

CONCLUSION

A note on essentialism and difference

Elizabeth Grosz

Feminist theory is necessarily implicated in a series of complex negotiations between a number of tense and antagonistic forces which are often unrecognized and unelaborated. It is a self-conscious reaction on the one hand to the overwhelming masculinity of privileged and historically dominant knowledges, acting as a kind of counterweight to the imbalances resulting from the male monopoly of the production and reception of knowledges: on the other hand, it is also a response to the broad political aims and objectives of feminist struggles. Feminist theory is thus bound to two kinds of goals, two commitments or undertakings, which exist only in an uneasy and problematic relationship. This tension means feminists have had to tread a fine line between intellectual rigour (as it has been defined in male terms) and political commitment (as feminists see it), that is, between the risks posed by patriarchal recuperation and those of a conceptual sloppiness inadequate to the long-term needs of feminist struggles or between acceptance in male terms, and commitment to women's terms.

The ways in which feminists have engaged in the various projects of constructing or fabricating a knowledge appropriate to women – while keeping an eye on male academic traditions as well as on feminist politics – have left many open to criticism from both directions. From the point of view of masculine conceptions of theory-evaluation, including notions of objectivity, disinterested scholarship, and intellectual rigour, feminist theory is accused of a motivated, self-interested, 'biased' approach, in which pre-given commitments are simply confirmed rather than objectively demonstrated;¹ and from the point of view of (some) feminist 'activists', feminist theory is accused of playing male power games, of participating in and contributing to the very forms of male dominance that feminism should be trying to combat. It is not altogether surprising that underlying both criticisms is a common demand for a *purity* of position – an intellectual purity in the one case (untainted by social and political factors which militate against or interfere with the goals of scholarly research) and a political purity in the other (free from influence of patriarchal and masculinist values). Male-dominated theories require the disavowal of the

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socio-political values implicit in the production of all knowledges and the creation of a supposedly value-free knowledge; while feminist political purists require the disavowal of the pervasive masculinity of privileged knowledges and social practices, including feminist forms.

In spite of the sometimes puerile and often naive extremism of both types of objection, they do nevertheless articulate a real concern for feminist theory, highlighting an untheorized locus in its self-formation: by what criteria are feminists to judge not only male theory but also feminist theory? If the criteria by which theory has been judged up to now are masculine, how can new criteria be formulated? What would they look like? Can such criteria adequately satisfy the dual requirements of intellectual or conceptual rigour as well as political engagement? Is it possible to produce theory that comprises neither its political nor its intellectual credibility? In what ways is feminist theory to legitimize itself in theoretical and political terms? These questions are not idle or frivolous. They are of direct relevance to the ways in which feminist theory is assessed, and may help to clarify a number of issues which have polarized feminist theorists in unproductive ways.

In this brief note, I would like to use a major dispute between feminist theorists – the debate between so-called feminisms of equality and feminisms of difference – to raise the question of the dual commitments of feminist theory and the need to devise appropriate criteria for its assessment. Is the concept of sexual difference a breakthrough term in contesting patriarchal conceptions of women and femininity? Or is it a reassertion of the patriarchal containment of women? Is the concept essentialist or is it an upheaval of patriarchal knowledges?

ESSENTIALISM AND ITS COGNATES

Feminists have developed a range of terms and criteria of intellectual assessment over the last twenty or so years which aim to affirm, consolidate, and explain the political goals and ambitions of feminist struggles. These terms have tended to act as unquestioned values and as intellectual guidelines in assessing both male-dominated and feminist-oriented theories. Among the most frequent and powerful of these terms are those centred around the question of the *nature* of women (and men) – essentialism, biologism, naturalism, and universalism. While these terms are closely related to each other, sharing a common concern for the fixity and limits definitionally imposed on women, it is important to be aware of the sometimes subtle differences between them in order to appreciate the ways in which they have been used by and against feminists. These terms are commonly used in patriarchal discourses to justify women's social subordination and their secondary positions relative to men in patriarchal society.

Essentialism, a term which is rarely defined or explained explicitly in feminist contexts, refers to the attribution of a fixed essence to women. Women's essence is assumed to be given, universal, and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's biology and 'natural' characteristics. The term usually entails biologism and naturalism, but there are cases in which women's essence is seen to reside, not in nature or biology, but in certain given psychological characteristics – nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, non-competitiveness, and so on. Or women's essence may be attributed to certain activities and procedures (which may or may not be dictated by biology) observable in social practices, intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern, and commitment to helping others, etc. Essentialism entails that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times: it implies a limit on the variations and possibilities of change. It is not possible for a subject to act in a manner contrary to her nature. Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization.

Biologism is a particular form of essentialism in which women's essence is defined in terms of their biological capacities. Biologism is usually based on some form of reductionism: social and cultural factors are regarded as the effects of biologically given causes. In particular, biologism usually ties women closely to the functions of reproduction and nurturance, although it may also limit women's social possibilities through the use of evidence from neurology, neurophysiology, and endocrinology. Biologism is thus an attempt to limit women's social and psychological capacities according to biologically established limits: it asserts, for example, that women are weaker in physical strength than men, that women are, by their biological natures, more emotional than men, and so on. In so far as biology is assumed to constitute an unalterable bedrock of identity, the attribution of biologicistic characteristics amounts to a permanent form of social containment for women.

Naturalism is also a form of essentialism in which a fixed nature is postulated for women. Once again, this nature is usually given biological form, but this is by no means an invariant. Naturalism may be asserted on theological or on ontological rather than on biological grounds: for example, it may be claimed that women's nature is derived from God-given attributes which are not explicable or observable simply in biological terms; or, following Sartrean existentialism or Freudian psychoanalysis, there are as it were ontological invariants which distinguish the two sexes in, for example, the claim that the human subject is somehow naturally free or that the subject's social position is a function of his or her genital morphology. More commonly however, naturalism presumes the equivalence of biological and natural properties.

While also closely related to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism,

universalism need not be based on the innate or fixed characteristics. It is usually justified in terms of some essential or biological characteristics, but universalism may be conceived in purely social terms. It refers to the attributions of invariant social categories, functions, and activities to which all women in all cultures are assigned. This may be the result of biology or ontology, but just as frequently it may reflect universal social or cultural requirements, such as the sexual division of labour or the prohibition of incest. Unlike essentialism, biologism, or naturalism, in which not only the similarities but also the differences between women may be accounted for (race and class characteristics can also be explained in naturalistic, biologicistic, or essentialist terms), universalism tends to suggest only the commonness of all women at all times and in all social contexts. By definition, it can only assert similarities, what is shared in common by all women, and what homogenizes women as a category.

These four terms are frequently elided: each has commonly served as a shorthand formula for the others. In charging theories with these conceptual commitments, feminists assert that they are necessarily complicit in reproducing patriarchal values: in claiming that women's current social roles and positions are the effects of their essence, nature, biology, or universal social position, these theories are guilty of rendering such roles and positions unalterable, necessary, and thus of providing them with a powerful political justification. They rationalize and neutralize the prevailing sexual division of social roles by assuming these are the only, or the best, possibilities, given the confines of the nature, essence, or biology of the two sexes. These commitments entail a range of other serious problems: they are necessarily ahistorical; they confuse social relations with fixed attributes; they see these fixed attributes as inherent limitations to social change; and they refuse to take seriously the historical and geographical differences between women across different cultures as well as within a single culture.

It is not surprising that these terms have become labels for danger zones or theoretical pitfalls in feminist assessments of patriarchal theory. One could be sure that the theories one analysed were tinged with patriarchal values whenever a trace of them could be discerned. They are the critical touchstones of assessment, self-evident guidelines for evaluating patriarchal theories and the patriarchal residues or adherences of feminist theories. These terms seem unquestionably problematic; they indicate, at least at first glance, a rare harmony between the principles of feminist politics and those of intellectual rigour, for they are problematic in both political and theoretical terms. Yet their value as criteria of critical evaluation for feminist as well as patriarchal theory is not as clear as it might seem.

SEXUAL IDENTITY/SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

Among the most central and contested issues in contemporary feminist theory are the terms in which women's social, sexual, and cultural positions are to be understood. This kind of question is, moreover, crucially positioned at the heart of the conflict between feminist politics and the requirements of patriarchal knowledges. Is woman to be assigned an identity and socio-cultural position in terms that make it possible for women to be conceived as men's equals, or is woman's identity to be conceived in terms entirely different from those associated with and provided by men? This question implies two other related questions: are the frameworks of prevailing patriarchal knowledges capable of bestowing on women the same basic capacities, skills, and attributes they have posited for men? And if so, are these frameworks adequate for characterizing not only what women share in common with men (what makes both sexes human) but also what particularizes women and distinguishes them from men?

The positions of a number of pioneer feminists in the history of second-wave feminism, including Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Eva Figes, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, and others could be described as egalitarian. This broad position assumes that the liberation of women from patriarchal constraints entailed opening up social, economic, political, and sexual positions previously occupied only by men. These theorists in different ways believed that women have been unfairly excluded from positions of social value and status normally occupied by men. Women in patriarchy were regarded as socially, intellectually, and physically inferior to men, a consequence of various discriminatory, sexist practices, practices which illegitimately presumed that women were unsuited for or incapable of assuming certain positions. This belief was fostered not only by oppressive external constraints but also by women's own compliance with and internalization of patriarchal sexual stereotypes.

Egalitarian feminists – among whom we should include, in spite of their differences, liberal and socialist feminists – were reacting to the largely naturalist and biologicistic presumptions on which much of social and political theory is based. If it is in women's *nature* to be passive, compliant, nurturing, this is a 'natural' index, guide or limit to the organization of society. Defenders of patriarchal social order assume that social and cultural relations should conform and be conducive to '(human) nature'. Its goal is not the augmentation and reorganization of 'nature' but simply its confirmation. The divisions and inequalities between the sexes were seen as the effects of a nature that should not be tampered with. This provides a ready-made justification for the most conservative and misogynist of social relations: they are treated as if they were the effects of nature alone.

Egalitarian feminists claim that women are as able as men to do what men do. The fact that women were not regarded as men's equals was, they claimed, not result of nature, but of patriarchal ideologies, discriminatory socialization practices, social stereotyping, and role-playing. They were, in other words, the results of culture not nature, of social organization rather than biological determinants, and were thus capable of being changed. Indeed, if women's social roles are dictated by nature, feminism itself becomes impossible for resistance to nature is, in one sense at least, impossible. Feminism is founded on the belief that women are capable of achievements other than those recognized and rewarded by patriarchy, other than those to which women's 'nature' has hitherto confined them.

As a category, women were consistently underrepresented in positions of social authority and status, and overrepresented in socially subordinate positions. Girls systematically underachieve and are inadequately prepared for social success; while boys' social roles maximize their social potential. Feminism began largely as a struggle for a greater share of the patriarchal pie, an equal access to social, economic, sexual, and intellectual opportunities. These early feminists of equality were bound up in what Kristeva has called 'the logic of identification', an identification with the values, norms, goals, and methods devised and validated by men:

In its beginnings, the women's movement, as the struggle of suffragists and of existential feminists, aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history. In this sense, the movement, while immediately universalist, is also deeply rooted in the socio-political life of nations. The political demands of women; the struggles for equal pay for equal work, for taking power in social institutions on an equal footing with men; the rejection, when necessary, of the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal insofar as they are deemed incompatible with insertion in that history – all are part of the *logic of identification* with certain values: not with the ideological (these are combatted, and rightly so, as reactionary) but, rather, with the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation-state.

(Kristeva, 1981, pp. 18–19)

In place of the essentialist and naturalist containment of women, feminists of equality affirm women's potential for equal intelligence, ability, and social value. Underlying the belief in the need to eliminate or restructure the social constraints imposed on women is a belief that the 'raw materials' of socialization are fundamentally the same for both sexes: each has analogous biological or natural potential, which is unequally developed because the social roles imposed on the two sexes are unequal. If social roles could be readjusted or radically restructured, if the two sexes could be re-socialized, they could be rendered equal. The differences between

the sexes would be no more significant than the differences between individuals. These feminist arguments for an egalitarian treatment of the two sexes was no doubt threatening to patriarchy in so far as the sex-roles the latter presumed were natural could be blurred through social means, women could become 'unfeminine', men 'unmasculine' and the sovereignty of the nuclear family, marriage, monogamy, and the sexual division of labour could be undermined. Where it was necessary to recognize the changeable nature of sex roles and social stereotypes, as feminists of equality advocated, this was not, however, sufficient to ensure women's freedom from sexual oppression. The more successful egalitarian programmes become, the more apparent it was that there were a number of serious drawbacks in its political agenda. These include:

- 1 The project of sexual equality takes male achievements, values, and standards as the norms to which women should also aspire. At most, then, women can achieve an equality with men only within a system whose overall value is unquestioned and whose power remains unrecognized. Women strive to become the *same* as men, in a sense, 'masculinized'.
- 2 In order to achieve an equality between the sexes, women's specific needs and interests – what *distinguishes* them from men – must be minimized and their commonness or humanity stressed. (This may, for example, explain the strong antipathy to maternity amongst a number of egalitarian feminists,² a resistance to the idea that women's corporeality and sexuality makes a difference to the kinds of consciousness or subjects they could become.)
- 3 Policies and laws codifying women's legal rights to equality – anti-discriminatory and equal opportunity legislation – have tended to operate as much against women as in their interests: men, for example, have been able to use anti-discrimination or equal opportunity regulations to secure their own positions as much as women have.
- 4 In this sense, equality becomes a vacuous concept, in so far as it reduces all specificities, including those that serve to distinguish the positions of the oppressed from those of the oppressor. One can be considered equal only in so far as the history of the oppression of specific groups is effaced.³
- 5 Struggles for equality between the sexes are easily reduced to struggles around a more generalized and neutralized social justice. This has enabled a number of men to claim that they too are oppressed by patriarchal social roles, and are unable to express their more 'feminine' side. The struggles of women against patriarchy are too easily identified with a movement of reaction against a general 'dehumanization', in which men may unproblematically represent women in struggles for greater or more authentic forms of humanity.

- 6 The project of creating equality between the sexes can only be socially guaranteed in the realm of public and civic life. And, even if *some kind* of domestic equality is possible, an equality at the level of sexual and particularly reproductive relations seems impossible in so far as they are untouched by egalitarianism.
- 7 Most significantly, even if the two sexes behave in the same ways, perform the same duties and play the same roles, the social *meanings* of their activities remains unchallenged. Until this structure of shared meanings is problematized, equality in anything but a formal sense remains impossible.

Try as it may, a feminism of equality is unable to theorize sexual and reproductive equality adequately. And this, in turn, results in its inability to adequately theorize women's specific positions within the social and symbolic order. Kristeva makes clear the link between sexual and symbolic functioning:

Sexual difference – which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to reproduction – is translated by and translates a difference in the relation of subjects to the symbolic contract which *is* the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language and meaning. The sharpest and most subtle point of feminist subversion brought about by the new generation will henceforth be situated on the terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, in order to try to discover, first, the specificity of the female, and then, in the end, that of each individual.

(1981, p. 21)

In opposition to egalitarian feminism, a feminism based on the acknowledgment of women's specificities and orientated to the attainment of autonomy for women has emerged over the last ten years or more. From the point of view of a feminism of equality, feminisms of difference seem strangely reminiscent of the position of defenders of patriarchy: both stress women's differences from men. However, before too readily identifying them, it is vital to ask how this difference is conceived, and, perhaps more importantly, who it is that defines this difference and for whom. For patriarchy, difference is understood in terms of inequality, distinction, or opposition, a sexual difference modelled on negative, binary, or oppositional structures within which only one of the two terms has any autonomy; the other is defined only by the negation of the first. Only sameness or identity can ensure equality. In the case of feminists of difference, however, difference is not seen as difference *from* a pre-given norm, but as *pure difference*, difference in itself, difference with no identity.⁴ This kind of difference implies the autonomy of the terms between which the difference may be drawn and thus their radical incommensurability.

Difference viewed as distinction implies the pre-evaluation of one of the terms, from which the difference of the other is drawn; pure difference refuses to privilege either term. For feminists, to claim women's difference from men is to reject existing definitions and categories, redefining oneself and the world according to women's own perspectives.

The right to equality entails the right to be the same as men; while struggles around the autonomy imply the right to either consider oneself equal to another or the right to reject the terms by which equality is measured and to define oneself in different terms. It entails the right to be and to act differently. The concept of difference, as it is used by a number of contemporary feminist theorists, including Luce Irigaray, Jane Gallop, Hélène Cixous, and others. It implies, among other things:

- 1 A major transformation of the social and symbolic order, which, in patriarchy, is founded by a movement of universalization of the singular (male) identity. Difference cannot be readily accommodated in a system which reduces all difference to distinction, and all identity to sameness.
- 2 Difference resists the homogenization of separate political struggles, in so far as it implies not only women's differences from men, and from each other, but also women's differences from other oppressed groups. It is not at all clear that, for example, struggles against racism will necessarily be politically allied with women's struggles, or conversely, that feminism will overcome forms of racist domination. This of course does not preclude the existence of common interests shared by various oppressed groups, and thus the possibility of alliances over specific issues; it simply means that these alliances have no *a priori* necessity.
- 3 Struggles around the attainment of women's autonomy imply that men's struggles against patriarchy, while possibly allied with women's in some circumstances, cannot be identified with them. In acknowledging their sexual specificity, men's challenge to patriarchy is necessarily different from women's, which entails producing an identity and sexual specificity for themselves.
- 4 The notion of difference affects not only women's definitions of themselves, but also of the world. This implies that not only must social practices be subjected to feminist critique and reorganization, but also that the very structures of representation, meaning, and knowledge must be subjected to a thoroughgoing transformation of their patriarchal alignments. A politics of difference implies the right to define oneself, others, and the world according to one's own interests.

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Feminists involved in the project of distinguishing women's sexual differences from those of men have been subjected to wide-ranging

criticisms, coming from both feminist and non-feminist directions. They face the same general dilemma confronting any feminist position which remains critical of the frameworks of patriarchal knowledges yet must rely on their resources: from the point of view of traditional, male-governed scholarly norms, their work appears utopian, idealistic, romantic, polemical, fictional, but above all, without substantial content or solid evidence and justification; and from the point of view of other forms of feminism – particularly from Marxist or socialist feminism – it appears essentialist and universalist. On the one hand, they are accused of straying too far from biological and scientifically validated information; and on the other, of sticking too closely to biological evidence. It seems that both these criticisms misunderstand the status of claims made by many feminists of difference, judging them in terms inappropriate to their approach.

Charges of essentialism, universalism, and naturalism are predictable responses on the part of feminists concerned with the idea of women's social construction: thus *any* attempt to define or designate woman or femininity is in danger of these commitments, in so far as it generalizes on the basis of the particular, and reduces social construction to biological preformation. Any theory of femininity, any definition of woman in general, any description that abstracts from the particular, historical, cultural, ethnic, and class positions of particular women verges perilously close to essentialism. Toril Moi provides a typical response to a feminism of difference in her critique of Irigaray's notion of woman or the feminine:

any attempt to formulate a general theory of femininity will be metaphysical. This is precisely Irigaray's dilemma: having shown that so far femininity has been produced exclusively in relation to the logic of the same, she falls for the temptation to produce her own positive theory of femininity. But, as we have seen, to define 'woman' is necessarily to essentialize her.

(1985, p. 139)

This, however leads to a paradox: if women cannot be characterized in any general way, if all there is to femininity is socially produced, then how can feminism be taken seriously? What justifies the assumption that women are oppressed as a sex? If we are not justified in taking women as a category, then what political grounding does feminism have? Feminism is placed in an unenviable position: either it clings to feminist principles, which entail its avoidance of essentialist and universalist categories, in which case its rationale as a political struggle centred around women is problematized; or else it accepts the limitations patriarchy imposes on its conceptual schemas and models, and abandons the attempt to provide autonomous, self-defined terms in which to describe women and femininity. Are these the only choices available to feminist theory – an adherence to essentialist doctrines, or the dissolution of feminist struggles into localized, regional,

specific struggles, representing the interest of particular women or groups of women?

Posed in this way, the dilemma facing feminists involves a conflict between the goals of intellectual rigour (avoidance of the conceptual errors of essentialism and universalism) and feminist political struggles (struggles that are directed towards the liberation of women as women). But is this really a choice feminists must face? Is it a matter of preference for one goal over the other? Or can the linkages between theory and political practice be understood differently so that the criteria of intellectual evaluation are more 'politicized' and the goals of political struggle are more 'theoretized'?

Gayatri Spivak sums up this dilemma well in her understanding of concepts and theoretical principles, not as guidelines, rules, principles, or blueprints for struggle, but as tools and weapons of struggle. It is no longer a matter of maintaining a theoretical purity at the cost of political principles; nor is it simply a matter of the *ad hoc* adoption of theoretical principles according to momentary needs or whims: it is a question of negotiating a path between always impure positions, seeing that politics is always already bound up with what it contests (including theories), and theories are always implicated in various political struggles (whether this is acknowledged or not):

You pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity. Whereas the great custodians of the anti-universal are obliged therefore simply to act in the interest of a great narrative, the narrative of exploitation while they keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything. . . . [T]hey are . . . run by a great narrative even as they are busy protecting their theoretical purity by repudiating essentialism.

(Spivak 1984, p. 184)

The choice, in other words, is not between maintaining a politically pure theoretical position (and leaving the murkier questions of political involvement unasked); or espousing a politically tenuous one which may be more pragmatically effective in securing social change. The alternatives faced by feminist theorists are all in some sense 'impure' and 'implicated' in patriarchy. There can be no feminist position that is not in some way or other involved in patriarchal power relations; it is hard to see how this is either possible or desirable, for a freedom from patriarchal 'contamination' entails feminism's incommensurability with patriarchy, and thus the inability to criticize it. Feminists are not faced with pure and impure options. All options are in their various ways bound by the constraints of patriarchal power. The crucial political question is which commitments remain, in spite of their patriarchal alignments, of use to feminists in their political struggles? What kinds of feminist strategy do they make possible

or hinder? What are the costs of holding these commitments? And the benefits? In other words, the decision about whether to 'use' essentialism, or to somehow remain beyond it (even if these extremes were possible) is a question of calculation, not a self-evident certainty.

In challenging the domination of patriarchal models which rely on essentialism, naturalism, biologism, or universalism, egalitarian feminists have pointed to the crucial role these assumptions play in making change difficult to conceive or undertake: as such, they support, rationalize, and underpin existing power relations between the sexes. But in assuming that feminists take on essentialist or universalist assumptions (if they do, which is not always clear) in the same way as patriarchs, instead of attempting to understand the ways in which essentialism and its cognates can function as strategic terms, this silences and neutralizes the most powerful of feminist theoretical weapons – feminism's ability to use patriarchy and phallocratism against themselves, its ability to take up positions ostensibly opposed to feminism and to use them for feminist goals.

I think it is absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism, universalism as it comes to terms with the universal – of classical German philosophy or the universal as the white upper class male . . . etc. But *strategically* we cannot. Even as we talk about *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalising. Since the moment of essentialising, universalising, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment; let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it.

(Spivak 1984, p. 184)

In other words, if feminism cannot maintain its political freedom from patriarchal frameworks, methods, and presumptions, its implication in them needs to be acknowledged instead of being disavowed. Moreover, this (historically) necessary use of patriarchal terms is the very condition of feminism's effectivity in countering and displacing the effects of patriarchy: its immersion in patriarchal practices (including those surrounding the production of theory) is the condition of its effective critique of and movement beyond them. This immersion provides not only the conditions under which feminism can become familiar with what it criticizes: it also provides the very means by which patriarchal dominance can be challenged.

NOTES

- 1 For an account of the challenges feminist theory has posed to male conceptions of objectivity, particularly in science, see Grosz and de Lepervanche (1988).
- 2 Kristeva makes this point forcefully in her analysis of the 'two generations of

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- feminists' outlined in her paper 'Women's Time' (1981). She refers there to de Beauvoir's anti-maternal position, a position also analysed in Mackenzie (1986).
- 3 This is Kristeva's understanding of the effects of a fundamental egalitarianism, which produces, among other things, the oppressive structure of anti-Semitism: assimilationism entails the repression of the specific history of oppression directed towards the Jew. This is why Sartre's position in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in spite of his intentions, is anti-Semitic. As Kristeva suggests: 'the specific character of women could only appear as nonessential or even nonexistent to the totalizing and even totalitarian spirit of this ideology. We begin to see that this same egalitarian and in fact censoring treatment has been imposed, from Enlightenment Humanism through socialism, on religious specificities and, in particular, on Jews' (1981), p. 21.
 - 4 This difference between difference and distinction is suggested by Derrida in his conception of *différance*, which is in part based on his reading of Saussure's notion of *pure difference* in language. Although Derrida does not use this terminology himself, Anthony Wilden's careful gloss on these terms helps to clarify many of the issues at stake in Derrida's as well as in feminist conceptions of difference (see Wilden 1972, ch. 8).

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