

Introduction to the refereed papers

Author/Contributor:

Thompson, Denise

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Introduction to the refereed papers

I have included on UNSWorks a number of papers I sent to academic journals, that were rejected for publication by the 'peer' reviewers.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the reviewers' reports supposedly giving reasons for the rejections were, mostly, horrendous. They were ill-considered, ill-informed and ill-mannered, and they treated my work with a disdain they made no attempt to hide. They had little idea of what I was talking about, and they seemed incapable of allowing my work its own integrity, while reacting as though they were personally affronted by what I had written. That wasn't true of all of them. But even the most gracious (and there were some) were patronising. They, too, couldn't understand what I was trying to do, and their advice teetered on the verge of insult. And the smug certainty and self-righteous posturing of some of the other 'peer reviewers', not to mention their unmitigated gall, was breathtaking.

One of the main criticisms was that my work was 'old-fashioned'.

Although this was not meant as a compliment, for two reasons I'm prepared to concede the charge. The first reason is that some of the best theory is that which the reader finds intensely familiar. This is what a friend of mine called (with reference to my work) 'the bleedin' obvious', something the reader hasn't thought of before it's pointed out, but which becomes immediately recognisable once it is.

The other reason is that 'old-fashioned' is often used to dismiss radical feminism, usually with reference to the 1970s, so I feel I'm in good company. I'm fascinated to note that feminism seems to have gone from being too radical (for 'the women out there') to passé with nothing in

between. But of course the issue is not whether or not feminism belongs to a by-gone era, which is never discussed anyway but simply asserted. Rather, what we are seeing is the operation of one of the mechanisms of ideological control—trivialisation and contemptuous dismissal.

A further point to be made about the notion of 'old-fashioned' is that it is a tacit admission that fashion is central to academic feminism. There appear to be no qualms about involving feminism in connotations of the superficial, the trivial and the ephemeral the notion of fashion entails.

This is presumably the influence of postmodernism. To the extent that I understand it, one of its chief premises is that there are no grounds for judgement about anything—no distinctions can be made about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, high culture or low culture, important or unimportant, trivial or significant, true or false (*especially* true or false), etc. To make such judgements is to find oneself caught up in dichotomous thinking, binaries or dualisms, and that is self-evidently (i.e. doesn't need any argument or evidence) bad. So a passing fashion is as good a basis as any other for deciding whether or not something is worth publishing.

Of course, the argument is self-refuting. If there are no grounds for judgement, there are no grounds for judging there are no grounds for judgement either. (The point has been made frequently). The absurdity is allowed to continue because the issues are not thought through. There is currently a fad for calling feminism 'old-fashioned', and that's a good enough reason for using the epithet.

While I'm on the subject of postmodernism, I have to admit that I have a long-standing policy of ignoring it, at least under that name, and this might partly explain the charge of 'old-fashioned'. I do deal with many of

the issues which have been paraded under the postmodernist banner, I just don't identify them as such.

And one final point—presumably these same reviewers would not call 'old-fashioned' a paper that discussed the work of, say, Plato. And yet Plato was writing much longer ago than the theorists I discuss. It isn't as though the issues I discuss were ever resolved.

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So how can these reviewers' reactions be explained? I can't provide a definitive answer to that question, but I have had a few thoughts on the matter because I've had to decide, and more than once, whether or not to continue when the venues within which I think my work fits find it so incomprehensible.

There are two parts to the question about 'treatment'. One relates to the tone of many of the reviewer reports, and there is no doubt that that is inappropriate. Disdainful dismissiveness and personal affront ought to have no place in an academic context. There are journals where the problem is recognised and reviewers are advised to treat respectfully the submissions sent to them. But there are no sanctions for bad manners, and reviewers' word is law and from their decisions there is no right of appeal. And even the kindest review is useless to the author if it misses the point of what she's trying to say.

The other question about treatment relates to the context itself, the things that are inherent in the system and make it what it is, and over which individuals have little or no influence. In the first place, there's the problem of scarcity—over 80% of submissions to academic journals get rejected. Although academic journals pay nothing, they get flooded with submissions because publication in academic journals, especially

'prestigious' ones, is the royal road to employment, career development, promotion, access to grant money, etc. If you want to work in academe, you have to get published in the refereed journals. Although there can be exceptions (there are always exceptions in social life), the general rule dictating who gets jobs, grants, promotions, recognition is, as it always has been, 'publish or perish'.

So it would seem I'm in with the majority here, and I should feel 'consoled' by the fact that most people's work is rejected (as one journal editor suggested). But the curious outcome of journal selection policies is that what actually gets published is hardly riveting stuff. Unless I'm very much mistaken (mistaken, that is, to the point of dementia), what I write is much, much more interesting and important than what consistently appears in the academic journals. I'm not the only one to hold this view about journal content. As a friend of mine (who does get published) said of the academic journals, 'You wouldn't mind so much if they weren't full of toilet paper'.

With an 80% (or more) rejection rate, this is a system in crisis. In crisis situations, it's not the case that only the best survive. In fact the best are the first to be defeated because what is required for survival is ruthlessness, sycophancy, opportunism and a pusillanimous care not to rock any important boats. There's also an element of chance because crisis creates chaos, and so sometimes good work gets through. But the system is heavily weighted against it.

Then there's the convention of using bibliographies to select reviewers. If a paper has a bibliography packed full of works being criticised (as mine always do), there's a fair chance it will be sent either to the author of one of the works I am criticising or to someone whose work is similar. But sometimes an expert is the last person my paper should be sent to

because those with the greatest stake in the system are least likely to be able to deal with something that radically brings it into question. Yes, I know academic work is supposed to include openness to criticism but in my experience it doesn't. Academic work should be open to critical engagement but it rarely is. People in academe are as committed to their own views, and as defensive of them, as people anywhere else.

I think it's fair to say that academe is a regime of power/knowledge. It works through a system of coteries, private networks and personal fiefdoms. This operating system has acquired a veneer of respectability by being given a name. It's called 'mentoring'. Those who, for whatever reason, cannot get themselves into a mentoring network have very little chance of an academic career. If, like me, they are always doing something that no one else is doing, they've got even less chance. And if, like me again, they are busy demolishing taken-for-granted frameworks on which careers and reputations are built, forget it.

On this analysis, then, my chances of getting published in the academic journals have been miniscule to none from the beginning. Still, I did hope that somebody with some influence on some journal might recognise what I was trying to do. And I guess I needed the experience. Although my perspective of critical social theory could have predicted what happened, experience is a better teacher than theory, especially as I started out with the belief that a commitment to feminism meant more openness to new ideas and a greater willingness to push the framework further. Clearly it doesn't. And as long as 'feminism' is nothing more than a label that can be applied to anything at all as long as it's got something to do with women, that's not likely to change.

In relation to my own responsibility in all this, it's pretty clear that what I'm saying falls outside the accepted ways of seeing. In fact, I've been

told this quite clearly—it's 'out of the academic mainstream', one reviewer said. Of course, this begs the question of why that should be grounds for rejection, but it does explain the strong sense I get from the readers' reports that what I'm doing isn't academic in some crucial sense. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm not *outside* these debates at all but very much engaged with them. It's true that (as I mentioned above) I don't acknowledge postmodernism. As I put it in *Radical Feminism Today*: 'The omission ... is deliberate. I do not discuss postmodernism as an identifiable framework because to do so, even as critique, would be to reinforce its position of pre-eminence. To focus attention, even critically, on postmodernism would be to award it credibility as a feminist enterprise, when from a feminist standpoint it is merely another ruse of male supremacy' (p.2). Nonetheless, I do engage with 'the academic mainstream'.

It's the way I engage with it that arouses such antagonistic incomprehension. I'm critical of the accepted ways of seeing, rather than simply reiterating what 'everybody already knows'. With the theorists of the Frankfurt School, I see theory as essentially critical. More to the point (and again, along with the Frankfurt School), I see theory as essentially critical in a quite particular way—it is directed towards exposing the subtle, i.e. not overtly violent, ways in which domination operates on hearts and minds. In doing so, it would appear I accuse those who embrace the frameworks I am criticising of being insufficiently radical at least, and at worst of complicity with domination. (As one reviewer asks, 'Which feminists don't know this?') I don't mean to do this. I didn't know I was doing it, and perhaps I'm wrong about this. But it does explain the sense of personal affront that emanates from some of the reviewers' reports.

I also do something else that might go part of the way to explaining the antagonism. In attempting to solve problems that have arisen within feminism, I take familiar frameworks and do something unprecedented, and hence unfamiliar, with them. Familiar frameworks, whether they shore up one's sense of personal identity or guarantee one's access to public recognition, carry with them a sense of ownership which feels threatened when they're questioned. This explanation incorporates the criticism that what I'm saying is old-fashioned—the familiar—the lack of comprehension of my main arguments—the unprecedented—and my sense that I'm being told I have no right to say what I say—I'm intruding where I have no right to be.

Of course, my critics wouldn't agree with this. They find the fault only in what I write. As one woman at the Lesbian Session at the 1980 Women and Labour conference said, 'It's nothing to do with your theory being sophisticated, it's to do with your theories being very very confused' (see: the discussion reported in the journal, *Refractory Girl*, included in 'Lesbianism as political practice: discussion'). But I don't feel confused about what I write. (And neither was I arguing my theory was sophisticated). In the case of that particular paper, 'Lesbianism as Political Practice', I wasn't entirely satisfied with the theoretical groundwork, but I didn't feel confused. On the contrary, the paper always seemed remarkably clear to me, even though the theory needed further development.

The disjunction between what my critics believe and what I feel, is so great that we can't both be right. My task is to decide where to place my trust, with my own feelings of clarity, or with the critics who demonstrably misunderstand what I'm trying to say. It might seem like a simple choice, but it has taken me years to arrive, not just at the decision, but also at a clear statement of the problem.

Academe (like any other framework) gives credence only to certain ways of seeing and not to others. There's nothing wrong with that in itself, in fact it's unavoidable. But when prestige and privilege come to determine meaning and trump truth, we've got real problems. Of course, it's dreadfully old-fashioned to talk about truth, which is frequently given a capital letter and a pair of quotation marks—'Truth'—to signify the supposed absurdity of such a notion. But it is the recommendation to dispense with notions of truth which is absurd, in the strict sense that it is self-refuting. To insist (even by implication) that it's not possible to make judgements of truth and falsity applies to that insistence itself. If it's true, it must be false, so no notice need to taken of it.

In the case of the reactions to my papers, the notion of truth is crucial to the question of whether or not I said what the reviewers said I did. It's crucial to the content of what I said, too, but the reviewers on the whole didn't discuss that. If I didn't say what they attributed to me but chastised me for saying anyway, then something very peculiar is going on. If reviewers on three continents can't read what I write, when I have been writing, and reading widely in the areas in which I've been writing, for over thirty years (since I was first an undergraduate in 1972), then there must be something seriously wrong with the system.

So I've reached the conclusion that academe is as subject to fashion and trendy ephemeral enthusiasms as any other field of human endeavour, and as little able to tolerate the new, the threatening or even the merely different. This applies as much to feminist academe as to any other field. The consequence is an educational system that allows the kind of ignorant arrogance documented in the discussions included with these papers to persist and to pass unremarked, and to play the gate-keeping role it does.

Refereed Papers

[October 2009] I had intended to include with the papers listed below the reviewers' reports giving their reasons for rejecting them, but I was unable to get copyright permission to place the reports on UNSWorks, and so I am unable to let the reviewers speak for themselves. However, I did quote them in the replies I wrote to the journals at the time, and those quotes give some sense of the tone and content of the reports. I have also included some later comments I made in footnotes to the reviewers' reports. These have been re-written to stand alone without the reports.

'What does it mean to call feminism "white and middle-class?"' (1994)

'Feminism and the problem of individualism' (1997)

'Feminism and the struggle over meaning' (1998)

'The trouble with individualism ...: a discussion with some examples' (1999)

'What counts as feminist theory?' (2000)

'Power and distaste: tolerance and its limitations' (2002)