

Feminism: Some Recent Canadian Contributions

Deborah Gorham

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[See table of contents](#)

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Feminism:

Some Recent Canadian Contributions

Deborah Gorham

Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (London: Verso Books 1986).

Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: The Women's Press 1985).

IS CANADIAN FEMINISM MERELY a dependent offshoot of American, British or French feminism? Or is it distinctly different? The two books under review are both designed to offer evidence not only for the distinctiveness of Canadian feminism but also for the special contribution that Canadians have made to feminist theory.

The Politics of Diversity, edited by Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, two Marxist feminist scholars, the first of whom is Canadian and the second British, is a collection with a well-defined purpose. The book was edited and published to demonstrate the distinctiveness and the strengths of Canadian feminist theoretical work primarily with a non-Canadian audience in mind.

It is clear that when they set out to put this collection together, the editors had given considerable thought to what a volume of this sort should and should not be. They did not intend merely to gather together a disparate collection of unrelated pieces, but rather to bring together selections that would illustrate themes that they believed worthy of illumination. In short, the book is designed to be more than the sum of its parts. In the case of all the themes selected, the pieces are arranged to demonstrate both diversity and the fact that there is dialogue among diverse points of view.

The editors have also arranged the volume so that it reflects the way in which Canadian thinking on a number of these issues has developed over time, and thus the selections, in conjunction with the thoughtful and well-constructed introduction, provide a history of Canadian socialist-feminist

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thinking over the past two decades. As a result, some articles make their presence felt even when they have not been republished in *The Politics of Diversity*. This is true, for example of Peggy Morton's piece, "A Woman's Work is Never Done," which appeared in *Women Unite!* (1972), the initial publication of the Women's Press in Toronto, and the first Canadian feminist anthology, and of Margaret Benston's "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation." (1969)

The subject of Benston's and Morton's articles — the relationship between women's paid and unpaid work — is, in fact, the dominant theme of *The Politics of Diversity*. An assessment of Canadian contributions to the "domestic labour debate" (the debate between Marxists and feminists about the way in which women's unpaid labour ought to be defined) is central to the collection. As Hamilton and Barrett remind us in their introduction, 'Canadians led the field' in the debate of the early 1970s. Moreover, they believe the discussion in Canada has never been as narrow or as doctrinal as it has been, for example, in Britain: "... the debates as they developed in Canada formed part of a much broader project to understand the oppression of women in modern capitalist society in greater empirical and historical detail." In Canada, they say, "we do not have an abstract and technical debate that exists in isolation; we have a much richer and broader research-based tradition of enquiry into political economy into which the more theoretical debate is inserted." (16)

The first two sections of the book are designed to substantiate these statements about the nature of Canadian empirical and theoretical discussion of women's labour. In the first section, 'Home and Workplace,' four examples of 'specific work done in the research tradition' are reprinted, including a sample of Meg Luxton's important work on women in Flin Flon, Manitoba, and an example of Ruth Roach Pierson's excellent historical work on women and World War II. That section is followed by ten papers gathered together under the title, 'Towards Feminist Marxism.' Two of the best — those by Bonnie Fox and Wally Secombe — are new. The remainder appeared elsewhere — mostly in *Studies in Political Economy* or *Atlantis* — with the earliest dating back to 1981. The ten selections are arranged so that the reader is indeed made aware of the existence of dialogue, of the diversity of opinion, and of the development of the debate, and they are valuable for these reasons alone.

But in the opinion of this reviewer, good as most of these pieces are, they do not in fact demonstrate the freedom from sectarianism, from narrowness, or from abstraction that the editors claim for them. Instead, the section taken as a whole offers us a debate among theorists who, too often, talk mainly to one another rather than to a wider audience. This judgement admittedly may arise from my own bias as an 'empirical' historian, but I think the selections in the section 'Home and Workplace' and in the remainder of the book

demonstrate the strengths of Canadian feminist research better than those collected as 'Towards Feminist Marxism.'

The selections in the remainder of the book are organised in three sections. The first, 'Racism, Ethnicity, Nationalism,' includes three interesting papers by Quebec scholars, written originally in French, which appear here in translation; the second, 'The Social Reproduction of Gender,' offers an example of Susan Russell's illuminating empirical and theoretical work on the way in which the school reproduces dominant values about gender and class as well as Jane Gaskell's perceptive piece on definitions of skill and women's work; and the third, 'Subjectivity, Sexuality, Motherhood,' has two interesting selections, a contribution by Roberta Hamilton, which analyses recent attempts to incorporate psychoanalytic theory into a Marxist-feminist framework, and one by Heather Jon Maroney, who discusses recent feminist work on motherhood. *The Politics of Diversity* concludes with Mary O'Brien's essay, 'Feminism and Revolution.'

Taken individually, the papers reprinted in *The Politics of Diversity* merit reprinting both for a Canadian and a non-Canadian audience. It is the vision of the editors, however, expressed both in the arrangement of the selections and in the introduction, that gives the volume its significance. The editors believe that Canadian socialist feminism has a unique contribution to make to international feminism. Canadians, they say, are both better able to talk to one another, in spite of their ideological differences, and better able to recognise and tolerate such differences than are feminists elsewhere — notably in the United States and Britain. This tolerance, this recognition of the inevitability of difference, has arisen in Canada because Canadians have had to deal with difference. "The traditional centrality of the Anglo-French conflict" has encouraged Canadians to learn to debate with one another: "Canadians talk to each other — indeed shout at each other — across barriers of theory, analysis and politics that in Britain, for example, would long since have created an angry truce of silent pluralism."

This vision of Canadian feminism is appealing, and it has considerable validity — sufficient validity so that it is not necessary to overstate the case, but unfortunately the editors do occasionally do just that. The work they have assembled is good enough to stand on its own without the hyperbolic statements they sometimes make about Canadian virtues, and their negative comments about American and, on occasion, British feminism. For example, to state that the difference between the women's liberation movement in Canada and in the United States 'was and is socialism' is to ignore both the tradition of socialist feminism in the United States, and the conservative elements that form a major part of Canadian feminism.

The second book under review here, *Sex, Power and Pleasure*, by the young feminist sociologist Mariana Valverde, is outstanding because of its reasonable, good-humoured approach to its topic. It could be said to ex-

emphify the points that Hamilton and Barrett make about the ability of Canadian feminists to sustain an analysis of points of view that elsewhere are so polarized that attempts at even-handed discussion are no longer possible. Valverde's purpose is to present a balanced analysis of sexuality, to articulate a position that supports genuine sexual freedom for women while at the same time acknowledging the extent to which the social context of the present and the past produce our sexuality. Valverde believes that in the United States, where so much of the debate has taken place, discussions of sexuality among feminists are polarized. On the one hand there are radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin, whom Valverde characterises as adopting a position of 'sexual pessimism,' and on the other hand there are those she characterises as supporting a sexual libertarianism based on 'self-delusion;' that is, on an over-optimistic assumption that women can create their own sexuality, without reference to the social context. Her own position is that our experience of sexuality is determined by our gender, by our class, by our race, and by our age, but that even given these constraints, a vision of a truly liberated sexuality for women and for men is possible.

Valverde takes up a number of issues of importance in current discussions of sexuality. These include the relationship between power and pleasure; women's uncomfortable relationship with their own bodies; the difficulties that heterosexual women and men experience when they seek to create equality in sexual relationships; the problems that confront heterosexual women, including men's fear of female sexuality and the double standard of aging; lesbian sexuality; and the current debate about pornography. Throughout the book, Valverde employs examples from her own personal experience, as a way of establishing contact with her reader. Thus, in the section on women's fear of and dissatisfaction with their bodies, Valverde discusses her own problems as a teenager with anorexia nervosa. And when discussing lesbianism, she makes it clear that she herself speaks from a lesbian-feminist perspective.

Valverde explains that she intended to write a 'how-to-think' book about sex, not a 'how-to-do-it' book, but at the same time she wanted the book to be "based on and oriented towards sexual practice." The book's main shortcoming is that while she has insightful points to make about most of the issues she discusses, her arguments are not always fully developed. Part of the reason for this is that in its language and structure *Sex, Power and Pleasure* at times comes perilously close to being the 'how-to-do-it' book that Valverde said she was not going to write. The informal style and the personal revelations contribute to the book's attractiveness, but the style and the stance that Valverde assumes as author hamper serious, extended analysis. She is aware of this problem. In her introduction, she explains: "I have sometimes felt the fascination of personal revelation on the one hand, and the pull of theoretical knowledge on the other, and have watched myself

drastically change writing styles when switching from one mode to another. Despite my efforts at integration, there is still a tension between the two poles of theory and experience, or abstract argument and confessional revelation.”(23)

Valverde's discussion of pornography is one section in which the argument is well developed, and she has some helpful contributions to make to a discussion that has become increasingly difficult and divisive, in Canada as well as in the United States. As Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett remark in their introduction to *The Politics of Diversity*, “no issue divides the feminist movement in Canada as publicly as the analysis and policy proposals surrounding pornographic material,” and they go on to say that the willingness of some women active in the antipornography movement to employ state control in the form of censorship has caused “the socialist feminist to react in anguish.”(7) With the recent debates over Bill C-54, in the period since *The Politics of Diversity* was published, the discussion has become even more painful.

Valverde takes up the pornography issue from a perspective that on the one hand rejects the solution of state censorship, but on the other hand acknowledges the harm that misogynist sexual imagery does to women. She argues that the discussion of pornography should be directed away from the current preoccupation with the harm women suffer from the most violent images, and back to the perspective from which it originally began, in the late 1960s: “The early critiques of porn begun in the late sixties were undertaken as part of a wider critique that included advertising images and such practices as beauty pageants. The protest was not just against images of violence, but against any images that portrayed women as stupid and only good for fucking. It is very unfortunate that this collection has taken a back seat to the question of violence in the current debates. Even if violent porn is what angers women most, it is not necessarily the cultural form most dangerous to our own emotional and sexual development.”(133)

As Valverde points out, a danger of the current assault on violent pornography is that the issue is so often seen in isolation. Violent pornography is perceived as the most pervasive problem confronting women, and too often it is assumed that if these images were controlled by censorship, sexual degradation of women would cease. But the connection between male domination and degradation of women and the erotic is not confined to the pornography industry: the connection pervades our culture, and the censorship of violent pornography will do nothing to counteract that pervasiveness.

Valverde emphasises that in her rejection of the use of the state to repress violent pornography she does not advocate that women should do nothing about pornography. Instead, she asserts, we should do everything possible “to replace both pornography and other sexist representations by woman-positive cultural projects.”(143)

In conclusion, then, while *Sex, Power and Pleasure* does not carry current debates about sexuality into new areas, it is an intelligent discussion of a difficult subject. The book is characterised by its reasonableness, by its commitment to the belief that it is both possible and necessary for people with different points of view and different levels of experience to talk to each other. Thus, while Valverde herself is an academic sociologist, an active and political feminist, and an outspoken lesbian, she has written a book that can be read with pleasure and profit by a wide spectrum of women and men.

Taken together, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* and *The Politics of Diversity* demonstrate the strength of current Canadian feminist scholarship. We do indeed have our own feminist traditions in this country, and they are worthy ones, from which others can learn, but above all from which we ourselves must learn. As Valverde puts it, "it might be good for those of us who live in Canada not to assume that all originality comes from New York or Paris, and for those who live elsewhere not to assume that anything that comes from Canada must be derivative and dull."



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