

Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory

Edited by Paul Patton

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Introduction

Nietzsche's views on women and politics have long been among the most problematic aspects of his thought. Philosophers prepared to find merit in his reflections on art, morals and truth have passed over his political doctrines in silence. In the aftermath of the Nazi appropriation of his texts, his silence has weighed heavily upon the political interpretation of Nietzsche. Until recently, it has prevented any serious consideration of his contribution to political theory. Nietzsche's relation to feminist theory has been no less troubled. His name is invariably linked with the infamous line from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – 'Are you visiting women? Do not forget your whip!' – while the other remarks on women scattered throughout his writings are often read as the more or less subtle expressions of an incurable personal misogyny. Even those concerned to defend his writings against the charge of anti-Semitism readily abandon his

remarks on 'woman' as indefensible.

Against this background, it is perhaps one of the surprising effects of the explosion of interest in Nietzsche since the early 1970s that he has begun to be taken seriously by political theorists, including some whose primary orientation is feminist. The writings of Tracy B. Strong, Otelia Schutte, Mark Warren, William Connolly and others have established Nietzsche as a thinker with much to offer those thinking through the dilemmas of political theory in the late twentieth century. The work of Sarah Kofman, Luce Irigaray and others has ensured that Nietzsche is now recognized as a valued interlocutor and resource for contemporary feminist theory. The present collection of essays displays some of the achievements and suggests some possible future gains, as well as risks, of this turn towards Nietzsche within social and political thought. While several of the essays interrogate Nietzsche's texts and thereby seek to advance the scholarly appreciation of their complexity, the principal

7 *Ressentiment* and power

Some reflections on feminist practices

Marion Tapper

Nietzsche's remarks on *ressentiment* and power and Foucault's analytics of power form the backdrop to this chapter. My concern is with certain feminist discursive and non-discursive practices, primarily in those institutions in which feminists have achieved a degree of success – bureaucracy, educational institutions and the professions. The question is: in what strategies of power are these practices participating and with what conception of power are they operating?

The thesis is that some feminist practices, in so far as they are motivated by the spirit of *ressentiment*, have been preoccupied with power as control and that this involves a double-edged danger. On the one side it risks playing into the hands of, rather than resisting, the modern mechanisms of power that Foucault identified as operating by techniques of surveillance, normalization and control. On the other, it involves a blindness to or forgetfulness of other forms of the will to power which are positive, those active forms concerned with self-formation and autonomy. In particular, I hope to identify what I shall call the logic of a psycho-politics that seems to be emerging in a specific feminist configuration of power/knowledge. It shifts from identifying and seeking to redress injustices to finding 'evil' everywhere, and not only in actions and practices but also in the 'soul' – of individuals and types of individuals, of language, discourse, culture and sexuality. It then requires and produces experts to detect the 'evil' and special discourses to expose it.

My procedure will be to outline some instances in which I think we can see a shift from wanting equal power within existing institutions to attacking those institutions themselves, from criticizing practices and discourses to finding everything 'evil'. I then ask whether this makes sense in terms of the structure of *ressentiment*

and, if so, what implications this has for our understanding of and participation in relations of power. Again I consider some instances of feminist practices in institutions. In conclusion I discuss some ways in which some feminist practices, rather than resisting power, might be complicit in it.

One desires *freedom* so long as one does not possess power. Once one does possess it, one desires to overpower; if one cannot do that (if one is still too weak to do so), one desires '*justice*', i.e. *equal power*.

(Nietzsche 1968: 784)

Let me start by saying that I take it as given that men have had and in many respects still do have power over women, however differently it may be exercised in different places and times and for different classes. But it does not follow from this that women were powerless; in any case, this is certainly not true now.

In response to this women have engaged, and quite properly so, in much of what Nietzsche might call nay-saying: insisting on the extirpation of sexism from language, of harassment from everyday relations, of exploitation from economic practices, of sexist bias from theories and discourses, of objectification from representations, and so on. And also much yea-saying: for control over our bodies, for safe movement, for equal opportunity, affirmative action, legal changes, and for representation in positions of power.

On the face of it it would be hard to deny that these are all worthwhile as actions extending the principles of freedom, equality and justice to include women. Also, on the face of it, we would have to admit that these actions have been reasonably successful though by no means completely. (In any case at least it is clear what further would be required to fulfil the intentions of these actions.) In the academies, for example, women have by and large achieved equality. That there is not equal representation has a largely historical explanation in that it is only relatively recently that women have been undertaking postgraduate degrees and applying for jobs in large numbers. Women can now get jobs and promotions if they produce the amount and quality of work that men do; most if not all committees require female representation; there is an enormous growth in publishing by and about women; and academies now have procedures to deal with instances of sexual harassment and other grievances such that few academics would dare to behave in ways which only a few years ago were the cause of justifiable complaint. My interest is in why and in what ways

about women and re-read the canon to reveal sexist bias in even those texts that said nothing explicit about women. This practice, perhaps in part because it has been completed, has given way to much more broadsweeping claims. Lloyd, for example, suggests that 'our ideals of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and that femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion' (Lloyd 1984: x). Jones states that 'this definition of authority as rules normalises an androcentric view of authority' (Jones 1988: 122). These random examples occur in carefully argued and detailed analyses. Others make much wilder claims that philosophy itself - logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical forms of argument and analysis - is patriarchal. Whatever the meaning and validity of such claims, and whatever the author's intentions in making them, they seem to have had a baneful effect. Some women students, for example, use them to justify refusing to read the classics of philosophy on the ground that they are written by men and hence patriarchal. If challenged, for example by saying that Anselm's ontological proof of the existence of God is one of the most beautiful and elegant pieces of writing, they too easily resort to the claim that logic is masculine; or that Plato or Sartre have been proven to be sexist. We now have a form of discourse in which it is enough to say that a text is written by a man to dismiss it. The reverse side of this is the construction of a canon of feminists' texts which operates by the same process of exclusion of all canons: Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel and so on are excluded in favour of the feminist critiques of political theory. In a different domain Joan Cocks traces a similar shift with respect to feminist political and theoretical concerns with the body and sexuality. What began as an attempt to reclaim female sexuality and bodily pleasure from its denunciation and denial has been transformed into a radical rejection of sexual desire and pleasure as nothing but a social construct of male power. And what began as a necessary and legitimate struggle against sexual harassment and abuse of women and children has extended into a suspicion of all bodily contact, gesture and movement as possibly expressive of male power. As Cocks says, this broadens 'the meaning of the body's violation and the scope for authoritarian rule' (Cocks 1991: 154).

In general we might say that early liberal feminists, and their contemporary counterparts, saw themselves as arguing within a theory of justice and social practices for the transformation of those practices so that women could also share in the good things available

women have not been satisfied with this level of institutional reform.

Let me consider some examples.

In the 1970s (in Australia) the struggle to introduce women's studies courses and majors in the academies generated considerable debate as to whether or not, and why, it would be better to have separate women's studies courses or to have the study of women incorporated into other courses; and in parallel, whether or not, and why, it would be better to have separate women's studies departments or women's studies taught through the various departments of established disciplines. In most, if not all, institutions various of these options have been adopted with varying degrees of strength and success. But curiously this has not proven to be enough. At least some feminist academics now want all courses and preferably all appointments, at least in arts faculties, to incorporate or evidence a concern for women's issues (Matthews and Broom 1991: 14). And mention is even made of the need to retrain male staff about disciplinary masculinism (Allen 1991: 10).

A related matter and one which contributes to the likelihood of the occurrence of the above-mentioned shift from wanting a place in that academy to wanting power in the academy is a shift in the critical feminist discourses within disciplines and perhaps with the critique of 'western patriarchal discourse' as such. Take, for example, art history. Earlier art historical critiques were concerned to establish that women artists were ignored, excluded from institutions and from recognition through critical appraisal and the formation of canons. In the process they discovered or retrieved and documented in the work of women artists and argued that they should be included in the canon. It is worth noting that the fact that this was possible showed that, despite being excluded and ignored, women artists were not rendered powerless, much less non-existent. Since the early 1980s the focus of attention has shifted from getting women included in the canon to questioning the process of canon formation. More specifically it is claimed that the problem is not so much that the history of art and the practice of art history excludes women artists. The problem concerns the reason why art criticism and art history need to assert a feminine stereotype, sensibility and art. The ideology of the language of art, it is said, is 'made by a dominant group which affirms men's dominance and power and reproduces their supremacy' (Parker and Pollock 1981: 80).

Similarly with philosophy. For some years feminist philosophers catalogued the absurdly sexist remarks made by male philosophers

while the bad things were removed. In contrast some contemporary radical feminists tend to proclaim themselves against the whole of western discourse and society. We find wholesale denunciations of men, patriarchy, sex, language, philosophy, and so on. We find claims that men have all the power and women none and that men use that power to repress women; differences are acknowledged between women and men and between women, but not between men; everything considered unacceptable is associated with men; and monolithic univocal explanations of this are proposed: either by such concrete things as 'the nature of men' or more abstractly, the institution of 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

The question I want to raise about this is whether it might be motivated and thereby explained by the spirit of *ressentiment*? A number of features which are pertinent here characterize this spirit. First, an inability to 'let go', to forget, it cannot have done with anything (Nietzsche 1969: 58). It is both a backward-looking spirit – it needs to keep on remembering past injustices – and an expansive spirit – it needs to find new injustices everywhere. In the kinds of institutions I am concerned with, those in which women have roughly achieved equal power, it can be expressed in the following kind of phenomenon. Where those with institutional power cannot justifiably claim that they are being discriminated against at the level of actions and practices they can maintain their political integrity, their claim to ideological purity and sense of powerlessness by resorting to finding 'evil' and injustice in wider and wider circumstances and at deeper and more concealed levels. The issue is no longer just what men say about and do to women but the very nature of language, discourse, culture and society. The enemy is no longer someone with whom you disagree and hence with whom you can argue, but a type – man – who is uncomprehending and unable and unwilling to try, a type whose very being is recalcitrant to virtue, who is evil.

The person motivated by the spirit of *ressentiment* looks for 'evil', needs to recriminate and distribute blame, to impute wrongs, distribute responsibilities and to find sinners. As Nietzsche says, they want others to be evil in order to be able to consider themselves good (Nietzsche 1969: 39). As Deleuze says, the man of *ressentiment* feels 'the corresponding object as a personal offence and affront because he makes the object responsible for his own powerlessness' (Deleuze 1983: 116). There seems to be two elements here. One is the need to see the other as powerful and responsible for my powerlessness, and then the transformation of

this thought into the thought that my powerlessness is a proof of my goodness and the other's evil. And this works by a revaluation of the enemy's values – an act of the most spiritual revenge, as Nietzsche says (Nietzsche 1969: 34). This makes sense of two aspects of feminist thought. First, the need to see women as helpless victims, as abused, misrepresented, as powerless in the face of such an onslaught of sexist, patriarchal, male power in every dimension of life and thought. Second, in the now frequently asserted claims of women's moral superiority: that women are caring, nurturant, their relations non-hierarchical, and so on. And seeing ourselves as good gives us a right to demand that others conform to our values.

One further aspect of *ressentiment* worth mentioning here is the inability to admire and respect. In contrast with envy, which allows for the possibility of admiring the work and qualities of those we envy, *ressentiment* allows for no such thing. If a man gets a job or promotion or a publication it is explained away by the fact that he is a man, using old boys' networks and so on. And now that women are getting jobs and so on we can see the same type of response on the part of men: she got it only because of affirmative action policies or because of her sexual behaviour.

However, in the discussion of *ressentiment* I do not mean to be attributing particular psychological states to particular individuals, but rather to be diagnosing the spirit of some current feminist discursive and non-discursive practices. The issue is why it is that now that women have achieved considerable formal and substantial equality – at least in the institutions I am concerned with – this has not proven enough. My concern is not with *ressentiment* as individual psychology but with the way this is played out politically. Women have quite reasonably wanted power, but perhaps, entangled in the spirit of *ressentiment* (quite unsurprisingly given our oppression throughout history) we have failed to be sufficiently critical about what it was that we wanted in wanting power. We wanted what it was that we believed the others had: power over.

In his Preface to the English translation of *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Deleuze says that Nietzsche is misunderstood if the will to power is interpreted as 'wanting or seeking power' and if the Nietzschean 'slave' is understood as someone who finds himself dominated by a master, and deserves to be (Deleuze 1983: xii). We could not disagree if this is all that Nietzsche is meant to mean by will to power and slave. But Deleuze also tells us that to want or seek power is a form of the will to power – its lowest degree, 'its negative form, the guise it assumes when reactive forces prevail

in the state of things' (Deleuze 1983: xi). In other words wanting power over is only one form of the will to power, and a reactive, negative form. Deleuze also says that '*ressentiment* and bad con-science are expressions of the triumph of reactive forces in man and even of the constitution of man by reactive forces: the man-slave' (Deleuze 1983: x). When reactive forces prevail they prevail with both the dominators and the dominated: 'totalitarian regimes are in this sense regimes of slaves, not merely because of the people they subjugate, but above all because of the type of "masters" they set up' (Deleuze 1983: x).

In this context it is interesting, if not also reasonable, to understand the extent to which the spirit of *ressentiment* may be shaping the form and direction of feminist struggles and successes. May it not be that, under the sway of reactive forces, we have been too inclined to seek power, to want to become masters of the type appropriate to a regime of slaves, to want to dominate? That this might be so would be invisible to us while we think of power as power over, while we think that whatever men do is exercising power or control over us such that if we are to become powerful we will have to gain control. *Ressentiment* makes it look as if power over is the only kind of power such that gaining power over seems the only escape from powerlessness. This would blind us to the possibilities of other, positive, active forms of the will to power. It would also, given that we are always enmeshed in relations of power, make it difficult to see how the ways in which we are exercising power may be complicit in larger strategies of power that we might otherwise object to, such that instead of resisting domination we are creating another form of it.

To claim that some feminists have been seeking power over men, and in some institutions are gaining it, is not to claim that women have in fact gained the sort of power that those who manage institutions have. Clearly very few women are senior managers, professors, deans or heads of department. What I mean can be better understood in the light of Foucault's account of the modern forms of power which operate by structuring the possible field of actions of others (Foucault 1982: 221). It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects; the crucial questions are: what sorts of subjects and by what techniques is this achieved? My suggestion is that feminists do not have to be in 'positions of power' to set up a situation in which certain things are not sayable and not do-able, where certain discursive and non-discursive practices are not acceptable. This can be done by establishing a norm for both dis-

course and behaviour and using the rules and regulations of the institution to achieve this. If this is how power works we might well say why should feminists not do this? After all, all relations are embedded in relations of power in this sense and the whole point of feminism is to rule out oppressive ways of structuring fields of action while, or in order to, opening up other fields, other possibilities. I shall return to this question after having examined some ways in which feminists are now exercising power. Let me consider some cases.

A fairly straightforward example can be found in the academies. What started out as a campaign to get women appointed and promoted, to introduce women's studies courses and to eliminate sexist bias from teaching practices and course content has now become somewhat different – and in accordance if not collusion with broader changes in the academies. These broader changes involve an increasing bureaucratization which operates with definite techniques of surveillance and normalization – with pervasive and constant procedures of appraisal in which each individual must monitor themselves to ensure that they conform to the standardized expectations of what it is to be an academic (as set out by bureaucratic committees) in order to pass the appraising eye of the supervisor with acceptance. Feminists are co-opting these procedures. The academic must now establish that they teach, research and administer not only in a way in general acceptable to bureaucrats but also in a way which is deemed satisfactory to feminist bureaucrats (whether academic or professional), as must the whole administration of the academy. Course content must be relevant to women, teaching materials must not be sexist, students' essays must not include sexist language, all committees must include at least one woman, and so on. Whether or not any of these are good or bad in themselves is one issue, another, and the one that most concerns me, is the form and use of power involved and the underlying strategies.

Let's consider an aspect of this in more detail: the insistence on women's agenda being incorporated into policy guidelines for selection committees. I mean by this the requirements to call for the references of at least some women applicants, to have some women on the short list and so on, and to explicitly justify not doing so where this is not done, and to explain what steps have been taken to ensure that good women candidates did apply. In some respects this is quite ineffective, and in some respects damaging to the cause of women's interests in getting appointed. If a selection committee, or a majority of it, does not want to appoint a woman it can go

through all the proper procedures and still find some reason or another for not considering her to be the most suitable or best candidate for the position. Of course if there is a man they do not wish to appoint they can always find some reason for not doing so. Only now, in the case of women, committees can claim that they have done it legally and morally, for now they can claim that they have not ignored women candidates, they can claim that they have given women more consideration than they otherwise or previously might have.

In the context of discussing problems faced by the Women's Studies Program at the Australian National University, Matthews and Broom consider a number of options for improving the situation of women and women's studies. One is for 'all future appointments in the faculty of Arts to require expertise in women or gender' (Matthews and Broom 1991: 14). Apart from their specific problems this could be seen as a solution to the problem I discussed above. But again this would seem to me to be either ineffective, except in the short term, or dangerous in several respects. It would be ineffective in that before too long every ambitious candidate, or anyone with any sense, will tack on to whatever else they do a project concerning women's issues. And once again the committee's proceedings can continue as before, possibly resulting in men who have little sympathy with women's interests being appointed. I do not take it that just because someone has published on feminism that they are sympathetic, and in the proposed context it would be even less likely. One would have to assume that to write on feminism would bring about a conversion and this is obviously false as shown by the existing writers on feminism who are virulently opposed to it. Short of adopting a positive discrimination policy, which would not exclude those women who are hostile or indifferent to feminism, the only way to avoid this outcome would be to ensure that the 'right kind' of people get on to selection committees so that the candidates with the 'right kind' of research projects are selected. And who are the 'right kind' of people and which are the 'right kind' of research projects? Us and ours – whoever we may be; that is whoever can control the committees. Men might have dominated the academies and the disciplines but they were not always this hegemonic, at least they allowed for some pluralism among themselves. In any case, surely we do not want to repeat this pattern.

There is also a danger in the implicit demand that all research activities have a women's issues component or that all researchers have this as a component of their interests. Matthews and Broom

(1991) restrict their proposal to Arts faculties but, as Allen (1991) and others who refer to 'disciplinary masculinism' even in the sciences and engineering make clear, there is no reason to stop there. The danger I see is that of a kind of intellectual authoritarianism, or at least an excessive privileging of some interests. We could, for instance, agree that nuclear research should be correlated with social and political concerns – for the health and safety of nuclear plant workers and the surrounding population, for the implications for world peace and so on – without thinking that it should be the direct concern of the scientists themselves, and without claiming that the matter is of special concern to women. Some research areas have no immediate socio-political implications, much less any particular relation to women as a group, mathematics and some areas of philosophy for example. And those areas which clearly or arguably do have a direct relation to or impact on women would probably fall into one or two categories: if they did not discuss women's issues they would not be good research, or, the technical aspect of the research might be considered a legitimately separate activity though we might also consider it deplorable that the researcher was not also interested in the implications of the research.

This demand *vis-à-vis* research and appointments is so far only at the stage of a proposal. But a similar demand *vis-à-vis* teaching, coming from Equal Opportunity Offices, is much closer to being implemented in some universities. At the University of Melbourne, for example, there is a document on Gender-Inclusive Curriculum which covers teaching methods and assessment, language and content, as well as the environment in which this occurs. This will, I suspect, have similar effects to the proposal concerning appointments: non-compliance with the spirit if not the letter of the law; its exploitation by those who seek job security or promotion while at least some of those who already bring feminist concerns to their teaching practices and content might find themselves disadvantaged; or an increasing control and surveillance of what we teach and how.

This last point brings me back to the issue that concerns me most here: the unreflective complicity in the modern forms of power. It concerns me most because ethically I am not opposed to the idea that in the present context special consideration should be paid in and to the appointment of women and that attention should be given to the exclusion of women's interests and needs from research and teaching. But the question is: what are feminists doing in the way in which we are attempting to redress such injustices?

The first general point to be made is that these practices are playing into and extending the strategies of control that the administrators of the academies are already implementing. Universities, at least in Australia, no longer seem to be satisfied with the power to hold their staff accountable for what they do. They also require a new kind of person, one prepared to engage in constant self-monitoring and to accept frequent external appraisal where the criteria of acceptability, as distinct from accountability, are determined by the administrators in the university and government. Some feminist bureaucrats and academics are providing them with further criteria of acceptability and avenues for surveillance and in the process gaining further power for themselves. For who will determine that acceptable procedures of appointment and promotion or dismissal have been fulfilled? Who will decide what an androcentric perspective is such that they can determine that a curriculum is gender-inclusive? Who will decide that a safe learning environment has been provided – that visual harassment has not occurred? Who will assess which of the current research in women's studies is to be the standard against which the content of a curriculum is to be reviewed?

In undermining the autonomy of individual academics and the processes of peer review and debate these new procedures will establish a profile of the normal, acceptable academic and institute systems of surveillance and judgement. First, a certain kind of individual will be required, and not just one with the right statements, but also one with the right thoughts, movements and gestures. Power, says Foucault, structures the possible field of action of others and the modern form of pastoral power does so in ways which make individuals subjects: 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault 1982: 212). And in its modern form it does so as both 'a government of individuality and a form of government by individualisation' (Patton 1989: 265). Second, the university administrators themselves may not care whether academics follow research in women's studies, develop gender-inclusive curricula or use non-sexist language, but it can only be pleasing to them to have others supporting and proposing criteria and techniques of surveillance and appraisal. Foucault says:

in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts

itself into their actions and attitudes, their learning processes and everyday lives. (Foucault 1980: 39)

Feminists can and do use this kind of understanding of the mechanisms of power to expose the effects of power on women's bodies and lives (see Bartky 1988 for an example). But do we want to use them ourselves?

As with other areas of disciplinary power which employ experts to label us and make us conform, these new procedures will require and produce a new set of experts and a new regime of power/knowledge. As Foucault says relations of power require the production of discourses which involve an ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and which have specific effects of power attached to them (Foucault 1980: 131–3). And this is what we are already beginning to see. Arguments from authority – a feminist text says that Plato is sexist, so he is, that logic is masculine, so it is; women's studies research shows that multiple choice tests disadvantage females and that males and females employ different learning styles, so they do. Will the content of a course be challenged because its text is sexist and so the teaching of it discriminatory? Will certain methods of teaching and assessment be banned? Women claim that if they feel harassed then they have been harassed, and if need be will call in a range of feminist experts to assert that this is so.

It might be argued that there is an alternative description and theoretical analysis of these phenomena. Rather than seeking power over, women in the academies are trying to establish discursive spaces for the expression of feminine specificities, expressions that have been denied by the dominant patriarchal discourses and social and political structures. And that in the process women may have to use the tools of the enemy. The aim, it may be said, is for 'autonomy, self-determination and a viable place which women can occupy as women in the theoretical and socio-political universe' (Crosz 1986: 195). Let us grant that this is the motivation and that if it were achieved the result would be highly desirable. My worry is that as this is being practised in the institutions like universities it is having a different effect. This may be partly because if we are going to establish and respect autonomy then there will have to be some ground rules according to which we operate. We cannot claim autonomy for ourselves while denying it in others; worse, such a denial undermines our own autonomy (Poole 1975: 13). If we reject

as patriarchal any discourse that is committed to truth and objectivity or any model of intellectual inquiry that requires formal logic or aims for unambiguous, precise modes of articulation (Grosz 1986: 199, 203) then it is not clear how such feminists could conduct themselves in the academy without denying the autonomy of most of its members. If feminism started out with the laudable intention of increasing the kinds of individuality available and acceptable, and to dissociate them from forms of domination, it is now, I suggest, in danger of doing the opposite. The use of feminist discourse, the specific power effects it has induced, and its deployment in and use of existing structures of power in institutions is not acting as a 'road block' to repression but introducing a new form of it.

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