

A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory

MARY EAGLETON (Ed.), 2003

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Feminist Studies has entered the twenty-first century as a mature discipline. This does not mean that controversies about its content and methods have been dissolved permanently. On the contrary. The contributors to the rich overview *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory* do not hesitate to address fundamental questions that are all related both to the conceptual framework of Feminist Studies and to the connection between feminist theory and feminist practice.

The editor of the overview, the literary scholar Mary Eagleton, has selected the contributions on the basis of the following themes: Place and Space (McDowell), Time (Cowman and Jackson), Class (Hennessy), 'Race' (Bhavnani and Coulson), Sexuality (Chow) and Subjects (Weedon). In doing so she has tried to instigate the conceptual fine tuning of feminist theory in a concrete way. The turbulent history of feminist theory has not only yielded different theoretical approaches, but also a certain consensus about the nature of the transitions within its common conceptual framework. As Eagleton claims in her introduction, at this moment in time nobody within the field of feminist research will question the conceptualization of identity as a layered process, structured by psycho-social, geopolitical and historical circumstances. Indeed, we seem to agree about the assumption that the material effects of circumstances such as place, space, time, class, 'race', sexuality as well as the theoretical debates concerning the conceptualization of those social, historical and cultural categories make it impossible for us to come up with an unambiguous definition of the category 'woman' and of the working of gender. The consequence of this newly acquired consensus about the relational nature of gender is that feminist research will have to occupy itself increasingly with its own specifically situated nature. While doing so it is inevitable that some of its

methods and instruments will be refined. Feminist research will have to situate itself and realise that knowledge is partial and always incomplete.

In this context, it is essential that we are aware of the fact that concepts such as class, 'race', place and space, which are so central to an understanding of feminist theory as a politics of location, originate in different theoretical fields. As a consequence of this awareness, each of the six thematic chapters in the first half of the volume demonstrate how to investigate and fine tune those concepts in order to make them fit the current feminist project. Rosemary Hennessy for example investigates how the lost continent of class may be re-deployed in the feminist and global struggle for social justice for women worldwide. The recollection of the history of thought concerning class immediately brings to the fore a general theoretical controversy: the debate between historical materialists who argue that history and society require the presence of living individuals, and the so called post-marxists or cultural materialists who focus not so much on the experience of empirical circumstances as well as on the discursive formations which structure the perception of those circumstances. Hennessy argues that from a historical-materialist perspective, class is of a higher order than categories such as gender and ethnicity: "From this perspective, gender and race are two especially pertinent ways of knowing difference under capitalism" (p.67) That is why, according to Hennessy, a general concept such as class needs to be theoretically contextualized and differentiated before it can be used in a feminist post-marxist analysis of the situation of the majority of the women worldwide, as feminist theory assumes that the possibilities for female agency are not only determined by class but also by a set of other interrelated and sometimes contradictory social and cultural factors.

In the second part of this volume, authors discuss the applications of the concepts and debates mentioned above in the diverse subdisciplines within the Humanities: Language (Mills),

Literature (Eagleton), The Visual (Pollock), Feminist Philosophies (Braidotti) and Cyberculture (Wolmark). A chapter on Feminist Futures (Ahmed) closes the volume. These chapters contain encounters between debates concerning the politics of location and debates concerning the politics of representation. Most of the contributors signal a change from feminist strategies aimed at dealing with the gendered politics of representation in order to conceptualize symbolical and material transformations to an attention given to the analysis of texts and images to the conceptual development of feminist reader- and spectatorship. This empowering approach within feminist theory is a tribute to Foucault's work, which is frequently quoted by several contributors. Foucault's late work emphasizes that the subject is free to keep an analytical distance vis a vis a discourse which not only grants positions and includes and excludes, but also creates the potential to transform these positions, these relations between margin and centre.

In the last chapter, 'Feminist Futures', Sara Ahmed takes us back to the relation between feminist theory and feminist practice. This issue is important for all Women's Studies teachers given the fact that the classroom is a place where the feminist teaching of feminist theory takes shape. Ahmed suggests that a reconsideration of the concept of 'emotion' ought to accompany the analytical distance mentioned before as a basic principle that is important for feminist theory and practice. Of course she does not conceptualize emotion as an unmediated and transparent phenomenon, but as a mediated experience intrinsically bound to representation and interpretation.

Eagleton's book is an affirmation of Ahmed's project to investigate and theorize (bodily) experiences as a new and exciting method to produce feminist knowledge and to develop new strategies to alter the position of the majority of the women worldwide. *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory* is strongly recommended to all Women's Studies teachers and students.

Prof dr ROSEMARIE BUIKEMA, *Utrecht University, The Netherlands.*