her interest in discourse and subjectivity and her engagement with New Historicism. Belsey talks about her position in the academy, its institutional practices and the importance to her of teaching. Careful readings of Althusser, Macherey and Lacan inform her fascination with interpreting the unconscious of the text. This close attention to texts is accompanied by a sharp awareness of the material effects of academic practice.

Might a materialist feminism too quickly disavow the realm of the spiritual? Penelope Ingram discusses the politics of the divine in an attempt to bridge the familiar gulf between spirituality and politics. She explores what Goddess spirituality has to offer feminists by developing Irigaray's concept of the Divine. Taking issue with those who regard Goddess spirituality as too 'low brow' for academic attention, she stages a productive encounter between feminist 'high' theory and popular interest in goddess spirituality.

It is through the formulation of the concept of an immanent divine, the divine as sensible transcendental, with its potential to dismantle dualisms, therefore, that we can understand the necessity for, and the value of, theorizing the role of the divine within feminist practices.

(p. 55)

This is a timely account of a phenomenon that clearly attracts many women, including feminists.

If Ingram reconnects spirituality with feminist politics, Lealle Ruhl demonstrates the hazards of a particular strand of feminist politics, namely 'natural law feminism'. She takes issue with political arguments – feminist or otherwise – that invoke 'the natural' as social or moral imperative. In examining the work of certain Canadian feminists, she shows how feminist calls for the defence of nature or of women's role in reproduction rely on an unproblematized biological script which eschews reproductive freedom for women. However, this is no return to a liberal rights-based defence of reproductive freedom. Indeed, Ruhl provides a powerful critique of liberalism, for its individualist orientation, and its ahistorical, abstracted and ungendered model of personhood. She shows a common reliance of natural law feminism on liberal models of subject and society, focusing on debates about new reproductive technologies and in ecofeminism. Overall, the critique has wide relevance for political struggles in the current phase of a globally extending neo-liberal order.

In 'Cracks in the feminist mirror' Jill C. Humphrey examines the findings of empirical research from the largest network of lesbians and gay men in the UK – a self-organizing group (SOG) within UNISON, the public sector union. At times, the group works to promote common interests, but at other moments the interests of lesbians and gay men diverge. Humphrey highlights the drawbacks of the dominance of feminist analyses in this (highly unusual) organization in which women form the majority of members. She also discusses resistance to bisexual and queer politics on the part of some lesbian and gay groups and examines their often weak links with other minority SOGs within the union. Her article testifies to the genuine progress that has been made by lesbian and gay activism while also drawing attention to the pitfalls and limitations of organizing on the basis of identity politics. Her example of the trade union's practice of reserving two seats for the representation of the Lesbian and Gay SOG so that a lesbian women and a gay man can attend each union meeting illustrates vividly the tensions between unity and difference faced by lesbians and gay men in working together.

In 'Drunken Tans: representations of sex and violence in the Anglo-Irish War (1919–21)', Louise Ryan uses mainstream and Republican newspaper reports, and autobiographies, in her piecing together of the complex intersections of militarism, nationalism and gender. She looks at how acts of intimidation and violence against women were written about and shows how these different representations shed light on each side's construction of gender roles within the struggle. Among Republican accounts, she finds

frequent slippage from representations of real women to the icon of Mother Ireland. However she also notes that Republican ideals of womanhood were somewhat at odds with the active part many Republican women played in guerilla war. Carefully contrasting ways in which different sources relate similar stories of 'outrages' against women, Ryan shows how such accounts were both influenced by, and contributed to, nationalist and colonialist versions of gendered identities. Above all, she reveals the extent to which the trope of Ireland as woman was used by both Irish Nationalist and British colonizers: 'Both colonizer and nationalist displayed their masculinity in opposition to weak, passive femininity' (p. xx).

Finally, we include our second Dialogue section. This is the place for shorter, more spontaneous contributions, including responses to *Feminist Review* articles. We particularly welcome exploratory or perspective pieces in the form of 'a view from here'. Continuing the theme of reflecting on feminists in academia, a group of Asian women scholars write about their experiences in higher education in Britain. Seventeen years after *Feminist Review* (Issue 17) was collectively produced by women of African-Caribbean and South Asian descent, Nirmal Puwar argues that autonomous spaces for self-organizing are still both relevant and necessary because women of colour continue to be marginalized. Sparked by Angela McRobbie's piece about 'third way' New Labour politics (*Feminist Review* No. 64), Jane Franklin develops a critique of the 'communitarian turn' in social democratic politics. A third contribution to the Dialogue section is a personal response by Bryony Hoskins to the book: *The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power* (by Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson), foregrounding an alternative emphasis in research on young women's sexuality today. Another response to this research is to be found in the book reviews included in this issue.

Future issues of *Feminist Review* include the following themes: mental health, women refugees, drugs and relations between psychoanalysis and feminism. We welcome articles on these themes.

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