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Keeping Optimism Alive

INTERVIEW WITH LYNNE SEGAL by Isobel Armstrong.

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IA: *You are one of the most prominent if not the most prominent of feminists in Britain and well known outside the country. In 1987 you published Is the Future Female: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism. In 1990 Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men, in 1994 Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure and then in 1999 Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics. In between you published collections on Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate and New Sexual Agendas. Can you tell us how you came to write these books here - you are from Australia - and how your feminist agenda grew and developed?*

Where to begin? Most certainly not with notions of ‘prominence’. For me, this was once a shaming ascription, so determinedly did I head for the backwoods of an all-embracing parity. Your questions evoke an image of another brash Antipodean, Germaine Greer, arriving here a generation ago to stir hearts and minds in the Old Country. In fact, our trajectories were remarkably dissimilar, our paths crossing rarely – except in Sydney’s bohemian sixties, as we each fled the desolate failure of the mid-century marriages which spawned us. Even there we diverged: I had worshipped my mother and despised my father, the reverse of Greer’s family formation.

I arrived in London in 1970, not to Cambridge footlights, but an accidental young mother. Clutching my infant and my license to work (a PhD critiquing the project of Anglo-American psychology), numbingly confused with next to no identity I was proud to affirm. This was two decades before anti-identitarian politics conferred fashionably fragmenting identities on those newly cavorting at the cutting edge of deconstructive and queer platforms with the blooming of critical cultural studies in mid-1990s academia. In the mean time, women like me had yet to find the identities we could later playfully reject: whether as females, mothers, or the desiring or desired lovers of others – straight or gay. Certainly, the sudden embrace of women’s liberation, bursting out all around educated young female drifters such as I, released me from some of my most destructive insecurities. It would be some 17 years before any books of mine appeared. In between time, I dreamed the dream of a libertarian socialist-feminist: my imaginary destination a deep-rootedly democratic, egalitarian, loving world; my dwelling place the collectivities which might foster it, including those now notorious collective households. The footsteps I followed, the meetings, marches, and community politics then alive and welcoming (at least some

of the time), were endlessly diverse. My clandestine mentors, such as Sheila Rowbotham (inspiring the first acknowledged essay I wrote, for *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism & the Making of Socialism*), or the North American Barbara Ehrenreich, steadfastly eschewed notions of prominence. An undercover academic at Middlesex Polytechnic, I was an ‘out’ revolutionary of the leaderless brigade: eminence was not our calling, though we certainly courted the attention and approval of the most dashing conspirators wherever we found them – male or female.

2. *Were there any key intellectual moments in your career? And do you think your work has changed direction at any point in any crucial way?*

My thoughts were always set in shifting sands and, till recently, rarely slotted neatly into any single intellectual trajectory, or patch of academia. I don’t expect any necessary relation between intellectual endeavours and political engagements: such links are never easy or uncomplicated even when we try to make them. Nevertheless, my own books have all been serial interventions in the intellectual clashes of evolving feminist thought and culture. As vigorously as I could manage, they addressed and assessed competing feminist directions and dilemmas. These became only ever more complicated, especially after the ethnic and racial provincialism of Western feminism was challenged, and the complexities of gender identities and sexual difference moved beyond early sex/gender distinctions made between nature and nurture. The assertion of racial and ethnic particularities and, more destructively, battles over heterosexuality and views of its inescapable ties to men’s dominance and aggression, proved highly explosive.

Written from a socialist standpoint, my books have come from a losing side, despite appealing to the minority I cherish. As the rejected subtitle of my first book *Is the Future Female?* would have clarified, I wrote to buttress ‘*Arguments for Socialist-Feminism*’. Behind it lay a 15-year absorption of papers from feminist conferences, newspapers, pamphlets and books of underground presses throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Pluto Press and Virago were as mainstream as I usually ventured; ‘Wouldn’t touch the [Old] Labour Party with a barge pole’, my more sectarian comrades and sisters mouthed. A reformist always, this was a position I rejected, but only fully abandoned with Thatcher’s triumphal march as the first true warrior of neo-liberalism, with its crusade to privatize of earth, fire, air and water.

Whether reading eminent (safely buried) forbears, free thinkers or whimsical dreamers, in the beginning I joined feminists seeking female role models from Wollstonecraft to de Beauvoir, to inspire our new identities and solidarities. This is a practice those who pioneered Women’s Studies, such as Elaine Showalter, began in the early 1970s in the USA and – much more controversially today - returns to in her very latest book, *Inventing Ourselves*.

Many, like me, read fragments of Marx, Freud and their then flourishing critical legacies. Soon the feminist intellectual vanguard would be heading towards structuralist/post-structuralist linguistifications of politics and political identities: post- Althusser, Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. (Interestingly, I came across the useful, if characteristically polysyllabic, notion of the ‘linguistification of politics’ in an interview with Judith Butler, the favourite target of those who criticise the theoretical move she here signifies).

Other Seventies feminists, as I did, lingered longer with increasingly less rewarding attempts at collective action, as the political world moved on its axis. Many found a home in the expanding spaces opening up for feminist engagements in differing workplaces or cultural arenas, the beneficiaries of the rich cultural, intellectual and civil rights it had engendered. My own thoughts were challenged by the growth of feminist psychoanalytic engagements, especially as the defeat of the radical Left in almost every economic and political domain made it easier for them to refocus on issues of subjectivity, identities and differences. Assaulted from without, the Left was soon being trounced from within by some of its own members who, as I see things, liked to construct its whole edifice in their own former Leninist or pro-Soviet image, disabling the lot of us. Weirdly, though, the recent victory of ‘market’ values in the public domain has been a victory for a bureaucratic, Soviet-style regimentalism. Thus history mocks us, as we fumble forward into new forms of modernity: even when flag-waiving post-modern mutabilities.

3. What about the intellectual ambience of this country? Has it helped you - or perhaps you have created it?

Hardly!

4. The media have found you very attractive as a writer and you speak on panels at big public occasions where gender issues need discussion. What kind of opportunities does the journalism you do give to you? What’s it like being a public intellectual? Are there any downers about it?

As I’ve suggested, that’s all rather recent. The media takes an interest when you’re lucky, have contacts, and can manage to intervene in some current polemical debate – from cloning sheep to combating clitoral excision (literal or metaphorical). Some of the issues which least interest me most engross the media (which likes especially to dwell upon itself). I was, for example, rather reluctantly but repeatedly drawn into pronouncements on pornography and censorship, issues capturing media attention with MacKinnon’s and Dworkin’s barnstorming anti-pornography crusade: sadly presented as the

imprimatur of popular feminism throughout the 1980s. Providing titillation for media audiences, it also allowed would-be celebrity feminists, like Camille Paglia, to blandish themselves lambasting other feminists. So I have managed to ride a few waves which captured public attention, if never quite on the crest, and always about to fall off. And I do welcome the challenge of struggling to find the words accessible to most people which capture something of the complexity and mutability of gender relations, as well as reflect upon our ostensibly ever more troubled sexual and personal dilemmas. It saddens me that, on the one hand, there still seems only limited spaces available for elaborating thoughtful feminist reflection in upmarket popular journalism while, on the other hand, disciplinary auditing targeting sparsely read academic journals constrains the more popular writing of academics. I take seriously all possibilities for expanding the intermingling of the two mediums, hoping this does not soon reduce merely to cyber space.

5. You were one of the earliest feminists to raise gender issues around masculinity while remaining, unlike some of your contemporaries, a powerful feminist? Is there any strain in this position?.

Amongst the 'sisterhood' you mean? Isobel, none of us is going to come through anything unscathed. I had always tried to question the increasing cultural inclination for feminists to celebrate women's inherently more virtuous ways (as in *Is the Future Female?*). Of course, given the necessity of virtue more likely to be thrust upon us (whether as daughters, mothers, lovers, wives or waged workers) we can indeed be very sweet, charming and nurturing - when not consumed by overwork, envy or hostility. We live in cultures which still exploit if not abuse the emotional labours of love still more likely to be apportioned to women. Moreover, some men's anxieties over 'manhood' can indeed produce obnoxious, even murderous, attempts at virility maintenance. Yet any complacent gendering of virtues and vices is always partially specious. And it becomes increasingly meretricious when asserted by women moving into positions of significant authority who (though lacking its key symbolic trapping) may well be enforcing regimes which keep more vulnerable women as ensnared as ever within older patterns of exclusion and overwork. Gender constraints and injustices never reduce to fixed or even consistent psychological formations.

My second book, on masculinity (*Slow Motion*), was thus a direct sequel of the first. Still attempting to link feminist perspectives to a broader progressive politics, it critically addressed theories of sexual difference, continuing gender hierarchies and the multiple, contradictory, often shaky consciousness of men. It also addressed the deep divisions of authority and status between men (with accompanying contrasting sexual, psychological and social configurations) and how these are obscured by gender contrasts

that conceal more than they reveal about the problems of particular groups of men. Published in 1990, it preceded by a hair's breadth the explosion of books addressing men's sense of emotional and physical vulnerabilities, mounting each year the millennium approached. The march of some women into every area once excluding us from power and authority continued unabated. This was despite the 'backlash' blaming women's shifting role in the workplace for almost every social problem the old century had failed to solve, and despite, overall, so many inequalities between women and men, in the home or workplace, remaining obstinately in place. The irony is that some men's sense of personal failure, certainly deep and crippling, are everywhere tied in with the persisting truth of women's secondary status and identity, both socially and symbolically. This is why notions of embattled manhood are far from new. They have always been with us.

6. So do you think issues of masculinity are here to stay? How will masculinity studies develop?

For sure, they are here to stay in the foreseeable future, or at least as long as 'manhood' still has a symbolic weight denied to 'womanhood'. They crystallise the contradictions of our time: between the public and the private domain; markets and morality; individual competitiveness and love, mutuality and care. We have solved none of these problems. I would like to hope that masculinity studies develop in ways which addresses them. This would mean that while men's subjectivity - its specific, if diverse, constraints and terrors - remain of central concern, so to do issues of social policy, social change and quotidian negotiations in the home, workplace and wider world.

7. What do you think about so-called post-feminism? Where do you think feminism is going these days? Are we right to be worried about it? Do you think that somehow the politics has gone out of feminism?

Steady on, or I will fall over, trying to untangle and prophesy the future of feminism and women's estate. But these are, of course, precisely the questions my last book (*Why Feminism?*) was written to address. So much has changed for women; so few of our dilemmas are resolved. In my view any 'post' tag usually arrives primarily trailing its ambivalent, dependent relation to what it supposedly supersedes. I don't really know what it means to be post-feminism, when so many of the radical goals of second-wave feminism have yet to be realized: from basic economic parity to subverting the cultural codings which depreciate, marginalize or silence the 'feminine' and bind potency, desire and authority to the 'masculine'. But there are too many ways of envisaging feminism nowadays to speak of any single trajectory, if there ever was one.

It is not so much that the politics has gone out of some versions of feminism, although I do see more conformity than dissidence in the ‘power-feminism’ currently associated with popular writers like Naomi Wolf or even, more recently, Elaine Showalter’s celebration of women celebrities as role models for women everywhere. The problem is more that we can fashion feminism to suit our purposes: whether our intention is to praise or denigrate it. For instance, the mainstreaming of feminism as merely a form of ‘equal opportunities’ can be used to downplay other structural inequalities which maintain the poverty of particular groups of women – especially along class, ‘race’, ethnic or regional lines. Conversely those for whom feminism primarily involves resignifying the ‘feminine’, exploring the ‘other’ of symbolic phallogentrism, can remain indifferent to calls for social reform and gender justice. Hence my own path, with all its ensuing wobbles and limitations, attempting to highlight the disjunctions and build bridges across the widening gulf between feminist theoreticians exploring, deconstructing or resignifying the place of sexual difference in language and other theoreticians and activists aiding or addressing the immediate needs of impoverished or imperilled women.

8. You have resolutely encountered founding feminists such as Juliet Mitchell. What’s your argument with her? Why is it important for wider feminist debate?

My argument? Juliet Mitchell has always inspired me, and we share near identical goals: to understand sexual difference and seek social justice, especially for women most marginalized in sweated homework, or wherever. Indeed, we share certain fears that feminism’s embrace of psychoanalysis can sometimes serve to displace politics. My disagreements have been primarily, although not entirely, with her role as prime mover and leading authority in particular strands of psychoanalytic feminism. Oddly, while Freud’s influence on clinical practice at the close of the twentieth century was being repeatedly traduced, psychoanalysis remains extremely influential in parts of the academy: cultural and media studies, critical theory and, especially, feminist scholarship. I have relied upon it to contemplate our obstinately contrary, inconsistent individualities and their always-precarious relation to social expectations of gender. They remain unstable whether we try to conform to or seek to subvert gender patterns, making our troubled compromises, either way. It helps us explain the belligerence and dread (especially from men) so often greeting change in the gender and sexual arena.

However, I considered Mitchell’s Lacanian espousal of the primordial place of the phallus as the precondition of language and cultural intelligibility to be politically conservative. I have also questioned her subsequent Kleinian direction, with its parallel insistence upon a reproductive, heterosexual

teleology. Here, for psychic health, the child must accept Oedipal kinship law, that is, must accept the sexual polarity of the parental couple. Her latest book, *Madmen and Medusas* is, among other things, a compelling analysis of the significance of sibling relationships in the production of hysteria. Nevertheless, she argues that 'what the hysteric unconsciously cannot face is sexual reproduction as opposed to parthenogenetic procreation'. It is striking that Mitchell now falls back on the very reproductive biologism she once turned to Lacan to avoid.

In contrast I have been drawn on feminists critically deploying psychoanalysis as a tool for reworking notions of gender. These include those New York analysts who in 1996 helped found the journal *Gender and Psychoanalysis*: relaunched in 2000 as *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. They emphasise that sexed identity is never internalized as a single entity (positively or negatively), but rather operates subjectively within an array of conflictual mental representations and self-perceptions. These arise from the unique identifications each child makes with its own parents, siblings and significant others, even though these are always themselves permeated by the polarising effects of symbolic phallogentrism and continuing patterns of male dominance. Such unorthodox rethinking of psychoanalytic accounts move us closer to the Foucauldian and Derridian influences authorizing queer theory's account of the inevitable instability and fluidity of identities and desire, with Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick still its reigning - if at times reluctant - theoreticians. In contrast to Mitchell's account of the necessary acceptance of sexual difference in terms of laws of procreation, others have drawn on their clinical work to suggest that children's perceptions and fantasies can fashion healthy stories out of configurations which contrast with normative family forms. Drawing on this work, I think we can build links between old feminist antagonists: those who cherish the psychic life of difference and those who stress the culturally contingent nature of gendered identities.

9. *What would you most like a critic to say about your work?*

I've never seen it as particularly original. So I'd like my critic to suggest it clarifies problems and, despite embracing complexity and foreseeing endless impediments, inspires hope. Being a non 'post-it' person, I can't see readers outliving me, so I'd like my critic to enjoy my prose and think they'd like to meet me. I'd like them to say something which keeps my own optimism alive.

Isobel Armstrong July 1 2001

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