Postmodern Feminist Politics

The Art of the (Im)Possible?

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IS IT POSSIBLE TO CONCEIVE OF A POSTMODERN FEMINIST POLITICS?

As discussions of 'postmodernism' continue to rage within feminist thought, this question has come to occupy centre stage in the collective conscience of academic feminism. Numerous books and articles have been devoted, more or less explicitly, to this question, and the issue has dominated conversations in formal and informal gatherings of feminist scholars for several years. The question strikes at the heart for so many of us, because ultimately feminist scholars share a commitment to social transformation which demands that we return to the question of the relationship between our theory and feminist practice.[1]

Yet what is remarkable about this debate is that it has been conducted at such a level of abstraction that concrete discussions of feminist practice have been almost entirely absent.[2] The question has been approached as if it were purely a philosophical one, which could be answered at the level of theory, without recourse to exploration of actual instances of feminist politics. For the past decade feminist theory has been presided over by feminist philosophy, and the status of feminist sociology, with its concern to theorize from the analysis of social, cultural, political and economic relations, has plummeted.[3] It is beyond the scope of this article to explore how and why this particular hierarchy of feminist knowledges has been established, but it is part of my task to reassert the relevance of a

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sociological perspective, with its grounded analysis of social action, to this, one of the key questions in contemporary feminist thought.

PHILOSOPHICAL POSTMODERNISM OR THE SOCIOLOGY OF POSTMODERNITY?

Any attempt to pose an answer to the question about the possibility of a postmodern feminist politics obviously depends on what is meant by this designation. 'Postmodernism' is a highly contested term, about which not even those who identify as 'postmodernists' agree.[4] Particular doubt is evinced by Judith Butler (1992), who questions its meaning and usefulness as an appellation which unifies a wide range of writers and strands of theory.

Interestingly it is the 'anti-postmodernist' feminists who are clearest about what they believe postmodernism means. Although they too acknowledge the broadness of the term (e.g. Brodribb, 1992; Waters, 1996) and rarely proffer definitions, they are unambiguous about the dangers which they believe postmodernism holds for feminism. Representing a strand of thought within contemporary feminism which believes itself to be particularly close to 'activism', the radical feminist contributors to the volume *Radically Speaking* suggest that postmodernism threatens to render feminist politics impossible.

> The concept of a 'post-modernist' feminism is a contradiction in terms because while feminism is a politics, post-modernism renders its adherents incapable of political commitment. . . . The chief problem with 'post-modernist' feminism is its inability to name forms of domination, and in particular in a feminist context, to identify male domination as the adversary challenged by feminism. This inability is a result of its refusal to engage with grand structures of oppression. (Thompson, 1996: 325)

> The post-modern turn is apolitical, ahistorical, irresponsible, and self-contradictory; it takes the 'heat off patriarchy'. . . . Post-modernism has created a climate in which the rationalist project is being abandoned. Just as women were poised to become part of the world of reason, we have been thrown back on the troubled realm of desire. (Bell and Klein, 1996: xix–xx)

> . . . our ability to act in the present is being severely curtailed by the post-modern insistence that there are no subjects, with the consequence that woman has been virtually erased as the author of her own life. (Bell and Klein, 1996: xx)

> Post-modernism is not about change, it is about wallowing in dystopias and doing it with glee. Post-modernism represents women by differences, not similarities, and the power of the representer is masked. Because it declines to identify domination in general and male domination in particular, post-modernism cannot contest the relations of power. The post-modern turn has

> depoliticized feminist theory. Post-modernism prioritizes pleasure over political analysis. . . . The move from reason to desire, the emphasis on style rather than content, take feminism away from its roots in politics. (Bell and Klein, 1996: xxvi)

One of the problems with these sorts of critiques of postmodernism, as well as with most favourable accounts of the coincidence of interests of feminism and postmodernism, is that they fail to distinguish, and to see the connections, between the particular configuration of ideas collected together under the label 'postmodernism', and the empirically observable condition of postmodernity. The critique of the subject, identified by Diane Bell and Renate Klein as a particularly problematic aspect of postmodernism, is part of the discursive domain of postmodernism (or, perhaps more accurately, poststructuralism), but other targets of their critique are as much features of postmodernity as an historical era as of postmodernism as theory. As such they cannot be wished or critiqued away, as perhaps they might were they only philosophical propositions. For instance, commitment to grand theories of oppression and to 'the rationalist project' have been radically destabilized in the intellectual and cultural climate of postmodernity. Similarly, 'the emphasis on style rather than content', which Bell and Klein (1996) and Kristin Waters (1996) find problematic, is both a feature of the discursive domain of postmodernist theory and of the aestheticization of social life and material objects which is taking place in postmodernity (Crook et al., 1992; Lash and Urry, 1994). Indeed, a sociological perspective on philosophical postmodernism would suggest that it should be understood as 'not being merely a new intellectual perspective, but rather as an expression of, or response to, the dramatic changes in the character of social life and the human experiences these changes have occasioned' (Simon, 1996: 1).

Without this distinction between postmodernism as theory and postmodernity as a social condition any exploration of the possibility or otherwise of a postmodern feminist politics will inevitably remain ungrounded in concrete consideration of the contemporary social condition. It is discussion of postmodernism as theory which has attracted the vast majority of attention from feminist scholars. Much has been written about the implications for feminist politics of a postmodern critique and deconstruction of humanist notions of the existence of an authentic unified subject.[5] The question of whether feminist politics require, as their foundation, the existence of the stable category of 'woman' has been widely debated. In contrast, feminists have remained remarkably silent in discussions of the meanings of the transformations in the social condition which have been captured by the label of 'postmodernity'. There has been very little consideration of what the new social figurations of postmodernity might mean for feminist politics. The question here is, what might feminist politics look like in an era in which

beliefs in transcendental reason, rationality and 'Truth' have lost their grip, and when grand systematic theories of oppression no longer inspire allegiance?

My focus in this article is on this latter question. I outline the contours of a feminist politics from within postmodernity and suggest that the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, and the social movement which sprung up around it, was an example of postmodern feminist politics. By this I do not mean that Greenham's politics were a conscious expression of a philosophical commitment to postmodernism. Rather I propose that they represented a new turn for feminist practice, and a move away from modern feminism. In so doing I am not straightforwardly taking a 'postmodernist' position against the 'anti-postmodernists' within the terms of the existing feminist debate about postmodernism. Rather I hope to shift the terms of the debate by highlighting the importance of a grounded consideration of the sociology of postmodernity.

POSTMODERNITY

The version of postmodernity to which I subscribe is one which sees both continuity and discontinuity in the social condition, rather than declaring that the postmodern era represents a complete break with modernity. Postmodernity is fundamentally rooted in modernity, and modern ideas, practices and politics continue, to some extent, to exist alongside postmodern ones. This is the postmodernity of Zygmunt Bauman (1992) and of Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher (1988), rather than that of Jean-François Lyotard's (1978) early work, and is not dissimilar to Anthony Giddens' (1990) notion of high or late modernity.[6] It is 'fully developed modernity', modernity 'conscious of its true nature' (Bauman, 1992: 187), a reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994).

Postmodernity can be thought of as a 'time and space, within the wider time and space of modernity, delineated by those who have problems with and queries addressed to modernity, by those who want to take it to task' (Heller and Feher, 1988: 1). It is the time and space of those who are conscious of living after the metanarrative, when people have lost faith in the possibility of all-encompassing political and theoretical projects, such as Marxism and liberalism, and no longer believe in the inevitability of progress, or accord a hallowed place to rationality and science. The postmodern state of mind critiques modernity, problematizing attempts to develop theories which explain everything, and which ignore difference. It 'embraces contingency' (Heller, 1989) and accepts ambivalence, ambiguity, pluralism and variety, in contrast to modernity's struggle for order, control, universality, homogeneity and absolutes (Bauman, 1992).

Postmodernity is the era of enhanced reflexivity, in which processes of

detraditionalization and individualization mean that people are increasingly aware of creating their own life narratives, and of their ability to exercise critical judgements about expert systems (Beck, 1992, 1997; Beck et al., 1994; Lash and Urry, 1994).[7] It is also a time characterized by processes of culturalization, by the increasing importance of the cultural and the symbolic and by the aestheticization of social life (Jameson, 1984; Crook et al., 1992; Lash and Urry, 1994).[8]

POSTMODERNITY AND POLITICS

What then does a postmodernity theorized thus mean in terms of politics?[9]

There is something significantly new about the politics of postmodernity: 'a radical, pluralistic, democratic, contingent, participatory politics of human life choices and difference' as Ken Plummer (1995: 147) describes them.[10] Plummer identifies five characteristics of the politics of postmodernity.

'The Eclipse of the Essence'

As faith that the discovery of the absolute 'Truth' can determine political choices ebbs away in postmodernity, issues of morality and ethics assume a new place in politics.[11] Postmodern politics do not appeal to science, rationality or abstract principles of philosophy for their foundational legitimation. In place of 'Truth' are partial, contested, situated 'truths', and politics 'becomes a matter of possibilities and pragmatics' (Plummer, 1995: 148). Sources of legitimation are plural, decentralized and local, and actors take on responsibility for legitimizing their own practice (Lyotard, 1978).

'The Delight of Differences'

In contrast to modernity's impulse towards order and uniformity, with its concomitant hostility towards 'the stranger and the strange', postmodernity is a heterophilic age (Bauman, 1997). Postmodern politics recognize that differences cannot be ignored, and choose to embrace them as central to their project.

'The Power of Participation'

The politics of postmodernity are about direct participation rather than representation by others, holding that people should be actively engaged in creating and transforming the conditions of their own lives.

Thus non-institutional forms of political action are the characteristic route for those seeking social change in postmodernity; active involvement in social movements takes the place of voting allegiance to paper membership of political parties.

'The Significance of the Sign'

In postmodernity language and signs are more than merely the media for political messages; they are in themselves part of the political process. Politics is enacted through signs and spectacles, and symbolism is increasingly important as a way to 'speak the unspeakable and represent the unrepresentable, to create a world of different images and signs that transgress, regress, progress and ingress' (Plummer, 1995: 149).

'The Tactics and Strategies of Time and Space'

Postmodern politics are both locally rooted and globally significant, and take place in a context of time–space distanciation (Giddens, 1990). Global flows of people, ideas and actions build political connections across space, and new media facilitate global communications.[12]

However, the politics of postmodernity do not represent a complete break with the politics of modernity. The politics of modernity live on in postmodernity. Thus although there is a general shift, which has been characterized as that from 'emancipatory' to 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991), or from the politics of inequality and redistribution to the politics of human rights and autonomy (Bauman, 1992), neither struggles for emancipation or against inequality are entirely won.[13] The imperatives of modern politics – justice, equality, citizenship – remain motivating ideals of political action within postmodernity.

GREENHAM AND THE SHIFT FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN FEMINISM

In identifying Greenham as historically one of the first and major instances of postmodern feminist politics I am challenging the interpretations which other feminist writers have offered of its politics.[14] These have either understood Greenham within the framework of existing 'brands' of feminism, as socialist feminist (Norden, 1985) or radical feminist in its 'anti-men separatism' (Liddington, 1989: 8), as an essentialist 'cultural feminism', a 'vulgar feminism' (Segal, 1987: 178), or as maternalist and anti-feminist (Green, 1983; Bellos et al., 1983).[15] In fact, the politics of Greenham cannot be categorized in this way. In its early days, the movement used maternalist, materialist and feminist calls to

mobilization, drawing on the three prominent traditions in over a century of women's history of peace activism (Roseneil, 1995a, 1999), but Greenham's collective discourse swiftly became increasingly feminist, and the maternalism ebbed away as individual and collective consciousnesses were transformed. This feminism was not that of any of the 'brands' into which feminism is commonly categorized – radical, socialist, liberal, lesbian, eco-, or any other – Greenham's politics drew on all of these, plundering them, in a postmodern mélange, but adhering to none exclusively or systematically.

The dominant strands of feminist thought which were available in the early 1980s as discursive resources with which to construct a politics were radical feminism and socialist/Marxist feminism. Within both of these traditions there existed a profoundly modern desire to construct grand theories of women's oppression, which would account for and explain the totality of women's position in the world. In contrast to this, Greenham made no attempt to develop an all-encompassing theory of that which it was opposing. While most of those involved agreed that they opposed militarism in general, and nuclear weapons in particular, that they opposed male domination (or 'patriarchy') in politics and culture, male violence, capitalist exploitation of the Third World and the degradation of the environment, no systematic theory of the relationship between these forms of oppression and exploitation was developed. Legitimation of action at Greenham came, therefore, not from a theoretical perspective or a body of thought, but from the individual's conscience, and it was recognized that this would be different between individuals, and thus that individuals would choose to act differently.

The politics of Greenham were engaged in a continuous dialogue with the politics of modernity and with modern feminism. Greenham moved towards a postmodern feminist politics, by radicalizing modern feminism rather than by rejecting it outright. The individual women whose collective action constituted Greenham carried with them experiences and ways of understanding the world which were formed within modern frameworks. Many had been involved in left-wing political parties, trade unions, liberation campaigns (anti-apartheid, for example) and the women's liberation movement. They had grown up in a culture where they were taught to trust science and welcome technology, to put their faith in experts and to seek absolute answers and grand explanatory theories. As a result, Greenham expressed, in part, the modern values of equality, autonomy, liberty, citizenship and public participation. In taking action at Greenham women were claiming a voice in the area of politics from which they are most excluded – foreign and military policy – which can be seen as merely a demand for the full realization of women's citizenship rights. However, Greenham went further than this, challenging the dominant meanings of these modern values. Equality was not

pursued at the expense of difference, and autonomy not at the expense of the collective. Citizenship and participation were not requested or demanded for the future of those in power, but were enacted in the present, in radically new ways which refused the modern liberal logic of majoritarian rule and accepted modes of political engagement.

Modern feminism has tended to operate within dualistic modes of thinking, and cleavages within feminism have opened up between those taking one side or the other. Among the most enduring are the dichotomies of equality and difference, and social constructionism and essentialism, which have run through over a century of feminist politics and theorizing. Greenham, however, resisted these dichotomies, and sat on neither one side nor the other. Some, though by no means all, of the women who constituted Greenham came to their involvement with a position on one side or other of these debates; there were passionate equality feminists from a socialist-feminist lineage, essentialist eco-feminists, radical feminist social constructionists, and maternalists. But as a collectivity Greenham did not take a position, and refused the terms of the debate. At times, arguments seeming to derive from both sides of the dichotomy were mobilized: 'women have been excluded from decisions about nuclear weapons; they should have a say in international affairs' ('equality'), and 'women have a different perspective on issues such as nuclear weapons' ('difference'), 'because of their social conditioning' ('social constructionist') or 'because they are mothers and carers ('maternalist'). Yet the fact that these arguments were not regarded as necessarily contradictory undermines feminist conceptions of equality/difference and social constructionism/essentialism as dichotomous choices; it suggests rather, as Diana Fuss (1989) has argued, that they exist along a continuum.

Similarly, as far as strategy was concerned, the politics of Greenham were neither straightforwardly assimilationist nor separatist. They demanded a voice for women in international affairs, yet this was done not by joining political parties, enlisting in the military or by becoming members of the defence establishment. Greenham was a women-only community of protest without being closed to the world, without opting out of the issues and problems of a male-dominated society, and so challenged feminist polarization around the issue of separatism.[16]

A POSTMODERN FEMINIST CULTURAL POLITICS

Greenham can also be seen as postmodern because its terrain of action, that is, its forms of expression, its claims and its impact, were primarily cultural and symbolic.[17] Most earlier modern feminist activism has focused on the struggle for basic citizenship rights and material resources

for women (this has involved cultural and symbolic struggle too), and Greenham's existence was predicated on successful outcomes to these struggles, such as women's increased economic and social independence, and on the establishment of the notion that women are legitimate political actors. But Greenham moved beyond this. Its politics were not demands for concrete resources, but a protest against the way political, economic and military resources are used in the world. And its politics did not demand equal participation in the existing military game.

Instead, Greenham offered the world a moving image of women resisting the might of the nuclear policies of the most powerful nation on earth – by dancing on the missile silos, picnicking on the runway, cutting down the fence, and just living a rather chaotic domesticity in front of a Cruise missile base defended by razor wire, watchtowers and thousands of soldiers. Actions, such as the naked Nagasaki Day Die-In in 1983, were designed as theatre (as much for the participants as the spectator), to dramatically enact the message. These spectacles, which were spread globally by television, film, video and still photography, had an enormous power to stir and challenge. Their impact was not through rational argument, in the Enlightenment tradition kicked off by Mary Wollstonecraft, but worked by provoking nagging images and ideas of playful disobedience, which drew on the emotional, the affective and the spiritual senses of the viewer.

The designation 'cultural feminism', which Lynne Segal (1987) applied to Greenham, has acquired almost entirely negative connotations within academic feminism (see Eisenstein, 1984; Segal, 1987). Defined by Nancy Fraser as 'the effort to assure women respect by revaluing femininity, while leaving unchanged the binary gender code that gives the latter sense' (Fraser, 1997: 29), it suggests a feminism which reinforces rather than deconstructs and transforms gender.[18] It speaks of essentialism, separatism and maternalism. Elements of such a cultural feminism were undoubtedly present in the politics of Greenham. For instance the cultural constructions of 'woman' as mother and carer, with a special responsibility to protect life, served as identities around which mobilization could take place, particularly in the early days of the camp.[19] However, to see the politics of Greenham as limited to this is to miss the shift from a modern cultural feminist politics to a postmodern feminist cultural politics which took place there over time.

Where modern feminist politics tend to fix the category of 'woman', by claiming status, recognition and rights for her, a postmodern feminist cultural politics deconstructs and transforms the meaning of 'woman'. While Greenham began in this modern vein, it rapidly began to open up and destabilize dominant gender and sexual identities.[20] The actions of women at Greenham constituted a powerful challenge to hegemonic constructions of 'woman'. Even towards the end of the 20th century,

when women are formally equal citizens and most women are paid workers, women are largely still expected to be domestic creatures first and foremost; as wives, mothers and grandmothers to put the needs and interests of others before their own. The woman who does not is castigated as selfish and unnatural. Women are still widely expected to adorn their bodies with fashionable clothes and cosmetics (though this is now for themselves, and less for men). Their bodies are not expected to be strong, and they are not thought to be competent at manual and practical tasks.[21] Above all, 'woman' still tends to be constructed as the complement of 'man', as existing for and in relation to 'man', as hetero-relational and heterosexual.

Greenham was an arena in which this 'woman' was challenged and alternative notions of 'woman' were formed. The 'Greenham woman' transgressed boundaries between the public and private spheres; she made her home in public, in the full glare of the world's media, under the surveillance of the state. She put herself and other women first, acting according to her conscience, taking responsibility for her own actions. She dressed according to a different aesthetic, in warm, comfortable clothing, removing many of the markers of femininity, but often adorning her body in ways which celebrated her independence of fashion. She was confident and assertive in the face of authority, rejecting its power to control her behaviour, testing it and taunting it. She developed close friendships and often sexual relationships with other women. This woman stepped outside many of the restrictions of dominant constructions of womanhood.

It was because Greenham had no 'line' for which prospective participants had to sign up in advance that women were able to start a process of personal transformation from where they were. And, occupying liminal space outside the everyday world, Greenham was both a physical and discursive space where women were separated from the ordinary conditions and constraints of their lives and were freer, therefore, to construct for themselves new identities. At Greenham women created new identities for themselves, and in so doing, became different people (Roseneil, 1995a, 1996, 1999). They developed new identities as individuals with agency. In the face of the disempowering threat of nuclear war, and against constructions of women as victims, as those who are 'done to' by men and governments or 'fought for' by armies, women at Greenham came to perceive themselves as powerful. Connected to this sense of personal power was a sense of collective power as 'women', but this category of 'women' was a deconstructed and transformed one.

At a wider symbolic level Greenham conveyed messages about women's independence, autonomy and agency which disrupted dominant discourses of gender. For women to leave their homes, and in some cases husbands and children, to pursue a political and personal project

constituted a symbolic affront to men's power to control women's actions, and to women's confinement by domestic responsibilities. Women occupying public space in such numbers, over such a long period of time, and with few concessions to the male gaze in their standards of domestic order, upset constructions of women as home-makers. That women *chose* to live and work only with other women, and deliberately and consistently refused to allow men to join in, challenged notions of men and women's complementarity. The daring and sometimes dangerous actions which women took against the nuclear state, without male protection or assistance, disturbed ideas of women as weak and fearful. And women doing all this, and to be appearing to enjoy it, refusing the status of martyrs, constituted 'gender trouble'. The postmodern feminist cultural politics of Greenham consisted of women refusing to perform gender as they should.[22]

A POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

The camp at Greenham was set up in 1981 to oppose the decision to station Cruise missiles at the US Airforce base at Greenham Common in Berkshire.[23] It began, therefore, at the height of the renewed Cold War, when nuclear fear gripped the continent of Europe, as a challenge to the greatest risk of a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), the threat of global annihilation. Action was galvanized at the point at which geopolitics touched the consciousness of individual women, through the recognition that nuclear war might break out from somewhere close to home. While there was a wide range of motivations and routes to involvement among the women who constituted Greenham (Roseneil, 1995a), the core of the collective identity of the movement coalesced around opposition to Cruise missiles in particular, and nuclear weapons in general.

Greenham expressed a postmodern disillusion in science and technology and a reflexivity about the dangers consequent on modernity's trust that science and technology carry with them progress.[24] There was no faith at Greenham in the promise of governments that more or better technology could prevent nuclear war, and accident – technology out of the control of human actors – was feared as much as the intentional use of the weaponry.

While many of those involved were well informed about the details of the military balance of power, and on occasions, to particular audiences, made carefully constructed, modernist arguments about the strategical weakness of Cruise as a weapons system, the collective voice of Greenham did not depend on this. Greenham opted out of the modernist discourse about nuclear weapons which was accepted both by the military and the mainstream peace movement, and refused to engage with the

techno-strategic discourse of the defence establishment.[25] It did not seek to argue that there were more effective or rational modes of defence than the acquisition of first-strike nuclear weapons, and refused the terms of the discourse of the Cold War which demanded attention to military forms of defence. Against this Greenham ranged an expressive politics of the emotions, which focused on the dangers and damages of military technology.

Greenham can also be seen as articulating a fundamental critique of modernity arising out of a post-Holocaust consciousness. While it is undoubtedly true, as Zygmunt Bauman (1989) argues, that the significance and implications of the Holocaust have barely begun to touch intellectual life in the western world, the politics of Greenham is one area in which reflection on the Holocaust can be seen to have taken place. This is not to say that every individual woman involved with Greenham had self-consciously considered the meaning of the Holocaust in relation to her action there. Nor do I wish to suggest that there was a clear understanding at Greenham of Bauman's argument that the Holocaust was not the antithesis of modern civilization, but rather exemplified modernity taken to its logical, rational destination. However, the regular discussions of moral and ethical issues which were part of the collective life and identity building of the camp were consciously and explicitly set within the context of, and with reference to, the Holocaust.

For instance, the formulation of one of the key ethics which bound together the movement – that of individual responsibility to act against the state if it is perceived that the state is acting immorally – was explained, both internally and to the outside world, with reference to the moral duties (and failures) of those who lived in Nazi Germany and under Nazi occupation. The very existence of Greenham, as well as the actions taken there, constituted a direct critique of and challenge to the authority of the modern state, which, as Bauman (1989) points out, has no limits with respect to its treatment of those under its rule.

At the heart of the politics of Greenham was a rejection of the central attribute of modernity, the principle which according to Bauman, underlying anti-Semitism, drove the Holocaust – rationality. It was recognized that the rationality and bureaucracy which organized the millions of tasks required to enact the extermination of millions of people had parallels with the rationality and bureaucracy of the modern nuclear state and its military in preparing for nuclear war. Both required, in Max Weber's words, 'Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs . . . the discharge of business according to calculable rules and "without regard for persons"' (Gerth and Mills, 1970: 214, 215, cited in Bauman, 1989: 14). The ethos which was constructed at Greenham and which guided the way life was led and actions

taken there was in sharp contrast to the bureaucratic rationality of the modern state.

A POSTMODERN ETHOS

The politics of Greenham did not appeal for their legitimation to reason, rationality or the truths offered by existing brands of feminism or other metanarratives, but drew instead upon a set of ethics which were constructed in situ, at Greenham. The reflexive and deliberate consideration of values was a central part of the action of Greenham, and the common values which were created formed part of the core collective identity of the movement. This ethos was loose and informal, and constantly in creation; it was never codified in the form of a policy statement or constitution. But it was no less real for being unwritten and implicit. It constituted a powerful moral discourse about how feminism should be practised and how daily life should be led, though it offered no absolute solutions to the problems which were faced at Greenham.[26]

The principle of personal responsibility and personal autonomy was central to the ethos of Greenham. In relinquishing belief in the ability of existing philosophies and theories to provide an adequate moral framework for action, women at Greenham took it upon themselves to create their own, as individuals and collectively. Greenham was premised on the notion that individual women should take it upon themselves to oppose the deployment of Cruise, and should withdraw their consent from military decisions which had been made in their name but to which they had not been party. This principle was rooted in a belief in the importance of individual agency in the creation, recreation and transformation of society, and acceptance of personal responsibility and autonomy was seen as a refusal of victimhood and as a refusal to cede power to the state. Each individual was expected to look to her own conscience and desires to decide on her action; so from decisions about whether or not to do the washing up or cook dinner, to whether or not to cut the fence, attend court, pay a fine or go to prison, there was no external arbiter. The onus for action lay with the individual and was not to be placed on others; women expected each other to make their own decisions and not to wait for leadership.

As part of its critique of the problems associated with the status accorded to rationality within modernity, Greenham sought to revalue the realm of the 'non-rational', which in modernity is deemed inappropriate in politics and public life. Greenham's ethos held that the 'non-rational' – affect, emotion, intuition and spirituality – should be considered adequate sources of knowledge in decision-making and daily life. An integral part of discussions about how life was to be organized at the

camp and in the planning of actions was attention to the feelings of the women involved. Thus 'rational' considerations of strategy and tactics were less important than how women felt about actions they might take, and whether actions were considered to be ethically and politically legitimate. Greenham consciously attacked the western dualisms of reason/emotion and mind/body.[27] In so doing, Greenham was not asserting that women are naturally more emotional and intuitive and less rational than men; rather it was seeking to revalue the 'non-rational' as an important realm of human experience, which should be admitted as a resource in political action. For some women, the 'non-rational' was akin to an 'ethic of care' (Gilligan, 1982; Ruddick, 1990). This ethic of care was not exclusively or even primarily maternal; care not just for children, but for self, friends, family and the planet, was seen as determining that nuclear weapons, and the threat they posed to life, were wrong. Other women invoked a language of feminist spirituality and magic, though this was by no means universal at Greenham.

The reflexivity of postmodernity was instantiated in the ethos of Greenham in a commitment that each individual, and the movement as a whole, should be self-questioning, self-monitoring, flexible and open to change. Decisions, routines, patterns of behaviour, plans and beliefs should be amenable to reorientation as circumstances changed and as new ideas emerged. Change, at the personal level and within the collectivity of Greenham, was valued rather than being seen as a sign of weakness. Thus it was that life at Greenham and the actions taken there were subject to ongoing re-evaluation and critique, both formally in meetings devoted to the purpose, and through informal conversation and discussion. Positions shifted, arguments changed, forms of action and organizational patterns were in a constant state of flux; almost (but not quite) everything was open to question, challenge and change.

Also fundamental to the ethos of Greenham was the principle of respect for the differences between the women who composed the movement. From the outset it operated with a coalitionist imperative, seeking to draw in and make space for women from a wide variety of backgrounds, with a range of political and social experiences, of different ages, classes, ethnicities, nationalities and sexual and political identifications. Difference was a source of tension, but it was accepted as inevitable and seen as a resource and strength, rather than being suppressed or ignored. There was a shared commitment to explore differences rather than denying them, and many hundreds of meetings were spent at the activity of building understanding and common ground, which was deemed as important as the outward-directed actions against the base. Greenham operated as a loose, hybrid and composite collective action which was supple and flexible enough to accommodate the different priorities and modes of working of the women involved.[28]

The other particularly postmodern element of the ethos of Greenham was the emphasis placed on pleasure, humour and parody. Traditionally, politics is seen as the serious and sober business of men in grey suits, and those engaged in oppositional politics tend to take themselves equally earnestly, often veering towards pomposity. Greenham stood as the complete obverse of this; while the women involved held passionate beliefs about what they were doing, it was a principle that action at Greenham should be as enjoyable as possible, and that it should not entail suffering or martyrdom. Many women were conscious of wishing to challenge the liberal press's portrayal of Greenham women as ordinary housewives and mothers who were heroically making sacrifices to save the world for future generations, and strove to overturn the construction of self-sacrifice, altruism and vulnerability as feminine virtues. Thus many of the actions which were carried out at Greenham were designed to mock, parody and deflate, and at the same time to be fun to enact. For example, the Teddy Bears' Picnic of Easter 1983, in which several dozen women dressed as bears, bunnies and jesters climbed into the base to have a picnic, was pleasurable for those taking part, made an ironic statement about the deadly seriousness of the global situation and was a pointed gesture to CND (Campaign against Nuclear Disarmament), who had refused to respect Greenham women's request that they not organize a major mixed demonstration at the base.

POSTMODERN STRUCTURES

To speak of the 'organizational structure' of Greenham is something of a contradiction in terms. In comparison with conventional forms of political action, and even in comparison with other social movements, Greenham was 'structureless'. There were no institutionalized procedures, no formal decision-making processes, no executive committees, no membership lists, no officers, no annual general meetings, no head office. But having no *formal* structures does not mean that there were no identifiable patterns in the organization of social life at Greenham or in the workings of the wider Greenham network.[29] Life and action at Greenham and within the network were organized in a postmodern structure; they were supple, dynamic, fluid and constantly changing.

If the archetypical structure of modern political organizations is bureaucracy, Greenham's segmentary, polycephalous and reticulate structure is characteristically postmodern.[30] Those involved frequently depicted the Greenham network as a spider's web: a non-hierarchical, intricate pattern of individuals and groups, joined together by almost invisible yet strong connecting threads.[31] The wider Greenham network was composed of dozens of local groups (one or more in almost every

town and city in England, Wales and Scotland). The groups were completely autonomous and were not arranged hierarchically ('segmentary'). Each group had connections back to the camp, which was at the hub of the network; those connections were sustained by frequent visits of women from local groups to the camp, by the newsletters produced by women at the camp and sent to contacts around the country to be photocopied and passed on, and, after the arrival of Cruise, by a 'telephone tree'. The camp acted as a clearing house for information within the network but the network had no overall control centre, and ideas for actions were generated both at the camp, in local groups and at regional meetings of local groups (it was 'polycephalous'). Over time the connections between local groups became stronger, information was increasingly communicated between groups by telephone and by newsletter, and did not necessarily pass through the camp. Thus there were web-like connections between local groups themselves, and between local groups and the camp ('reticulate'). Above all, the network was sustained by personal relationships between women, and the pleasure that women took in each other's company; friendships existed between women who lived at the camp and women in local groups, and between women involved in different local groups, which facilitated information exchange and a sense of collective identity.

The structure of the camp and the wider network reflected the ethical commitment to diversity and difference. At the camp, for instance, the organization of daily life in up to 10 different 'gates' (smaller camps located outside the gates around the perimeter fence) became a means of dealing with difference; the gates developed different characters and attracted different sorts of women to live and stay at them. For instance, there was a clustering of younger, working-class lesbians at Blue Gate, of older middle-class women at Orange Gate, of heterosexual women at Violet Gate, of vegans at Turquoise Gate and of more separatist lesbians at Green Gate.[32]

CONCLUSION

The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, and the wider social movement which sprung up around the camp, mobilized more women in Britain than any other protest movement since the campaigns for suffrage in the early years of the 20th century. During the 13 years of its existence, many thousands of women spent time living or staying at the camp, and hundreds of thousands of women took part in actions there. In identifying the politics of Greenham as postmodern, I am therefore suggesting that postmodern feminist politics have been emergent in Britain since the early part of the 1980s and that they have involved a very significant number of

women. They are not, as 'anti-postmodernist' feminists have suggested, the impossible dream of an academic elite.

This article suggests that the social condition of postmodernity provides the context for the creation of postmodern feminist politics. While rooted in modernity, and carrying forward the modern feminist project, postmodern feminist politics transcend some of the problematic dichotomies of modern feminism, and offer new ways of dealing with difference. They place a new importance on the self-creation of moral and ethical frameworks by individual and collective actors, and they offer a radical critique of the negative and dangerous attributes of modernity. Above all, they occupy the terrain of the cultural, and enact a deconstruction and transformation of gender categories which begins in the real, everyday lives of women and facilitates the creation of new identities. Without grand plans or systematic theories, and never claiming to express the 'Truth', a postmodern feminist politics plays with existing possibilities and opens up new ones.

NOTES

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1. That concern exists about the relationship between feminist theory and practice is evidenced by the production of a dedicated edition of the leading journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* on 'Feminist Theory and Practice' in 1996.
2. Exceptions include Scott (1990), Yeatman (1994) and Nicholson and Seidman (1995).
3. For a discussion of the state of feminist sociology and the impact of poststructuralism on feminist theorizing, see Roseneil (1995b).
4. Many of the thinkers most often referred to as postmodernists reject that label, including the 'originators', Baudrillard, Foucault and Derrida. Nonetheless it is a label which is sufficiently widely used and understood to be worth retaining.
5. See, for example, Weedon (1987), Fuss (1989), de Lauretis (1990), Hekman (1990), Nicholson (1990), Scott (1990), Butler and Scott (1992), Butler (1992), Ramazanoglu (1993), Yeatman (1994), Nicholson and Seidman (1995), Smart (1995), Ahmed (1996) and Bell and Klein (1996).
6. Calhoun (1995) rejects the notion that we have entered a new era of 'postmodernity', and his position is close to that of Giddens.
7. These theorists characterize this process as 'reflexive modernization', and the new era as 'reflexive modernity' or, in Giddens' case, 'late modernity'. There are differences between these theorists in their interpretations of

reflexive modernization (see particularly the debate in Beck et al., 1994), but there is much common ground between them.

8. Perhaps the clearest contrast between the discussions of postmodernism which have preoccupied feminists and those which have taken place within sociology can be seen in the preoccupation of the former with 'the death of the subject' and of the latter with 'reflexivity'.
9. It should be acknowledged that I am only considering what might loosely be called 'left radical' politics. The 'other side' of postmodernity – ethnic, racial, gender and sexual fundamentalisms – is beyond the scope of this article (see Beck, 1997).
10. These features of the politics of postmodernity are broadly similar to those identified by the literature on 'new social movements' (e.g. Melucci, 1989), but I reject the label 'new social movement' because of its problematic (post-)Marxist analytic framework (see Roseneil, 1995a).
11. See Bauman (1992, 1995), and on ethics and morality in feminism, see Cornell (1995) and Smart (1995).
12. This article does not consider this aspect of the postmodern politics of Greenham. See Roseneil (1997) for a discussion of its global and local dynamics.
13. Giddens defines emancipatory politics as 'a generic outlook concerned above all with liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life chances' (Giddens, 1991: 210). In contrast, life politics, which are premised on a certain level of emancipation from tradition and from hierarchical domination, is 'a politics of choice', and of self-actualization, in which moral questions about how we should live are at the core.
14. The discussion of Greenham which follows draws on research published in Roseneil (1995, and Roseneil, 1999). For a discussion of the conduct of the research, see Roseneil (1993).
15. The radical feminist contributors to *Breaching the Peace* (Onlywomen Press, 1983) argued that Greenham was threatening to destroy the women's movement and undermine feminism. As 'the acceptable face of women-only actions, legitimized by its falling into women's traditional role of concern for future generations' (Green, 1983: 7–8), they saw it as diverting women's attention away from their own oppression and from male violence (Bellos et al., 1983: 20).
16. See Hoagland and Penelope (1988).
17. The cultural impact of social movements is emphasized by Melucci (1989), who argues that their 'hidden efficacy' lies in overturning dominant cultural codes.
18. I am grateful to Fiona Williams for pointing me in the direction of Nancy Fraser's (1997) useful discussion of the affirmation/transformation dilemma in the cultural struggle for 'recognition of difference'.
19. Although even at the beginning feminist discourses were employed to explain the actions being taken and to mobilize those who already identified as feminists.
20. For a more detailed discussion of the transformations in consciousness and identity which women experienced at Greenham, see Roseneil (1996).
21. See Young (1990) and Bartky (1990) for discussions of women's embodiment.
22. The notion of the performativity of gender is developed by Butler (1990).
23. The camp was set up at the end of the Women for Life on Earth Walk from

Cardiff to Greenham Common in September 1981. A spontaneous decision was made to stay outside the US Airforce base at Greenham Common when the walk arrived, and the camp remained there until 1994. Greenham was the first site in Europe for Cruise missiles, a new generation of NATO first-strike capability nuclear weapons. For a more detailed discussion of the background to the establishment of the camp, see Roseneil (1995a).

24. This critique of science and technology ran through much of the women's liberation movement from the early 1970s, particularly manifesting itself in the women's health movement and in eco-feminism. However, there have been significant tensions between the more modernist, pro-science and technology strands of feminism and the more postmodernist, critical strands.
25. For a deconstruction of the 'rational' scientific discourse of the defence establishment, see Cohn (1987, 1993).
26. This discussion of Greenham's ethos focuses on those aspects which can be considered the most 'postmodern'. For a fuller discussion of the ethos as a whole, see Roseneil (1995a: Ch. 4, 1999).
27. Griffin (1978, 1989) and Lloyd (1984) discuss how western philosophical dualisms systematically devalue the side of the dualisms which are constructed as female.
28. It was also, however, through this formation that differences in power (e.g. about class, access to discursive resources, race) were able to find expression; see Roseneil (1995a).
29. Freeman (1984: 6), in her critique of 'the tyranny of structurelessness', makes the point that there is no such thing as a 'structureless' group, and that informal structure in inevitable.
30. Gerlach and Hine (1970) suggest that social movements are characteristically 'segmentary, polycephalous and reticulate'.
31. On another level, the web was a symbol of women's collective power, seemingly fragile, but actually very strong. The spider has traditionally been seen as female.
32. These are broad characterizations; for more detailed discussion see Roseneil (1995a, 1999).

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