

Chapter One

Interpretation and Genealogy in Feminism

What could it mean to pose “the man question” in political theory? At the most general level, to ask the man question is to call political theory into question with regard to gender, to call the question of gender in political theory. But there are different ways to put gender into circulation as an analytic category, different ways to problematize the social, political and linguistic arrangements of sexual difference. Many of the most heated debates in contemporary feminist theory, and many of its most troubling and promising possibilities, can be seen as disputes over the proper way to frame questions of gender in language and politics.

In some respects the man question is a reversal of the older and more familiar “woman question,” particularly as elaborated within nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialism, wherein a certain ordering of the world is established, reflecting male experiences and understandings, and then women are problematized and fitted into that order. For example, in a small tract entitled *The Woman Question*, an unnamed editor marshals selections from Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin to indicate the proper role for women in the unfolding of socialism. Clara Zetkin’s interview with Lenin, also included, indicates that women too can ask the woman question: “We must win over to our side the millions of toiling women in the towns and villages,” Zetkin declares. “Win them for our struggles and in particular for the communist transformation of society.”¹ Women here are the problematic others, the unreliable,

troublesome, and/or dangerous ones that “we” must cajole or control.

Many significant western male thinkers have framed their inquiries implicitly around “the woman question.” Freud is a nearly unavoidable target; perceiving women’s sex to be defective because it is hidden, presenting, as Luce Irigaray remarks, “*the horror of nothing to see*,” Freud relentlessly establishes the male to be the norm, then shrugs his shoulders at women’s incomprehensibility, their essential mystery.² Julia Kristeva makes the same point: concerning women’s sexuality, she says, “Freud offers only a massive *nothing*.”³ Hegel’s account of the modern world articulates a notion of subjectivity that he then denies to women, defining them as “plants” vis-à-vis the male “animal,” as “‘ironies’ in the life of the spirit.”⁴ Lévi-Strauss posits an exchange of women that assumes polygamous sexuality on the part of men, and asserts that there will always be a shortage of truly desirable females; meanwhile the possibilities that women’s desire might also be polygamous, or that men might not all be equally attractive, go unremarked.⁵ In the terms of the woman question women are the problem, men and masculinity are the unnamed norm, and gender is silenced as an analytic category. Irigaray’s characterization of Freud could easily apply to all who pose the woman question:

The “feminine” is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value. . . . In short, they [women] are deprived of the worth of their sex. The important thing, of course, is that no one should know who has deprived them, or why, and that “nature” be held accountable.⁶

Feminist responses to the woman question have been complex and varied. An early and still common response is to claim entry for women into the worlds that men reserved for themselves by hurling a loud “Me too!” at the wall of arrogance and exclusion. While there are still good political reasons for retreating to this position on occasion, the response challenges only the answers to the woman question, not its terms. In order to shift onto the theoretical and practical terrain of the man question, many feminists have pursued a re-framing of the inquiry via a reversal of its terms; that is, they call for the overthrow of male-ordered thinking in favor of a discourse that privileges women’s experiences and wom-

en's perspectives, that puts women in the center. But this reversal is not a simple reversal, nor an uncontested one. It is not simple because it does not retain the hierarchical structure of patriarchal discourse, substituting women at the pinnacle. Most versions of feminism reject the idea of simply reproducing phallogocentric discourse or patriarchal society with women at the top.⁷ The vexing question is, then, What exactly constitutes patriarchy's reproduction? In pursuing this question, some feminisms move to contest the reversal itself by arguing against any arrangement of margin and center, against the very principle of a center at all.

The relation between efforts to put women in the center and efforts to deconstruct centers is complex. Both frame the questions of political theory around the problematic of gender, but in different ways. In the first stance men—male power, male identities, masculinity as a set of practices—are problematized; in the second, the gendered world itself becomes a problem. Both stances bring gender into view as a powerful organizing principle of social life, but the former reverses patriarchal gender priorities while the latter explodes them. In some respects these two ways of asking the man question seem simply to contradict one another. How can we simultaneously put women at the center and decenter everything, including women? But this contradiction, while acute, does not exhaust the possible relation between these two theoretical practices; nor does naming the contradiction preclude searching for creative strategies to negotiate it. One approach to relating these two theoretical projects is a temporal one: the woman-centered discourses can be seen as paving the way for gender-free analyses; putting women in the center, then, would be a step toward decenteredness.⁸ While this formulation is inviting in some ways, it does not explain why any group would seek to destroy the center once they have occupied it; nor does it explore the ways in which the two theoretical impulses depend on one another.

Debates between feminist reversals and their discontents offer a dynamic if unstable field for examining feminist discursive and institutional practices. The creation of women's voice, or a feminist standpoint, or a gynocentric theory, entails immersion in a world divided between male and female experience in order to critique the power of the former and valorize the alternative residing in the latter. It is a theoretical project that opposes the identities and

coherencies contained in patriarchal theory in the name of a different set of identities and coherencies, a different and better way of thinking and living. The deconstruction of gender entails stepping back from the opposition of male and female in order to loosen the hold of gender on life and meaning. This theoretical project renders gender more fragile, more tenuous, and less salient both as an explanatory and as an evaluative category. Women's point of view is created in order to reject the male ordering of the world; gender is deconstructed in order to reject the dualism of male and female.⁹

The contrast between reversing gendered practices through interpretation and exploding them via genealogy is not (regrettably) as neat as I have just suggested. Genealogy too employs its reversals. Frequently the switch entails relations of cause and effect. Foucault, for example, argues that the category of sex, rather than causing behavior and directing desire, is in fact the effect of a historically produced regime of sexuality.¹⁰ Gayatri Spivak refers to the "subject-effect" to establish the juridico-legal subject of modernity as outcome rather than cause.¹¹ Reversal is a seemingly irresistible move of displacement, an effective strategy to dislocate the center and challenge its claims to self-evidence. Yet differences between the ways that reversals are deployed remain: approaches affiliated with interpretation tend to use their reversals to provide an alternative resting place for understanding and action, while those employing genealogy tend to undermine one's ability to rest at all. Genealogical reversals do not restabilize cause/effect relations in the opposite direction so much as they unsettle any effort to conceptualize singular or linear relations between events and practices.

Efforts to give voice to women's perspective(s) sometimes emphasize the need to speak with and listen to women in their own terms, and sometimes go on to recruit women's perspective(s) to provide direction for political change. Arguments for both approaches usually call for some founding source for women's experiences: sexuality and reproduction, the political economy of the gendered division of labor, the practices of mothering, or the telos of nature. Sometimes the defining category is conceptualized biologically or innately and suggests an essentialist form of argument in which the meaning of women's lives is lodged in the female body

or psyche. Sometimes essentialism is eschewed in favor of a historical account in which *woman* or *women* is/are produced through and against the operation of political, economic, and social forces. Whether the arguments emphasize what women *do* or what women *are*, the construction of the category *women's experience* requires some coherent notion of what sorts of persons and what sorts of experiences count as fundamental. Realizing that the foundation they seek may not apply to all women or exclude all men, expressions of women's voice usually call for respect for differences among/within women (and sometimes among/within men as well), but the logic of the search for a founding experience tends to elide difference nonetheless.

The deconstructive project comes to the defense of difference, in opposition to "the founding of a hystero-centric to counter a phallic discourse."¹² The deconstruction of gender is done in the name of a politics of difference, an anti-foundationalism defending that which resists categorization and refuses to be corralled in the categories of male and female. While nearly all feminist theory opposes binary opposition at some level, the deconstructivists are the most radical in their call for an opposition to sexual dualism itself in the name of "a choreographic text with polysexual signatures." The voices in such a chorus "would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes."¹³ Deconstructive strategies focus on the multiple meanings that could reside within terms or narratives, attending to the many residing within the appearance of the one. Yet the deconstructive project is itself parasitical upon the claims it seeks to unfound, including claims about sexual difference, both those of the patriarchal order and those of feminists. So these two projects cannot be neatly separated. They are like contrasting themes that run through the fabric of feminist theory. Sometimes the two projects meet head-on in debate, but more often they coexist within a particular flow of argument, encountering and evading one another in subterranean fashion. Advocates often speak as though the two projects were totally separate and antagonistic endeavors, but within the general fabric of feminist thought they appear more often as connected, yet contrasting, themes. Although the relationship between them is not harmonious, conversations are nonetheless possible between them. Inter-

pretation and genealogy are contrasting voices that create different, albeit related, possibilities for knowledge and politics.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the political and epistemological opportunities made available by these two contrasting theoretical practices, as well as to clarify their relationship to one another. Here they are mapped out as metatheories, that is, as theories about how to do feminist theory, or as questions about how to ask the man question. The various efforts to name and to act upon women's voice can be seen as differing versions of the hermeneutic project within political theory. Within this project the task of theory is to interpret appearances properly in order to uncover an underlying meaning, a reality distorted but not destroyed by the power of those able to construct the appearances in the first place. Most theories that carry the imprint of Hegel or of Marx, and often of Freud as well, participate in some version of the hermeneutic project. Correspondingly, the efforts to deconstruct gender take the form of differing expressions of political theory's genealogical project. Here the task is to deconstruct meaning claims in order to look for the modes of power they carry and to force open a space for the emergence of counter-meanings. "A theory," says Gilles Deleuze, speaking for genealogy, "does not totalize; it is an instrument for multiplication and it also multiplies itself."¹⁴ Genealogy is more clearly an activity than a theory in the interpretive sense in that it takes up a posture of subversion toward fixed meaning claims. Yet its emphasis on subversion positions it at odds with authority and inclines it to the side of the powerless and marginal. Nietzsche and most of the theorists labeled poststructural or postmodern participate in various ways in the genealogical project.

Just as the woman question has very little to do with women, and everything to do with filling in the gaps in male-ordered claims about reality, so the man question has very little to do, directly, with men. It has to do, rather, with making it possible to view male power and female subordination, and/or maleness and femaleness *per se*, as phenomena in need of explanation and redress. In its hermeneutic version, pursuit of the man question entails the valorizing of women's experiences as a privileged locus of discursive and institutional insight. In its genealogical guise, asking the man question entails calling into question the field of meaning within which man and woman can be understood as stable categories at all. One

of the ironies of the woman question is that women tend to disappear from its central terms, to become troublesome mysteries (for example, Freud's "What do women want?") or recruitable auxiliaries (Zetkin's "millions of toiling women") attached to a firmly male-ordered story. The man question reverses and maintains this irony in that it is not directly about men, but about the dislocation of male-orderedness in inquiries into gender. The hermeneutic move effects this dislocation by shifting women into the center of the analysis, while the genealogical approach interrupts the stability of the terms *men* and *women* (among others). My central concern is not with the substance of western society's understanding of masculinity but with the kinds of thinking and acting that are necessary to dislodge masculinity from its claims to normalcy and to make it a problem that requires explanation.¹⁵

Engaging feminist questions at the level of metatheory enables us to ask what Heidegger and others have called the question of the frame. The questions we can ask about the world are enabled, and other questions disabled, by the frame that orders the questioning. When we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become *enframed* within it. The frame makes claims upon our questioning that we have trouble hearing: "Man [*sic*] stands so decisively in attendance on the challenging-forth of enframing that he does not grasp enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to." The dominant frame orders our thinking in such a way that alternative orders are silenced: "But enframing does not simply endanger man [*sic*] in his relationship to himself and to everything that is. As a destining, it banishes man into that kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing."¹⁶

It is possible to be enframed *within* interpretation (feminist or otherwise) or *within* genealogy, seeing only the battles each practice names as worthy and missing the ways in which contending interpretations or rival deconstructions cooperate on a metatheoretical level to articulate some possibilities and silence others. Within feminist theory interpretations and deconstructions of various kinds constitute different sorts of meaning fields, and within those fields certain debates flourish while others fail to take root.¹⁷ Enframing is challenged when elements on the fringes or in the basements of

a particular frame (say, feminisms as fringe or subterranean elements of modernity) become more audible. Further, the fringes of an argument can come to offer a hidden enablement to the frame from which they are excluded: it is the fringe's prohibitions or silences that allow the explanations of the frame to do their work. Paradoxically, the woman question is enabled by the exclusion of women from its central terms of inquiry, so that the male-ordered accounts can continue their operations with minimal disruptions from the margins. Enframing, then, is also challenged when the "intricate and interanimating" relation of the fringes and basements to the frame is named.¹⁸

The man question is a kind of frame for feminist metatheories; it invites inquiries into the arrangements and terms of gender by marking the dominant configurations as strange, demanding explanation. As a frame it is not exempt from the problems of enframing. Feminisms too have their fringes and their basements; while it is probably impossible to know one's own fringe completely, one can at least know that the fringe exists and stay open to its disruptive effects. Attention to clashing metatheories, opposing ways to ask questions about questions, can help bring into focus the frames within which questions normally reside and the fringes those frames both create and repress. Articulating the debates and dependencies between interpretation and genealogy in feminism may help to agitate into livelier existence the terrain that is unoccupied or underoccupied by the debates framed within each practice.

Three preliminary points need to be made about the constitution of interpretation and genealogy as categories for inquiry into the man question. First, in constructing them I have disregarded important distinctions within each set of practices. Advocates of hermeneutic inquiry may take offense at the inclusion of historical explanations of the emergence of meaning with religious forms of essentialism, or of idealist with materialist analyses. Champions of genealogy may object to the conflation of the textual practices of literary deconstruction with the historical project of denaturalizing the claims of power. I do not mean to suggest, for example, that Marx is the same as Jung, or Foucault the same as Derrida, but rather to group them according to their overall participation in two fundamental and opposing activities: the discovery of truth in an ordered universe versus the imposition of meaning on a disordered

one. The advantage of these categories is their ability to thematize questions not readily askable within the more familiar oppositions of feminist theory, such as socialist feminism versus cultural feminism or radical versus liberal feminist politics. When arguments about the nature of order confront arguments about whether there is an order at all, differences within the two positions are minimized so that differences between them can make an appearance.

Second, I trace contending strategies of argument rather than fixed positions or established schools of thought. By referring to interpretation and genealogy as strategies, practices, or impulses, I mean to suggest both their activity and their fluidity. As ways of comprehending the world, both stances are selective and active engagements with that world; as theories they are also practices. While they are perspectives evinced by individual thinkers (that is, they are things that people *do*), they take their power largely from their status as already existing linguistic/political practices into which we enter to make our arguments. The genealogical impulse is ill-served by efforts to capture it within the docile walls of an academic school of thought; to create a stance called “post-structuralism” that one can then espouse or reject is fatally to tame the rebellion against categorization expressed therein. Nor does hermeneutics as I use the term refer to any single ideological argument or school of thought; rather, it names a stance toward knowing and acting that depends heavily on a stable appearance/reality distinction. The opposition between interpretation and genealogy is not a reformulation of the old war between idealism and materialism; interpretations, for example, can look either to ideas or to social structures (or both) to critique the misleading appearances that disguise underlying realities. The question here is not whether language or institutions are more real, but what to make of claims about “reality.” In reading contemporary feminist theory through the lenses provided by interpretation and genealogy I attempt not a taxonomy of positions but a tracing of threads that weave around and chafe one another; not a complete account of a stable field but rather an unraveling of two persistent impulses within feminist discourses. In reducing feminism’s many faces to two, I risk failing to capture all the significant debates, but perhaps I have found a way to think about a stubborn and persistent opposition that marks much of our thinking, writing, and acting.