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Theory and its difficulties

(A paper written for the Lesbian Conference, Melbourne, January 1990)

I want to talk about 'theory' because that is the word which comes closest to describing what it is that I do, and because there appears to be some confusion and a great deal of anger among lesbians about theoretical writing, anger which is often expressed in the form of accusations of elitism or 'class privilege' directed towards those who speak or write theoretically. On the other hand, there is a great need among lesbians (not, I would suggest, the same lesbians) for theoretical understanding, a need which I obviously share since I spend most of my time and energy working at it.

Now, to a certain extent I can sympathise with the anger, because most of what comes under the heading of 'theory', even feminist theory, is so obscure it feels that there is some conspiracy going on to keep us ignorant and disorientated. The most recent example of obscurantist theorising is what has been loosely and not entirely accurately called 'French feminist theory. I say 'not entirely accurately' because a great deal of it is not feminist (although all of it is French). But the problem is not new, it has been around since the beginning of this second wave of feminism, It is due, I would suggest, to the exclusion of radical feminism, i.e. the critique of male supremacy, from the ranks of academic respectability, power and influence (surprise, surprise!). Feminism has been allowed into the halls of the elite only as a subsidiary partner attached to some recognised branch of 'malestream thought', initially Marxism, and subsequently Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Derridean 'deconstruction' (or whatever). As a consequence, academic feminism has rarely been grounded in feminist complaint and female experience, being focused instead on esoteric fights with the boys.

For example, I can sympathise with the criticisms made by the women in the Dalston study group in England, of the Patriarchy Conference held in London in 1976, in their paper called 'Was the Patriarchy Conference Patriarchal?' (Patriarchy Conference, 1976) I don't entirely agree with their criticism of the way the sessions were run, i.e. with 'long papers read out word for word like at a lecture plus questions at the end'. I think there should be a place at feminist conferences for the paper-plus-questions format for those of us who, as listeners, are comfortable with spoken arguments or who, as speakers, need to write our arguments down and read them out because we are not good extempore speakers or are too nervous to remember the arguments. There is probably even a place for 'long' papers, although it needs a particular kind of stamina and expertise to cope adequately.

The study group also criticised the language used in the papers which, they said, ‘had the effect of *making* large numbers of women feel stupid, inadequate or angry’. The language, they said, ‘perpetuate[d] the split between the undervalued day to day language of [oppressed] groups which is rarely used for theorising, and the impoverished depersonalised analytical language of the intellectuals, in which we can never really find ourselves mirrored’. Now, while I agree that theoretical language is alienating to those who are not used to it, and that the language in which most theory is couched is unnecessarily obscure, I am not at all sure that theoretical concepts and arguments *can* be put into ‘day to day’ language. While those of us who write theory have a duty to make ourselves as clear as possible, those of us who read it need to do some work too. If the function of theory is to break new ground, to keep pushing at the limits of what is already possible and known, then readers cannot sit back passively and expect to be fed with easily recognisable ideas. As Mia Campioni once remarked to me, ‘the text must be produced’, i.e. the reader must work to make the text her own, to discover its relevance or irrelevance to her own life, its truth or falsity in terms of her own experience. The responsibility for theoretical clarity is not on one side only.

The women of the Dalston study group were used to working theoretically. They said that they weren’t anti-intellectual, and had no intrinsic objection to studying the theorists referred to in the papers at the conference, as long as that was done critically. But they thought it was ‘important to try to learn to communicate at the same time as building up knowledge, rather than having a two-step process of theorise first and popularise later (i.e. an intellectual vanguard) if we want the level of critical thinking amongst the whole movement to be a high one’. Their feelings of being intimidated and mystified were not a result of their never having come across the ideas and arguments before. Indeed, on a certain level, they understood the obscure papers quite well (as is clear from their comments on them). What they didn’t understand was how the language and ideas of those papers related to the issues which feminism had already addressed. ‘What seems odd’, they said, ‘is that the papers directly theorising about women’s language and sexuality were written as if none of these things in the movement had happened’. I would add that the overall problem with obscurantist theorising is the failure to keep the theory grounded in experience, indeed, the failure to start with experience at all, much less constantly refer the theory back to experience in order to check its meaning and truth. In that sense, I find that many complaints about the incomprehensibility, mystification or irrelevance of theory perfectly justified.

But there is another objection to theoretical work which is completely unjustified, and that is that intellectual work is elitist or 'class privileged'. This accusation is, I have finally decided, a dangerous one because it implies that intellectual work is some kind of private possession of the ruling class and therefore not something that women who are concerned about oppression ought to do, because it sets up invidious distinctions between women and privileges some women over others. This is an insidiously seductive argument, because we all know that systems of education are set up to favour the wealthy, or at least the tolerably well off, and that without money it is extraordinarily difficult to get an education. Education systems also function in large part to maintain the kind of intellectual work which privileges one form of masculinity, that detached, isolated individual, spuriously neutral, who is absolutely certain of his own existence while doubting the existence of anything or anyone else, including the existence of those who maintain the existence of the great thinker. Who fed Descartes while he sat in that room with a stove doubting everything, for example? And how did he arrive at the certainty that he owed his existence to God, when even a moment's clear and distinct reflection would have suggested that his mother might have had a more immediately important, if mundane, role to play? (But I digress).

Nonetheless, we *must* educate ourselves, not necessarily formally through the 'malestream' system, although that, too, has its benefits, which is why it is made so difficult for the non-privileged to enter. For that system doesn't only purvey the interests of men as the interests of all; it also defines what are genuinely human capacities as male prerogatives. We need to break that monopoly. At the very least it is important to respect those who have gained some education, often against enormous difficulties, in much the same way as we respect those who have gained any other sort of skill, e.g. tennis playing. Feminism can only be weakened if educated feminists are intimidated into silence.

But all of us must do some work. One form that work might take is to question that feeling of being threatened by difficult or unfamiliar ideas or arguments, rather than screaming with rage because we can't understand immediately. If it is true that 'the personal is political', then we are all capable of theorising, although some of us are probably more capable than others, not because we are more privileged than most women, but because we have more time or energy or interest or opportunity for working at it. Moreover, the work needed to understand theory is far less than the work needed to be able to write it. Most of us simply do not have the time, energy or inclination to spend on it. But that is no reason why we can't respect those who do.

Which brings me to the question of what theory is. Before I try to answer that question, I want to make a couple of preliminary remarks. The first is that that 'is' in the question 'what is theory' should be read as 'what I consider theory ought to be', not what it actually is most of the time. What I say about theory is not a description of the ways in which theory is usually carried out, but an argument about how I think theory should be carried out if it is to be an appropriate feminist enterprise. Secondly, I can't answer the question definitively and exhaustively. I don't even know that I can answer it very coherently. In other words, I don't have *the* answer, and it is always possible I have got something wrong.

In the most general terms, theory is the process of trying to understand and explain the world (or reality, or the facts, or states of affairs, or ... etc.) which is known through experience. I am, of course, talking about feminist theory, which is the best available theory of the human condition at the present time because, unlike the boys' theories, it promises to illuminate more of the human condition than just the interests of privileged white men. Whether or not what I say is of relevance to theory in the natural sciences, I don't at the moment know. To the extent, however, that the natural sciences are themselves part of the human condition, and to the extent that they make claims to the highest, even the only, form of knowledge possible, the natural sciences do not fall outside feminist concern. Indeed, there is a fairly substantial feminist literature concerned with locating the natural sciences within the male hegemony, a literature which brings into question the sciences' claims to universal truth. But this is not the place to go into that in any detail.

So, in the first place, I have set up a distinction between theory and experience. In the first version of this paper, given at the Lesbian Studies and Research conference in Sydney in October 1989, I suggested that experience comes first, and that theory follows. The reason I said that is because there seems to be an idea around that theory is something into which action, behaviour and experience must be made to fit. That idea is, I think, what is behind the phrase 'ideologically (un)sound' (or 'politically (in)correct' as they say in the northern hemisphere). That phrase expresses the idea that what one does must fit into categories predetermined by the relevant 'correct line'. So we say: 'I know it's terribly ideologically unsound, but I *like* ... wearing make-up or dresses, or eating meat, or fucking men, or being monogamous, or smoking', (or whatever one's particular lapse from full feminist rectitude might be). What I find endearing about the use of that phrase is that it resists the idea of being coerced into 'correctness', at the same time as it acknowledges that the tendency to coercion and dogmatism exists.

But rather than seeing theory as something which directs our actions, which tells us what to do (and not do), which tells us where to go from this point on now that we have seen the light, I prefer to see it as the process of making sense of what has already happened, of summing up, understanding and explaining where we have come from. It also tells us *that* we need to move on, that we can now stop going over old ground and re-inventing the wheel, but not *what* we must move on to. Theory does not automatically give us ‘the right path’. From a particular theory, no particular and obvious course of action necessarily follows. Or rather, to the extent that we insist that there *is* only one correct way of doing things, we are trapping ourselves in hard-line dogmatism. We can avoid that by acknowledging that each of us makes her own decisions about what she does in the light of what feminist theory has revealed. While we might agree about the theory, we won’t always agree about what is to be done.

The most important thing I want to say about theory, certainly feminist theory or any other theory of the human condition, is that it starts from, and is structured and informed by, a moral and political standpoint. i.e. theory involves taking a stand in relation to power-as-domination and in relation to questions of what ought and ought not to be so. This is not an insight which would be acknowledged within most ‘malestream’ theories of the ‘human sciences’, which tend, rather, to insist on their own objectivity and disinterestedness, and to assert or assume that the truths they uncover have universal relevance. (There are two exceptions—Marxism and anti-racist, anti-imperialist theories—although they too confine the scope of their relevance to the interests of men). Theory, then, is not disinterested. It starts from particular interests, either those which dominate or those which are subjugated. Those interests might be implicit or explicit. But under present hierarchical conditions, theory must either clarify where it stands, or risk reproducing without acknowledgement more of the same conditions.

Experience I would define as ‘agency within a life world’, i.e. as activity and receptivity for which the individual bears her own responsibility. I define “experience’ neither as the passive reception of internal and external stimuli, nor as the value-free perception of what is, nor as the mute acceptance of authorised versions of the world-taken-for-granted, but as an active presence in the world claiming the fullest possible responsibility for her place within it. By that I do not mean that we are responsible for everything that happens to us. To the extent that oppression debars us from exercising possible control over our lives, obviously we are not. But we can still be responsible for how we act within oppressive conditions, for being clear about what is oppression and what is not, and for deciding the extent and limitations of our freedom and constraint.

Without theory, experience is at best a blind groping in the dark, at worst, a maintenance and reinforcement of, and collusion with, the status quo. And without experience, theory becomes an esoteric mystery, a game for academic troglodytes, of no interest for or relevance to life.

Experience provides the truth of theory, i.e. theory is tested by being referred to experience. At this point, I must say something about truth. For reasons which are not entirely clear to me, 'truth' is an unpopular word among feminists. But I think it is vitally important that feminism make, and be seen to be making, claims to truth. 'Truth' is a powerful concept, and we can only weaken our case by refusing to lay claims to it. We need to be clear, however, about what is involved in the connection between power and truth. Under present conditions, truth tends to be entangled with domination in the sense that might is right. As Foucault pointed out (although not in quite the same words), it is the interests of the powerful which tend to define what counts as 'true', and what counts as 'false', 'irrelevant' or 'meaningless'. But to the extent that that kind of 'truth' prevails, it is not truth at all, but some kind of lie or distortion (a conclusion Foucault did not draw from his analysis). The power of the truth appealed to by feminism is not of that sort at all, since feminism is not only not backed up by institutions of domination, it is intended to undermine those institutions. The power of truth is intrinsic to truth itself. Although that power is not the sort of thing which can prevail, at least not in the short term, against prejudice, violence, terror, or entrenched vested interests, nonetheless it is the only power truth has.

'Truth' is not a kind of private property of the dominators. On the contrary, it is within the reach of all of us. It is a very simple thing really—nothing but a correspondence between something that is said and what that statement refers to. For example, the truth of your lover's statement that there are problems in the relationship is that there actually are problems in the relationship. But having defined 'truth' as a correspondence between statements and what they refer to, nothing very much has been said. That definition doesn't resolve questions like, for example, how you go about verifying the truth of what's said. Neither is it any help in deciding what the terms used mean, nor what you should and should not do. Nor is it much help in convincing those who do not want to know, those for whom the status quo *is* reality. Nonetheless, it is a definition which at least brings 'truth' down to a manageable level.

But to return to the question of theory and experience: theory provides the moral and political meaning and purpose of experience. Theory must be constantly referred back to

experience to test theoretical accuracy, adequacy and (sometimes) intelligibility; experience must be referred to theory in order to assess where one stands in relation to power, and how one judges the worth of the world, or relevant aspects thereof. Neither provides any guarantee for the other. Theory can be impeccably 'ideologically sound' and still do grave damage to one's experiential reality; while experience can be intense and overwhelming, and yet be theorised only by being radically questioned and undermined. Experience can be more or less deceptive, but the unmasking of the deception will only come with more experience. There can be good and bad theories, and all theory is only more or less accurate. The criterion of a 'better' theory is that it explains more facts more simply than its rivals. But any theory can be wrong, either wholly or in part, and the 'best' theory is one which has survived attempts to falsify it. (There is a problem with this last claim, and that is the question of what counts as falsification. But I do not want to go into that here).

Theory is not just the putting of experience into words. That can be a difficult enough task all in itself, given the phallocratic reality which requires that women in particular deny our own desires, needs and interests in the interests of maintaining male domination. But although verbalising experience is important and necessary work it is not theorising, because it remains tied to the particularity of 'my own' experience, whereas the essence of theory is to generalise. It is because of the generalising nature of theory that it has that well-known tendency to fly off into meaningless abstraction and false universalism, and why it is so important that theory be constantly referred back to experience.

Reference

Patriarchy Conference (1976) *Papers On Patriarchy* Brighton: Women's Publishing Collective