

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 polemicism and eroticism." Unfortunately, Sloterdijk never enlightens activists about possible epistemological focuses where social change can or could arise. 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 optimism of 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 1980s. Of course, the Diogenic strategy of returning the body to the Enlightenment concerns of rationality and truth is the antidote to this backlash. Again, this smacks of Habermas, who is also concerned with a redeployment of the Enlightenment. The French (Foucault's technology of the self and Lacan's misrecognition) deny this space of embodied truth, and it is this denial that the German neo-rationalists find nihilistic and politically conservative. Sloterdijk seems to ignore the postmodern critique of identity and ideality, 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 post-New Left is practising sophisticated micropolitical resistance strategies while remaining aware of systemic problems that need critique. I see an effervescing 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 cynical movements of Dada to the punk movement and to the "necrophilic robot gestures of New Wave." In three instances he flatly states that these movements are breeding grounds for fascism. He draws a continuum of "cool generation" from the "Nazi fraternity" scene to the "develop-

ers 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 apothecizing the sixties drop-out culture, he labels the 'eighties cultural space of post-punk "fascist." Embodying this cultural space of post-punk myself, I disparage 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 melancholia 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. ♦

Mark Driscoll is a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Cruz.



JEAN YOON

Against Polarization: Fluid Oppositions

The Oppositional Imagination: Feminism, Critique and Political Theory
by Joan Cocks

London, New York: Routledge, 1989, 245 pp.

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 that 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 feminist politics which, she argues, are apparent in women's newspapers, etiquette at women's gatherings, popular music, fashion, approved pairings, and some works of the feminist canon. *The Oppositional Imagination* is not an anti-feminist work, but rather an attempt to reveal and rectify a shift towards increasing polarization of the sexes, a reassertion of the "Masculine/feminine regime" in a new but no 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 risks rejection from the very community to which she claims citizenship.

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 ontologically violent, oppressive, technocratic, that they have been so through time, and may always be so. According to this ideology, women are pacifist, 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 dominative power's advances and slip-pages 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. Only such 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 scraps 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 supremacist women against blacks then, cannot simply be ascribed to the authorship of white men, or



in Adrienne Rich's terms, "patriarchal fragmentation." This approach is not only simplistic and "monotonous," it also inadvertently flatters men with virtual omnipotence and humiliates women "in a way that rivals all the contemptuous things men have said against them." Needless to say, in recent years feminism has shifted dramatically from a naïve representation of racism as a phenomenon of

male authorship, but the underlying mandate that sisterhood should override racism remains.

If cultural power is evident in the "common-isms" of daily life, then its prime target is sexuality – how pleasure is achieved and with whom. The "truth of the body" is a cultural-political regime. Drawing from Foucault, Cocks argues that the body is an arena where domina-

By ascribing all the evils
or weaknesses of women
solely to male authorship,
radical feminism rewrites
herstory as a demeaning
puppet show.



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 lineal connection, inheritance rights, and familial authority and obligation, but of sexual personality."

The radical feminist version of the body's meaning fails, however, to disarm the dominant culture's portrait 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-centred 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 axiom that the "will to power" in the sexual realm is directly linked to male genitals lies in the very existence of lesbian sado-masochism. Heterosexual passion is not necessarily violent and phallogentric, nor is lesbian sex 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 unstable," and that the radical feminist stance must be understood as an alternative cultural hegemony. She refuses to pass judgement, or make any gesture that seems to favour one sexual preference at the expense of another, but underlying her text is an implicit approval of resistance to any culturally determined eros. 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 naïve belief in the Masculine/feminine regime are "loyalists." The "naïve" loyalist is the "key" to the continued perpetuation of the old order, by leading a life without political resistance. The strident "Real Woman" who pickets birth control clinics is a living paradox. The "rebel" 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 demarcate a field of political resistance that is not determined only by gender. The "question of political alliance," she concedes, 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 dictations 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 that.

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 liberally-minded male friend? Who can argue that Mary Wollstonecraft did not find an intellectual partner, a "traitor" in Cocks' terms, in William Godwin? While most feminists would be able to supply examples of "traitors" in their own social sphere, Cocks' argument is an exhaustively thorough *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 confirms Cocks' commitment to a non-hegemonically determined society. By devoting the first half of her work almost exclusively to the ideas of male scholars (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 Millet'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' fundamental optimism for a vital, free-flowing culture in which one's gender no longer determines one's relationship to power and the Masculine/feminine regime is broken down completely. 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, a "multiplicity of sexually marked voices," an "indeterminable number of blended voices." ♦

Jean Yoon is a writer living in Edmonton.



the inside/OUT collective
presents the toronto

Lesbian & Gay



Film & Video

Festival

March 21-31
1991



Euclid Theatre
394 Euclid Ave. at College

For further information Contact the inside/OUT
collective at P.O. Box 121, station "P" Toronto
M5S 2S7, or telephone 924-3902

NATH

Inv
He

Great
by Susa

Scarboro
Canada

At first g
tion of S
with the
sional an
grave's p
fun. On
becomes
the eye
debate o
self, the
problem
and non
low art.
ful figur
her read
author in
the work
Musgrav
of letters
her own

As su
niscient
ingway.
only of
perhaps
the plac
the man
himself

Hem
tion lies
novation
berg pri
persona
sent. Fo
fascinat
Musgrav
reasons,
subject
Susan M
more an
her pers
ous pers
The
Musgra

1. Mus

Critics
poetry,
books, t
'Medus
at the p