CONSCIOUS BODY IS PRODUCED BY THE CULTURE OF CYNicism ITSELF, AS A REGENERATING AND LEGITIMIZING DEVICE.

His response seems to be something resembling a free will argument. He calls for us to thrust off the armour of subjectivity which has become "an armed state unto itself" and "free ourselves through transcendental positivism and eroticism." Unfortunately, Sloterdijk never enlightens activists about possible epistemological focuses where social change can or could occur. There are no suggestions of how the activist might slip through the iron cage of the administered world. For one who concerns himself with contemporary politics and culture, Sloterdijk seems to show no concern with real social change. He is, however, mainly interested in a reactionary return to the 1960s, a return that must ignore the socio-economic reality of the 1980s. He sighs melancholically, "the opposition those days...has pretty much died out."

As for the North American political landscape, Sloterdijk thinks that cynicism has led to the neo-conservative backlash of the 1990s. Of course, the Diogenetic strategy of returning the body to the Enlightenment concerns of rationality and truth is the antithesis to this backlash. Again, this smack of Habermas, who is also concerned with a redeployment of the Enlightenment. The French (Foucault's technology of the self and Lacan's mirocognition) deny this space of embodied truth, and it is this denial that the German neo-rationalism finds nihilistic and politically conservative. Sloterdijk seems to ignore the postmodern critique of identity and ideology, which would allow and encourage the ruptures and openings necessary for micropolitical resistance to hegemony by unburdening theorized activists from the need to act within a space of truth and reason.

I scan a North American left that is heterogeneous and divided but is very active around issues of homelessness, US imperialism in Central America, and gay and lesbian liberation. This divided posture, New Left is practising sophisticated micropolitical resistance strategies while remaining aware of systemic problems that need critique. I see an effacement of resistances to domination that is almost completely bereft of utopian tendencies, a fact that 1960s New Left intellectuals often bemoan. This new generation of activists, who are in many ways acting against the sixties, find that local political radicalism is more effective when stripped of its metaphysical demands for truth and justice.

Sloterdijk seems pressed to dismiss certain countercultural spaces that are offering counter-hegemonic points of resistance. He extends his critique of the cinematic movements of Dada to the punk movement and to the "necrophilic robot geneses of New Wave." In three instances he states that these movements are breeding grounds for fascism. He draws a continuum of "cool generation" from the "Nazi fraternity" scene to the "sceptical generation of the fifties" to the "developers in cynicism already making themselves noticed as New Wave,...for, we know that Bohemianism is dead and...in the subcultures are to be found the cheerless attitudes of withdrawal." After apostrophizing the sixties drop-out culture, he labels the "eighties cultural space of post-punk fascism." Embodying this cultural space of post-punk myself, I disapprove the sixties as being overly Rousseauian and, in its idealism, not sensitive enough to local domination-effects.

Finally, I become one of Sloterdijk's borderline melancholics when I think that this book, in many ways a brilliant tracking of telos from the Enlightenment to fascism - the wonderful Weimar sections almost led me to overlook Sloterdijk's horrible sexual politics could have been so effective, yet failed. It reduces itself to a cynical exercise in finger pointing: An exercise that produces real melancholin for this reviewer, who suspects that the (old) New Left which is pointing fingers has removed the index finger from the peace sign signifier, materializing a middle finger now pointing alone, this new sign signifying something entirely different. •

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JEAN YOON

Against Polarization: Fluid Oppositions

THE OPPORTIONAL IMAGINATION: FEMINISM, CRITIQUE AND POLITICAL THEORY
by Joan Cocks


Radical feminism's romanticization of women as essentially innocent or good may be more benign than the dominant culture's degradation of women, and it may be more well-meaning - than the culture's idealization of women in a backhanded way that suggests they are really the weaker and less dramatic sex. Still, it is absolutely infantilizing and embalming.

Joan Cocks, The Oppositional Imagination

From the feminist perspective, Joan Cocks' The Oppositional Imagination: Feminism, Critique and Political Theory is an unusual work because instead of critiquing dominant patriarchal structures, Cocks focuses on the fault lines in the populist "common sense-isms" of radical feminism: the politics which, she argues, are apparent in women's newspapers, newspaper columns, newsletters, and some works of the humourist genre. The Oppositional Imagining is not an anti-feminist work but rather a work to reveal and rectify a shift towards increasing polarization of the sexes, a reassessment of the "masculine/feminine" regimes in a new but not less restrictive form. Feminism resists dominant culture by identifying radical feminism as a network of political communities with an identifiable ideology containing certain fundamental flaws. Cocks places herself in a counter-resistance to the alternative hegemony. The salient irony evident to any reader is that Cocks's rejection from the very community to which she claims citizenship.

42
Her book is important precisely because she addresses issues troubling the very centre of the feminist movement and does so successfully.

Cocks' principle argument is really quite simple. Feminism began on the premise that sexual difference is culturally created. Difference, she argues, rests "on the harsh, systematic fashioning of brute bodies into masculine and feminine selves." Or to cite de Beauvoir, women are not born, they are created — and so, by extension, are men. If the regime of Masculine/Feminine is a cultural imposition upon the body, revealing no anatomical truth, then both women and men are capable of escaping it. Contemporary radical politics, however, promotes an ideology based on the implicit belief that men are biologically and eternally violent, oppressive, technoocratic, that they have been so through time, and may always be so.

According to this ideology, women are pacific, truth-producing and connected with wild natural forces; they are victims of an organized male conspiracy. This conspiracy theory is, however, "unable to account with any persuasiveness not only for the domineering power's advances and slip-ups in the sexual domain, but for feminism's own appearance and development as an oppositional tendency."

Cocks is not the first feminist critic to point out the fallacy of the "patriarchal conspiracy." According to literary theorist Toril Moi, the "theory of sexual oppression as a conscious, monolithic plot against women leads to a seductively optimistic view of the possibilities for full liberation." The enemy is identified, targeted, externalized. It is the other that can be severed completely from the "good" and destroyed. This reverse essentialism, which gives rise to innumerable practical and ideological paradoxes, stems from an inadequate understanding of how power operates in the cultural domain.

Drawing from Gramsci and Foucault, Cocks contends that cultural power is perpetuated or transformed on the "organic" or "molecular" level, rather than from a center or a top-down authority. The woman a model allows for resistance movements such as feminism to appear or even continue. But with few exceptions, Cocks argues, radical feminism falls into the trap of assuming that the "patriarchy" is centralized and deliberate. It "uncovers" men as the ghost writers and secret agents of social life. Women were "blind" while men had "clear vision," women the victims and men the manipulators. By ascribing all the evils or weaknesses of women solely to male authorship, radical feminism rewrites herstory as a demeaning puppet show.

Cocks scorns the notion that "any subordinate is incapable of thinking and doing ugly things of its own accord." This idea accompanies the misguided belief "that every ugly thing a subordinate actually thinks and does can be traced back to the evil genius of its dominator." The crimes of white supremacists against blacks then, cannot simply be ascribed to the authorship of white men, or

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Border/Lines 19 Fall 1990 43
tive power has been exercised through a system of punishments and rewards that exaggerate or even create the apparent differences between male and female. She goes half a step beyond Foucault in arguing that "the modern regime of truth of Masculine/feminine [is] pre-eminently a drama not of linear connection, inheritance rights, and familial authority and obligation, but of sexual sexuality."

The radical feminist version of the body's meaning fails, however, to disarm the dominant culture's portrayal of the "phallic personality." Men, by virtue of having a penis, are assumed to be aggressive and violent. Feminism, which holds as one of its primary tenets the assumption that anatomy does not represent ontological truth, violates its own founding principles in its analysis and interpretation of the male sexual experience. The male genital organ is assumed to be synonymous with the phallus, a cultural idea of male-controlled power; they are not, in fact, the same thing. Nor can it be assumed that all male passion and exclusively male passion is fueled by a phallic "will to power." Evidence of the failure of the logic of the "will to power" in the sexual realm is directly linked to male genitals lying in the very existence of lesbian sadomasochism. Heterosexual passion is not necessarily violent and phallic; nor is it necessarily non-violent and reciprocal.

The radical portrayal of the lesbian erotic is one of reciprocity, mirroring, non-aggressive and yet non-passive; lesbianism is the "ideal" sexuality. Cocks refutes this with the counter-assertion that passion is "endemically unsexed," and that the radical feminist stance must be understood as an alternative cultural hegemony. She plans to evade responsibility, or make any gesture that seems to favour one sexual preference at the expense of another, but underlying her text is an implicit political resistance to any culturally determined erotic. Even lesbian S/M, an issue that is dividing the feminist community into unforgiving factions, is treated as an issue of political resistance and a further example of the instability and private nature of desire and pleasure between consenting adults.

Cocks indirectly rejects separatism as a viable political option. Men who successfully escape the pull of the dominant culture can become "traitors to their own sex. Similarly, women and men who maintain a native belief in the Masculine/feminine regime are "loyalists." The "native" loyalty is the "key" to the continued perpetuation of the old order, by leading a life without political resistance. The "traitor" lives a life of revolt, the "critic" interprets, and the "maverick" (a rare species) lives entirely outside all orthodox sex/gender classifications. These stances to the Masculine/feminine regime, even in this truncated re-telling, clearly demonstrate a field of political resistance that is not determined only by gender. The "question of political alliance," she concludes, is "very complex."

Although [women] are far more likely than men to become critics and rebels of Masculine/feminine, they are not more likely to become critics and rebels than to become loyalists. And of course they are not the only possible critics and rebels around. Thus it is that women who are actively at odds with the dictates of Masculine/feminine may be closer in their sensibilities to the few men who are traitors than to the many women who are loyalists. Any sexual politics of resistance ultimately will be brought face to face with this.

What woman has not dealt with a mother fretting about marriage, or a female co-worker who turns chalk white at the mention of "lesbian" or "abortion" and at the same time has a far more liberal-minded male friend? Who can argue that Mary Wollstonecraft did not have an intellectual partner, a "traitor" in Cocks's terms, in William Godwin? While most feminists would be able to supply examples of "traitors" in their own social sphere, Cocks's argument is an exhausting through critical rebuttal of a growing populist movement towards separatism which maintains the hegemonic classifications and becomes a "living negative" of the regime.

The form of The Oppositional Imagina- tion continues Cocks's commitment to a non-hegemonically determined society. By devoting the first half of her work almost exclusively to the ideas of male scientists (Foucault, Gramsci, Said), she breaks a tacit rule among feminist writers to cite male authors at length only to expose deep-rooted, "invisible" and incapacitating sexism. (Kate Millett's Sexual Politics is one model of this technique.) In the second half, Cocks assumes the reader has read or may sometime read (American) feminist theory in depth: Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich are her prime targets. Feminists, she suggests, might start with Part II and work backwards, while political theorists (male, presumably) should start with Part I - "something might ease up along the way." This image of readers of opposite genders reading towards each other, meeting perhaps somewhere in the middle, is, I think, a bit too linear, too monodimensional. It is telling, however, of Cocks's fundamental optimism for a virile, free-flowing culture in which one's gender no longer determines one's relationship to the Masculine/feminine regime. In many ways, The Oppositional Imagination is an appeal for fluidity and multiplicity in the political sphere analogous to feminist literary critic Toril Moi's linguistic ideal of a free floating sexual signifier: "multiplicity of sexually marked voices," an "indeterminable number of blended voices."

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