

2 What is Feminism?

Rosalind Delmar

There are many, feminist and non-feminist alike, for whom the question 'what is feminism?' has little meaning. The content of terms like 'feminism' and 'feminist' seems self-evident, something that can be taken for granted. By now, it seems to me, the assumption that the meaning of feminism is 'obvious' needs to be challenged. It has become an obstacle to understanding feminism, in its diversity and in its differences, and in its specificity as well.¹

It is certainly possible to construct a base-line definition of feminism and the feminist which can be shared by feminists and non-feminists. Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order. But beyond that, things immediately become more complicated.

For example, popular approaches to feminism often contain references to a style of dress, to looks, to ways of behaving to men and women, to what used to be called 'manners'. It is, in practice, impossible to discuss feminism without discussing the image of feminism and the feminists. Feminists play and have played with a range of choices in the process of self-presentation, registering a relation both to the body and to the social meaning of womanhood. Various, sometimes competing, images of the feminist are thus produced, and these acquire their own social meanings. This is important to stress now because in contemporary feminism the construction of new images is a conscious process. There is a strand whose central concern is to investigate culture (in its widest sense) and to experiment with the means of representation. But feminism's wish that women behave differently is also an historic element: Mary

Wollstonecraft at the end of the eighteenth century called for 'a revolution in female manners'.

The diversity of representations of the feminist has undoubtedly grown since then. How difficult it would be to choose between them, to find the 'true' feminist image, the 'proper way' to be a feminist. And yet many books on feminism are written, and feminism is often spoken about, as if there were a 'true' and authentic feminism, unified and consistent over time and in any one place, even if fragmented in its origins and at specific historical moments.

Most people have heard a sentence which begins: 'As a feminist I think . . .'. It is a sentence which speaks of a wish that an agreed way of being a feminist should exist, but is not the product of any genuine agreement among feminists about what they think or how they should live their lives. In the women's movement, there is a strong desire to pin feminism down (whether as support for a series of agreed demands or as preoccupation with central concerns like sexual division or male domination) but this impulse has invariably encountered obstacles. General agreement about the situation in which women find themselves has not been accompanied by any shared understanding of why this state of affairs should exist or what could be done about it. Indeed, the history of the women's movement in the 1970s, a time of apparent unity, was marked by bitter, at times virulent, internal disputes over what it was possible or permissible for a feminist to do, say, think or feel.

The fragmentation of contemporary feminism bears ample witness to the impossibility of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism. Such differing explanations, such a variety of emphases in practical campaigns, such widely varying interpretations of their results have emerged, that it now makes more sense to speak of a plurality of feminisms than of one.

Recently the different meanings of feminism for different feminists have manifested themselves as a sort of sclerosis of the movement, segments of which have become separated from and hardened against each other. Instead of internal dialogue there is a naming of the parts: there are radical feminists, socialist feminists, marxist feminists, lesbian separatists, women of colour, and so on, each group with its own carefully preserved sense of identity. Each for itself is the only worthwhile feminism; others are ignored except to be criticized.

How much does this matter? Is it not the case that even extreme differences in politics can often mask underlying agreement? Could it not still be that what unites feminists is greater than what divides?

Might not current fragmentation be merely an episode in an overriding history of unity?

At times it is rather attractive to think so and to let the matter rest at that. All cats look grey in the dark, and the exclusivism of feminist groups can be reminiscent of what Freud called 'the narcissism of minor differences'.² Even so, at a theoretical level, agreements are uncovered only by the exploration of differences – they cannot be assumed. And there is no overwhelming reason to assume an underlying feminist unity. Indeed, one unlooked-for effect of an assumed coherence of feminism can be its marginalization, as discourse or as practice.³ In many ways it makes more sense to invert the question 'Why is there so much division between feminists?' and ask instead 'Does feminism have any necessary unity, politically, socially, or culturally?'

What is the background to current fragmentation? At the start of the contemporary women's movement in Britain it was often assumed that there was a potentially unificatory point of view on women's issues which would be able to accommodate divergencies and not be submerged by them. From the start the modern women's movement pitched its appeal at a very high level of generality, to all women, and thought of its aims and objectives in very general terms.

The unity of the movement was assumed to derive from a potential identity between women. This concept of identity rested on the idea that women share the same experiences: an external situation in which they find themselves – economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination are examples; and an internal response – the feeling of inadequacy, a sense of narrow horizons. A shared response to shared experience was put forward as the basis for a communality of feeling between women, a shared psychology even. Women's politics and women's organizing were then seen as an expression of this community of feeling and experience.⁴

So unproblematically was potential identity between women assumed that the plural form 'we' was adopted, and it is still much used: 'we', women, can speak on behalf of all of us 'women'.⁵ (In some of the first women's groups of the late sixties and early seventies every effort was made to encourage women to use this form and speak in terms of 'we' instead of what was heard as the more divisive grammar of 'you' and 'I'. It should be noted, though, that this plural form lends itself to a differently divisive grammar, that of 'us' and 'them'.)

In fact, common ground within women's politics was based on an agreed description rather than an analysis, and the absence of

analysis probably enabled such a stress to be laid on what women in general could share. No-one predicted (or could predict) that uncontrollable divisions would arise between and within women's groups.⁶ Early optimism went together with a huge effort to create a solidarity between women (one of the meanings of 'sisterhood') which, it was thought, would arise out of shared perceptions. But in spite of the success of women's liberation in bringing to the fore and reinforcing feelings of sympathy and identity between women, political unity (another of the meanings of 'sisterhood') cannot be said to have been achieved. Analytic differences and the political differences which spring from them have regularly been causes of division in the women's movement.⁷ Unity based on identity has turned out to be a very fragile thing. What has been most difficult for the women's movement to cope with has been the plethora of differences between women which have emerged in the context of feminism.

Over the past twenty years a paradox has developed at the heart of the modern women's movement: on the one hand there is the generality of its categorical appeal to all women, as potential participants in a movement; on the other hand there is the exclusivism of its current internal practice, with its emphasis on difference and division. Recognition of and commitment to heterogeneity appear to have been lost, and with those a source of fruitful tension. A further aspect of the same paradox is that the different forms of women's politics, fragmented as they are, have been increasingly called by the same name: *feminism*. Even the term that signifies its rejection – 'post-feminism' – incorporates it.

Women's organizing was not, in general, in the late sixties and early seventies, called feminism. Feminism was a position adopted by or ascribed to particular groups. These were the groups which called themselves 'radical feminist' and those groups and individuals who represented the earlier emancipatory struggle. Both often came under fierce attack. The equation between women organizing and feminism has been implicitly adopted since then, and its usage as a blanket term to cover all women's activities urgently needs to be questioned.

Are all actions and campaigns prompted or led by women, feminist? The encampment at Greenham Common is a powerful example of a community of women in its nucleus, support groups, and the character of its demonstrations. The symbolism deployed at Greenham calls up images of the female and the feminine: the spider's web of the support network, the nurturing maternity which leaves its marks of family photographs and knitted booties on the

boundary fence in a battle for space with the symbols of male defence and attack: barbed wire, the nuclear missile. It is its projection of women as those who care which allows the Greenham camp to be represented as useful not just to women, and through them to the species, but to the species first and foremost. Yet is this entirely feminist? Support for Greenham does not rely in the main on feminist groups (although it does rely on women). Greenham actions have been *polyvalent*, capable of attracting multiple meanings and mobilizing various ideological stances in their support: this is part of its strength. Without a women's movement a women's peace camp would probably not have had so much resonance; this is part of the success of the women's movement, but does not make Greenham necessarily feminist.

The politics of Greenham has been keenly debated among feminists. For some, the mobilization of femininity and nurturance is expressive of feminism, for others it represents a deference to that social construction of woman as maternal principle which through their feminism they attempt to challenge.⁸ Not only does Greenham represent different things to different feminists, summoning up different meanings of feminism, it is by no means certain that those who participate in Greenham politics, or support the camp, would describe themselves as feminist.

Can an action be 'feminist' even if those who perform it are not? Within contemporary feminism much emphasis has been laid on feminism as *consciousness*. One of the most distinctive practices of modern feminism has been the 'consciousness-raising group'. If feminism is the result of reflection and conscious choice, how does one place those individuals and women's groups who would, for a variety of reasons, reject the description 'feminist' if it were applied to them? Does it make sense to ascribe to them a feminism of which they are unaware? What, in the framework provided by 'feminist consciousness', is then the status of this 'unconscious' feminism?

The various ways in which such questions can be answered connect back to the central question 'what is feminism?' If feminism is a concern with issues affecting women, a concern to advance women's interests, so that therefore anyone who shares this concern is a feminist, whether they acknowledge it or not, then the range of feminism is general and its meaning is equally diffuse. Feminism becomes defined by its object of concern - women - in much the same way as socialism has sometimes been defined by an object - the poor or the working class. Social reformers can then be classified as feminists because of the consequences of their activities, and not because they share any particular social analysis or critical spirit.

This way of looking at feminism, as diffuse activity, makes feminism understandably hard to pin down. Feminists, being involved in so many activities, from so many different perspectives, would almost inevitably find it hard to unite, except in specific campaigns.

On the other hand there are those who claim that feminism does have a complex of ideas about women, specific to or emanating from feminists. This means that it should be possible to separate out feminism and feminists from the multiplicity of those concerned with women's issues. It is by no means absurd to suggest that you don't have to be a feminist to support women's rights to equal treatment, and that not all those supportive of women's demands are feminists. In this light feminism can claim its own history, its own practices, its own ideas, but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copyright over problems affecting women. Feminism can thus be established as a field (and this even if scepticism is still needed in the face of claims or demands for a unified feminism), but cannot claim women as its domain.

These considerations both have political implications in the present and also underlie the way feminism's past is understood. If a history of feminism, separable from although connected with the history of changes in women's position, is to be constructed, a precondition of such a history is that feminism must be able to be specified.

In the writing of feminist history it is the broad view which predominates: feminism is usually defined as an active desire to change women's position in society.⁹ Linked to this is the view that feminism is *par excellence* a social movement for change in the position of women. Its privileged form is taken to be the political movement, the self-organization of a women's politics. So unquestioningly are feminism and a women's movement assumed to be co-terminous that histories of feminism are often written as histories of the women's movement, and times of apparent quiescence of the movement are taken as symptomatic of a quiescence of feminism. This identity between feminism and a women's movement is, moreover, part of the self-image of contemporary feminism. The idea that the new movement of the 1960s was a 'second wave', a continuation of a struggle started just over a century before and interrupted for forty years (after the hiatus of the vote) pervaded the early years of the contemporary women's movement and still informs many of its debates.¹⁰ The way feminism's past is understood and interpreted thus informs and is informed by the ways in which feminism is understood and interpreted in the present.

The problems involved in writing feminist history throw into relief some of the problems involved in specifying feminism more closely in the present. Feminist historiography highlights different versions of feminism, since it often has overt political motivations which then produce different versions of the same history. Present approaches to feminist history can themselves be historicized by comparison with the ways in which past feminists have read their own history. Even the frustrating assumption of identity between feminism and the women's movement has its advantages: it focuses attention on the area where feminism is most intimately intertwined with a generality of concern with women's issues: women's politics. The problems of separation present themselves acutely here, and this makes it a productive point of entry.

Some of the major conventions of the writing of feminist history, which are only in recent years being questioned and overturned, can be found in the classic history of the nineteenth-century movement: Ray Strachey's *The Cause*.¹¹ It is an important book in several ways. Not only is it still the best introduction to the subject, but it is the product of the mainstream feminism of the turn of the century. Its author was an active feminist, secretary to Mrs Fawcett and involved in the NUWSS. Her main concern was to chart the period between 1860 and 1920 during which the term feminism took on its dictionary definition, 'advocacy of the claims of women'.¹² It is also the product of a feminism which did not (unlike much contemporary feminism) define itself as 'woman-made' (it would be difficult to write a history of nineteenth-century feminism which did not include at least J. S. Mill and Richard Pankhurst). A detailed look at this work will help clarify how some of the questions raised so far relate to the writing of feminist history.

History Conventions

When Ray Strachey wrote her history the close connection between feminism and the social movement for change in women's position was redolent with meaning: the term 'feminism' was itself coined in the course of the development of the social movement. All the same, within *The Cause* distinctions are made between feminism and the social movement for change in women's position.

She starts her history by proposing two forerunners of the nineteenth-century movement. One is Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist theorist and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The

other is Hannah More, Evangelical philanthropist and educationalist. Of the first, Ray Strachey writes that she set out in her great book 'the whole extent of the feminist ideal . . . the whole claim of equal human rights'.¹³ Of the other she remarks that 'It may seem strange to maintain that Miss Hannah More and Mrs Trimmer and the other good ladies who started the Sunday-school and cottage-visiting fashions were the founders of a movement which would have shocked them profoundly; but it is clearly true.'¹⁴

If the nineteenth-century women's movement is looked at as a movement for increased participation by women in social and political life or as a movement which negotiated the relative and shared positions men and women were to occupy in the social, political, and economic order, it makes sense to invoke each woman as a symbolic figure. Hannah More had a part to play in the general redefinition of women's sphere; Mary Wollstonecraft articulated women's claims, needs and desires at a deeper level. By harnessing the two a neat schema can be constructed. There is theory (Mary Wollstonecraft) and practice (Hannah More), consciousness of the rights of women and lack of consciousness, Mary and Martha coinciding. One is radical, the other conservative; they responded differently to the same social phenomena, yet both had contributions to make. (This schema only works, however, because it ignores Hannah More's intellectual work.)

On the other hand, to combine the two, as Ray Strachey points out, seems 'strange' because if the purpose was to construct a history of feminism, even in Mrs Fawcett's definition of it as 'a movement for the redressal of women's grievances' it would make little sense to include Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft as equal partners. Hannah More was not just not a feminist, she was a rabid anti-feminist: it was she who described Mary Wollstonecraft (whose book she had not read) as 'a hyena in petticoats'. Her practice was part of overall change, but allowed women the public sphere only when domestic duties had been fulfilled. Such a position was far removed from Mary Wollstonecraft's vision, which questioned the value of women's confinement to the domestic sphere and saw increased public participation by women, up to and including political citizenship, as a good in itself.

How does Ray Strachey make her distinctions between feminism and the women's movement? Her discussion of the rise of the women's movement stresses a coincidence of factors which helped bring it into being. These include: women's shared exclusion from political, social and economic life, with a rebellion against this; middle-class women's sense of uselessness; and the formulation of

common objectives, culminating in the demand for political citizenship through the vote.

But whilst the sense of uselessness or awareness of grievance might be sufficient to bring someone into the ambit of women's politics or to a lasting achievement which could benefit women in general, this in itself, in Ray Strachey's eyes, did not make someone a feminist. She does not include, for example, Caroline Norton as a feminist, nor Florence Nightingale, even though she includes Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* as prototypical of feeling amongst middle-class women. She writes of her that 'though she was a feminist of sorts . . . Florence Nightingale had only an incomplete and easily exhausted sympathy with the organised women's movement. In her absorption in her own work she judged the men and women she lived among almost wholly by their usefulness or their uselessness to it.'¹⁵ The inference is clear: Florence Nightingale put her own work first, women's rights were a side issue: a feminist would have put women's rights in the centre of her work. As far as Caroline Norton is concerned, Ray Strachey takes her at her own word and accepts her disavowal of feminism. This definition of a feminist as someone whose *central* concern and preoccupation lies with the position of women and their struggle for emancipation is constant throughout *The Cause*; so is feminism as conscious political choice. Together they allow a relatively objective differentiation between feminists and non-feminists. Feminists are not represented as more 'moral' than non-feminists.¹⁶

~~To define a feminist in this way still implies an intimate connection between feminism and the women's movement. The feminists are the leaders, organizers, publicists, lobbyists, of the women's movement; they come into their own and into existence on a relatively large scale in the course of development of a women's movement. The social movement, particularly in its political dimension, provides the context for feminism; feminists are its animating spirits.~~

This definition is valuable as one dimension of an eventually more complex definition, but cannot stand on its own. It has very little to tell, for example, of the intellectual and cultural life of feminism, of the ideas which might unite or divide feminists in their commitment to a movement or to its different aspects. In Ray Strachey's definition feminists share the same aims and the same general ideas, the same broad commitment to the great cause of female emancipation, and a capacity to put this cause in the centre of their lives. The content of their ideas merits only the briefest of sketches.

Histories of feminism which treat feminism as social movement

tend to concentrate on chronicling the vicissitudes of that movement and subordinate any exploration of the intellectual content of feminism to that main purpose. *The Cause* is no exception to this rule. Divergent feminist ideas are charted according to differences in tactics and strategy, or the various issues seized upon and the consequent articulation of aims and objectives. Yet underlying unity is assumed.

Ray Strachey's account of feminism's development in *The Cause* is by now a standard one. First there is the appearance of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, described as 'the text' of the later movement. Then there is a forty-year silence, preceding the emergence of the first women's organizations – the practical movement. Theory precedes practice in this narrative, and Mary Wollstonecraft is, as it were, the harbinger of the movement, a female John the Baptist, heralding what was to follow. True to the correlation between feminism and social movement, it is a narrative according to which feminism finally 'starts' and achieves itself within the form of a social movement of women for their emancipation.

What happens if this story is unpicked, if the history of ideas is allowed parity with the history of a movement?

The idea of a silent period can be compared with the results of the work done by Barbara Taylor and published in *Eve and the New Jerusalem*.¹⁷ This shows how Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas were taken up within the Owenite socialist movement in the years which preceded the appearance of the Langham Place group.¹⁸ The gap proposed by Ray Strachey's account is at least partially filled; rather than silence, broken only by occasional isolated utterances, there is the intermingling of feminism and socialism within utopian politics. This 'discovery' of an active feminism where none had been seen before derives from an approach which takes intellectual history seriously. It also depends on an implicit separation of the terms of the equation feminism = the social movement of women. In terms of that equation the period in question reveals nothing. A shift in emphasis unveils a hidden link in feminism's fortunes.

The exploration of feminist history is severely limited if the appearance of the social movement is assumed to be feminism's apotheosis and privileged form. For one thing, any feminism preceding the Seneca Falls Conference of 1848 in the United States or the Langham Place circle in England in the 1850s, is necessarily seen as prototypic, an early example of a later-flourishing plant, a phenomenon to be understood in terms of what comes later rather than in its own terms and context.¹⁹

To accept, with all its implications, that feminism has not only

existed in movements of and for women, but has also been able to exist as an intellectual tendency without a movement, or as a strand within very different movements, is to accept the existence of various forms of feminism. The ebb and flow of feminism's intellectual history is important here, since it enables a different perspective to be placed on the movement itself. It also points up feminists' and feminism's ability to use and to combine with diverse ways of thinking politically. A study of these various combinational forms of feminism can illuminate both the means of diffusion of feminist ideas, and the different tendencies within feminism when it does exist in conjunction with a social movement of women.

In Ray Strachey's account Mary Wollstonecraft's work gains meaning by becoming 'the text' of the later movement. But is the impression of theoretical continuity this conveys a valid one? Is Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophical radicalism shared by later feminists? The claim is made by Ray Strachey in the absence of any sustained discussion of feminism's intellectual content. Any substantiation depends on an analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought and that of later feminists.

A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* combines an appeal on behalf of women with a general social critique which employs key themes from the Enlightenment and uses them to illuminate women's position and needs. The demand for free individual development in a society open to talent, for example, is a demand of the French Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft extends this idea to women, widening out criticism of hereditary rights, duties and exclusions, to include those which derive from sexual difference.

This drive to extend the field of social criticism in order to encompass women is carried forward in the name of women's basic humanity. The claim is first and foremost that women are members of the human species and therefore have the rights due to all humans. In making this claim several elements are combined. There is a Lockean Christian argument that God has constructed the world according to the laws of reason, and that humans can reach an understanding of the laws of God by use of that reason. If women are human they have reason and have the right to develop their reason in pursuit, not least, of religious knowledge.²⁰ There is an argument against women's confinement to the world of artifice and their consequent exclusion from the world of natural rights. Rousseau's *Emile* is specifically pinpointed because within it women are deliberately constructed as objects of sexual desire, and by that confined to a lifetime's subordination within limits defined by male needs.²¹ The main thrust of this aspect of the *Vindication* is that as

members of the human species, and in the interests of their own development, women should have the same considerations applied to them as are applied to men. This is, importantly, a natural rights argument: it rests its case on the rights due to all humans as species members. Ray Strachey accurately calls it a plea for equal human rights.

This notion of *human rights*, of the Rights of Man, is not held in common between Mary Wollstonecraft and later, nineteenth-century feminists. Their debates took place in the aftermath of a major political defeat of 'natural rights' arguments, which had found their most forceful expression in the slogans of the French Revolution and which stayed alive by entering the political language of socialism.

Some did hold on to a concept of natural rights. For example, Dr Richard Pankhurst, husband of Emmeline and father of Sylvia and Christabel, pursued the following line of argument in 1867:

The basis of political freedom is expressed in the great maxim of the equality of all men, of humanity, of all human beings, before the law. The unit of modern society is not the family but the individual. Therefore every individual is *prima facie* entitled to all the franchises and freedoms of the constitution. The political position of women ought, and finally, must be, determined by reference to that large principle. . . Any individual who enjoys the electoral right is not, in the eye of the constitution, invested with it in virtue of being of a certain rank, station or sex. Each individual receives the right to vote in the character of *human being, possessing intelligence and adequate reasoning power. To be human and to be sane are the essential conditions* . . . it is not on the grounds of any difference of sex that the electoral right is in principle either granted or denied.²² [My emphasis]

By contrast, Helen Taylor, daughter of Harriet Taylor and step-daughter of J. S. Mill, recommended the Ladies Petition presented by Mill to the Commons in 1866, in the following terms:

This claim, that since women are permitted to hold property they should also be permitted to exercise all the rights which, by our laws, the possession of property brings with it, is put forward in this petition on such strictly constitutional grounds, and is advanced so entirely without reference to any abstract rights, or fundamental changes in the institutions of English society, that it is impossible not to feel that the ladies who

make it have done so with a practical purpose in view, and that they conceive themselves to be asking only for the recognition of rights which flow naturally from the existing laws and institutions of the country.²³

She invokes support for female suffrage and the suffragists on the grounds that the suffragists 'eschew natural rights and support the rights of property. To consider 'a birthright as not of *natural* but of *legal* origin is', she writes, 'in conformity with modern habits of thought in regard to civilized men, the natives of civilized societies; but *exactly as it is opposed to any a priori theories of the rights of man*, [my emphasis] it is also opposed to any attempt to give or withhold privileges for merely *natural* reasons, such as differences of sex.'²⁴ Property represented by an individual is the true political unit among us', she claims.

By holding property women take on the rights and the duties of property. If they are not interested in politics their property is. Poor-laws and game-laws, corn-laws and malt-tax, cattle-plague-compensation bills, the manning of the navy, and the conversion of Enfield rifles into breech-loaders – all these things will make the property held by English women more or less valuable to the country at large . . . [and] it is on the supposition that property requires representation that a property qualification is fixed by the law.²⁵

Richard Pankhurst and Helen Taylor were expressing an important and deep difference, between the rights of persons and the rights of property, which was at the centre of political and ideological debate in the nineteenth century and is still alive today. The affirmation of property rights over human rights and *vice versa* is sufficiently incompatible for it to be hard to see much meaning in talk of shared ideas. Mary Wollstonecraft and Richard Pankhurst share a philosophic radicalism from which Helen Taylor and others were keen to distance themselves.

It can be objected that as far as Ray Strachey is concerned, this criticism is unjust. Her claim is not, it could be said, that feminists shared a *theory* but that they shared an *ideal*. Is even this true? To the extent to which all the variety of objectives subscribed to by nineteenth-century feminists could be described as tending to produce equality for men and women alike, then it can be said that the ideal of equality was generally shared, but it is difficult to go further than this. The ideal of equal *human* rights did not stay in the centre of feminist preoccupations. The dynamics of feminist activity

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries moved away from it, even whilst feminists insisted on equal treatment, by developing much more than previously the concept of inescapable differences between the sexes. The term 'equal rights' became filled with different contents.

The more work that emerges on the history of the nineteenth-century movement the more difficult it is to see any one theme, campaign, or ideal as pivotal. The picture which emerges is of a fragmented movement, its aims like pebbles thrown into the stream of social, political, economic and cultural life, producing rippling circles which touch and overlap, but of which no *one* could be with any certainty called the focal point. At the turn of the century the vote took on the weight of a symbolic function, uniting the personnel of many different campaigns; and, reciprocally, support for female suffrage became the touchstone of feminism. But the vote was never in any simple way the object of feminist aspirations.

For Ray Strachey and others like her, however, suffragism was the linchpin test of feminism and this is reflected in the narrative of *The Cause*: its climax is the triumph of the vote. Such an emphasis in itself marked a shift. Enfranchisement of women was not a central concern for Mary Wollstonecraft. She introduces the subject with a certain diffidence:

I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government. But, as the whole system of representation in this country is only a convenient handle for despotism, they need not complain, for they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard working mechanics.²⁶

From the 1850s onwards feminists (in Ray Strachey's definition of the animating spirits of the movement) agreed that women 'ought to have representatives', more forcefully than the idea was ever held by Mary Wollstonecraft. Not all maintained her link between women and 'mechanics': this was often jettisoned together with the concept of natural human rights which informs it. Hence the fierce debate between feminists, as well as between some feminists and non-feminists, about the relationship of women's suffrage to universal adult suffrage. What replaced the notion of 'human' rights was one of 'women's' rights which depended not so much on a concept of woman as species member, but on woman as member of a specific social group composed of herself and other women. Suffragist and suffragette alike, whatever their differences over tactics, usually

agreed in constructing 'woman' as a unified category, a specifiable constituency, sufficiently different from any class of men to need their own representatives, and sufficiently similar for an enfranchised section to represent the disfranchised.

As the campaign developed and resistance to it became more articulated suffragists and suffragettes had to answer a set of questions which registered various difficulties in relation to womanhood, to the nature of representation, and to citizenship. Who could best represent women? Women or selected men? Could women's interests be distinguished from men's? If so, how and by what? What was a woman? Could women represent men? Could they represent the interests of the state? Could they take on the duties as well as the rights of the citizen?²⁷

The position of married women in particular created a difficulty since in law married women were entirely represented by their husbands.²⁸ In the main suffragettes and suffragists alike were prepared to compromise with this state of affairs. They demanded equality on the same terms as men, even though marriage created differences between women and men as well as between women and men, and they supported bills which would exclude married women from the vote.

In the name of egalitarianism, therefore, they were prepared to accept the exclusion of a large number of women from citizenship, for a time at least. Amongst the arguments used to justify this apparent paradox was an appeal to an underlying unity between women. Mrs Fawcett for example reasoned that, because of their shared womanhood, widows and spinsters would be able to represent their married sisters. Christabel Pankhurst stressed that women were being excluded on principle, because of their sex: winning the vote for some would break the principle of exclusion for all. From this point of view it didn't matter which women were first enfranchised. Both leaders mobilized the concept of a unity of interest between women to prove that women are the best people to represent other women and that some women could wait: it is constitutive of both their feminisms and shared by them despite their differences. At the level of the concept of woman being deployed, agreement exists where it may not have been expected, and where at another level (ideas about how the British Constitution worked, for example) profound disagreement does exist.

An analysis of the shifts and changes which have taken place in the meaning and content of 'womanhood' for feminists is intrinsic to any study of feminism as a specific body of thought or practice. The study of combinational forms of feminism is also important and here

the terms of general social analysis can be crucial. But overall it is even more pertinent to ask what concept of woman is being mobilized, or indeed, as far as contemporary feminism is concerned, whether a concept of woman is being employed at all.

Feminists have not always had the same concept of woman, either at any one time or over time, and those moments at which changes have taken place in dominant feminist thinking about women can be pinpointed. Taken together with an appreciation of the different alliances feminists have entered into, the concept of woman can become a means through which the influence feminists have had at a more general political, social and cultural level can be gauged. But these things can only happen if attention is shifted from continuities of feminism to the discontinuities, the breaks, in feminist discourse and practice.

One of the attractions of the history of the nineteenth-century movement for feminists is that it provides a certain reassurance in the example of women acting together in a united way. It is also possible to mould its material into a satisfying narrative. In *The Cause*, the story is one of trials, vicissitudes, but eventual success. Fifty years later, the development of a new movement led to a questioning of the terms of this 'success' and the story has been amended so that it now more often finishes in anti-climax and defeat or else in the creation of the new movement to carry the struggle further. But the underlying structure of the narrative is maintained.

Both this structure and the emotional purposes of feminist history writing relate to its political function. Combined, they can give feminist historiography an evolutionist and progressivist flavour. The present is treated as the culmination of the past and as relatively 'advanced' compared to that past. Characteristics of the modern movement (like the commitment to autonomy, separatism, or whatever) are taken as definitional of feminism and looked for in past experiences. Disjunctures and dead ends tend to be ignored. The past is thus used to authenticate the present when there is no guarantee that past feminisms have anything more in common with contemporary feminism than a name: links between them need to be established and cannot be assumed from the outset.

In my view these problems derived from an overstrict identification of feminism with a women's movement, and of the history of feminism with the history of the achievement of the aims of that movement. Such an identification depends on a definition of feminism as *activity*, whether diffuse or directed to a given end. As a perspective it generates further problems, too.

The focus on feminism as activity, as campaigns around issues,

tends to underplay the nature of the general debate about women and the extent to which feminists were involved in setting its terms. Claims are often made, for example, about women's 'silence' or exclusion from public speech in the nineteenth century. It is hard to find much evidence to support this in the journals of the period.²⁹ A rhetoric of exclusion is taken as factual description. Although there was a good deal of thinking and writing in the politics of nineteenth-century feminism, this is rarely foregrounded. Pride of place is given to feminism's dramas.

And there is sometimes something rather suspect in this emphasis on feminism as activity, as locus of a particular campaigning spirit. In *The Tamarrisk Tree* Dora Russell recalls that after the Labour Party Conference of 1926, at which her group won an endorsement of their birth control campaign, H. G. Wells sent her a postcard, part of which read 'Berrie thinks, I write, but you DO'.³⁰ On the face of it a compliment. Yet is it? Does it not sum up a certain position in regard to women's politics, to feminism, to its history, to women in general? Men think and write, women do; men thought and wrote, women did (the most famous novel about the New Women was called *The Woman Who Did*). Men reflect; women act out. But in their acting, what ideas were feminist women drawing on, using, transforming, creating? The answers to these questions are often occluded by the presentation of feminism as spectacle.

Present and Past

Instead of a progressive and cumulative history of feminism, it is an historical examination of the dynamics of persistence and change within feminism which is needed. Alongside those narratives which stress the success or failure of particular campaigns, some appraisal of the complicated inheritance of feminist thought and practice is required. This inheritance is not simply a part of the past but lives in the present, both as a part of the conditions of existence of contemporary feminism, and as a part of that very feminism.

When the women's liberation movement came into existence in the late 1960s, it emerged into a social order already marked by an assimilation of other feminisms. Feminism was already a part of the political and social fabric. It was not present as a dominant force; feminists were after all the representatives of a subordinate group.³¹ But the logic of mainstream feminism – that there could be a politics directed towards women – had been assimilated, even if women have not normally acted as a unified political constituency, and if 'women's politics' had, by the 1960s, become stereotyped.

It had become acceptable, before the emergence of the women's liberation movement, to think about women as a separate social group with needs and interests of their own, even if this way of thinking has been unstable and not always in evidence. This does not mean that only feminists treated 'woman' as a unified category, or that anyone who does so is a feminist. Nor is it to say that all feminists share or have shared the same concept of womanhood. Although the suffrage movement effected a political shift away from exclusive considerations of women as sex to emphasize women as social group, the post-suffrage movement (after much conflict) adopted a concept of woman based on the needs of reproduction and the social value of maternity.³²

An autonomous female subject, woman speaking in her own right, with her own voice, had also emerged. It has been part of the project of feminism in general to attempt to transform women from an object of knowledge into a subject capable of appropriating knowledge, to effect a passage from the state of subjection to subjecthood.³³ In great measure this project was realized within the feminism of the 1860s to the 1930s, albeit in literary form.³⁴

Women's liberation groups formed within a context which already included a programme for women's legal and political emancipation – the unfinished business of 1928 – and pressure groups and lobbyists working for it.³⁵ This simultaneity of what might be called an 'old' feminism and a 'new' is perhaps one reason why broad and loose definitions of feminism have such an appeal, and why such broad definitions can be shared by feminists and non-feminists. The content of the term has not been determined by the women's liberation movement. A pre-existing content was already part of culture, and could not be negotiated or wished away.

Modern feminism is an admixture, and the boundaries between its components, between its 'past' and its 'present', are not necessarily that clear. At the start of the contemporary women's liberation movement it was common for women's liberationists to distance themselves from emancipationism, the campaign for equality between the sexes. Despite this, women's liberation has spawned campaigns for legal and financial equality, equal opportunity at work, and other demands which have an emancipationist object. 'Women's right to enter a man's world' is both demanded and criticized. The ambivalence which the issue arouses is important because it indicates areas of uncertainty and confusion about feminist aims, a confusion which might be more productive than a premature clarity.

Nor has the *image* of the feminist been the creation of women's

