

Teaching Seditious: Some Dilemmas of Feminist Pedagogy

Teaching feminism *is* teaching sedition. Feminists are in revolt against the male dominant institutions and the androcentric culture that define this society — and perhaps all existing societies. Feminists seek to overthrow the established order and to replace it with a system in which people's life opportunities are not limited by their class, their race and, above all, their sex. Feminist scholars and teachers are one wing of the feminist assault force that is attacking the dominant culture.

To be perceived as, or indeed to be, seditious causes difficulties for anyone. It raises special problems for those of us who take it on ourselves to teach philosophy and public policy. I want to discuss some of those problems here.

Feminism as a Systematic Policy Perspective

The popular media, and even some feminists themselves, often identify certain issues as "women's issues." So-called women's issues include legal discrimination against women, affirmative action, abortion, divorce, child support, the ERA, non-sexist education, and pornography. Although these issues are obviously issues of legitimate public concern, they often seem to be among the less pressing public issues of our time. Compared to so-called "human" issues of war and peace and world starvation, concern with affirmative action and pornography may seem narrow or parochial.

Some people suggest that so-called women's issues are not the issues of primary concern even to women. The New Zealand representative to a U.N. conference on women in 1980 stated this view forcefully. She said: "To talk feminism to a woman who has no water, home, or food is to talk nonsense." If questioned on her view, it is plausible to suppose that she would have elaborated it as follows: "Women are human beings first and foremost. As such, women share with all other human beings, with men and with children, certain basic human needs. Students of public policy should give the highest priority to developing policies that could satisfy these basic human needs. Only when this has been achieved should we turn our attention to the special and therefore secondary needs of women."

At first sight, this view sounds like common sense. Increasingly, however, feminists are rejecting it, as they reject so much of what has passed traditionally for common sense. Many feminists claim that it is simply impossible to maintain a conceptual distinction between women's special needs on the one hand and general human needs on the other hand. They observe that in no society are people viewed simply as people, as human beings; instead,

people are categorized as men and women and they are shaped, psychologically and even physiologically, according to prevailing norms of masculinity and of femininity. No human needs are biologically determined; all needs are shaped by a certain social context, structured by prevailing norms of gender. Just as there is no such thing as human nature in general, so there are no such things as human needs in general. Instead, there are needs specific to different classes of individuals and, among these, needs that are specific to men and needs specific to women.

Women's needs include not only needs for education or for reproductive freedom; they also include, of course, needs for water, home, and food. To the extent that men too need water, home, and food, one might infer that these are basic human needs which are not specific to either sex. But this inference would be fallacious, because water, home, and food have a different meaning for each sex. In all societies that I know of, access to the necessities of water, home, and food is different for each sex and so is even what counts as an adequate supply. For instance, in some societies, drinking water is obtained by women's carrying it for long distances; piped water would thus have a direct and immediate effect on women's lives that it would not have on men's. Moreover, a reduction in infant mortality resulting from water-borne diseases could help to transform women's lives as childbearers.

Similarly, changes in housing practices are likely to affect women very differently from men, in part because, in all societies, the home is the center of women's work. Finally, in all societies, the production and consumption of food is organized along gender lines. The diet of women and men is also likely to be quite different. In many societies, women are expected to eat last, after the men have eaten, and sometimes they have a totally different diet altogether, usually one that is lower in protein and often less tasty or nutritious. Even within our own society, women tend to consume more salad and more sweets while men eat more meat. There's more than a grain of truth in the title of the best-selling book *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche!*

One implication of all this is that practically *every* public policy issue can now be seen to be a women's issue. This does not mean simply that the major issues of public policy concern women as well as men: it means that these issues concern women *differently* from the way that they concern men. For instance, so-called aid to so-called developing countries affects women differently from the way it affects men. Often the "aid" may result in a relative or even absolute worsening of women's position, as men

become absorbed into the paid labor force of new development projects and women are left behind to do subsistence farming, including much of the work that men used to do in pre-"development" days.

Even the nuclear arms race affects women differently from men; for, although men will perish (almost?) equally with women in the final holocaust, the current cost of this arms race is being borne disproportionately by women. Women are not the recipients of most of the income generated by the high-technology weapons industries but women are primarily those in need of the social services that are cut to fund arms spending, and they suffer disproportionately from the inflation that results from this spending.

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the ways that public policies have very different and often even contrary impacts on women and on men. This insensitivity is demonstrated by the very identification of certain issues as women's issues, with its unacceptable double implications both that some issues do not concern women and that "women's issues" are not matters of general concern.

It is thus not only permissible but actually mandatory that feminists should be involved in leading discussions about issues of public policy. Otherwise, evaluation of these issues will be incomplete and policies will be adopted that continue to favor the interests of men over women.

Feminism as Impartiality

What I have established so far is that it is not only



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for women and for men. Moreover, it is usually feminists who have linked failures of certain public policies explicitly with the lower social status of women. For instance, feminists have shown that birth rates in Third World countries will remain high until better nutrition for women results in lower infant mortality and until women receive more education and are not forced to rely on their sons for economic support. In this example, adequate public policies on issues of education, employment, nutrition, and population cannot be developed without attention to the subordinate social status of women.

This example shows clearly that the subordinate status of women is not a self-contained or a secondary issue. Instead it is a key to understanding and evaluating a whole range of public policy alternatives. Unfortunately, this key tends to be used only by feminists. Non-feminists who discuss issues of public policy generally are insensitive to

legitimate but actually desirable for feminists to be involved in evaluating issues of public policy. But what about leading discussion of these issues in a classroom? Is it wise or even safe to have convinced feminists responsible for introducing these issues to impressionable young minds? Is an explicit political commitment to feminism compatible with the pedagogical commitment to impartiality?

It is very easy, indeed, it is quite common, for feminist teachers to be accused of bias. Students in courses on feminism sometimes express an interest in hearing "the other side" of the issue or complain about lack of "balance." Such complaints are more likely to occur if the instructor expresses any emotion, such as moral outrage, in the course of her presentation. The expression of emotion is generally taken to be incompatible with the cool objectivity of pure scholarship.

I think the feminist answer to this challenge lies in a counter-challenge to conventional assumptions about what constitutes objectivity or impartiality. For instance, feminists should point out that emotions are not necessarily counterposed to thoughts, and that feeling is not necessarily a distortion of perception in the way that bias is a distortion of objectivity.

That an individual has strong feelings about a certain public policy issue does not imply that she is necessarily biased or irrational in her thinking about the issue; the fact of strong feelings shows merely that she cares deeply about the issue — and her caring may well encourage her to *think* more deeply about it.

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The belief that objectivity and impartiality are incompatible with feeling and emotion often is associated with the view that objectivity and impartiality are incompatible with moral commitment. When impartiality is construed as neutrality between conflicting interests, it is inevitable that feminists will seem to be biased. For feminists do not claim to be operating from some neutral, Archimedean point outside the social world. There is no such point, they argue, and no such thing as moral neutrality. Instead, all systems of knowledge are shaped by human purposes and reflect human interests and values. Within a society that is divided by class and gender, prevailing knowledge reflects the interests and values of the dominant class and gender. Within male dominant society, feminists claim, the way we think about the world and the way that we conceptualize our options inevitably will be shaped by the interests of men, primarily the interests of men of the dominant race and class.

The male bias of prevailing knowledge, however, will not be immediately obvious. A characteristic feature of contemporary ideological portrayals of the world is that they purport to be value free, or else to reflect the interests of "society as a whole" or even of "all humanity." In the context of such high-flown talk, feminist claims often appear to be biased — just as the voice of a woman or of someone with a regional accent sounds parochial when contrasted with a BBC radio announcer, whose unemotional, upper-class, and male voice is perceived as class and sex *neutral*, making the BBC news seem to express a god's eye perspective on the world.

When feminists point out the male bias in prevailing systems of knowledge, or in prevailing public policies, the standard liberal response is to invite feminists to present "their side of the picture." The liberal idea is that feminism represents one among many competing points of view and that a just resolution of public policy issues is most likely to be reached if all points of view are heard and allowed to

compete in the marketplace of ideas. This notion is probably in the minds of those who complain that feminist teachers do not present all sides of an issue. In emphasizing the feminist aspects of public policy issues and in ignoring or criticizing anti-feminist positions, feminists again are seen as teaching in a way that is not fair or "balanced."

Feminists should respond to this challenge by denying that all positions are equally worthy of consideration. In discussing issues of racial discrimination, one is not obliged to study the agitational propaganda of the Nazis or of the Klu Klux Klan. The most interesting issues of public policy are multi-faceted rather than two-sided, and time constraints usually will not allow exploration of every conceivable position on an issue. From the feminist perspective, one can know almost a priori that approaches to public policy that fail to examine the specific policy implications for women are quite inadequate and do not merit valuable class time.

Impartiality is not the same as neutrality. To be neutral on an issue is to have no position, not to know or not to care what is the right thing to do. On some occasions, individuals may be in positions of genuine neutrality, but often the appearance of neutrality is a cover for underlying interest. Whatever students may believe, issues of public policy can hardly be presented to a class in a neutral way: the facts that are selected and the principles that are identified, even the way that the issue is defined, inevitably will predispose the hearer to accept one policy rather than another.

To be impartial on an issue is not to be indifferent as to its outcome; instead, it is to be open-minded, to consider seriously unorthodox opinions, to listen to voices that speak without established authority as well as those with official credentials. It is to give equal weight to the interests of all, to refuse to discount some individuals or groups.

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Impartiality is quite consistent with commitment. Indeed, feminists believe that a genuinely impartial consideration of contemporary social life must generate inevitably a commitment to feminism. Anyone who examines contemporary social institutions with an open mind, who gives equal weight to the interests of all individuals or social groups, and who listens seriously to women's voices cannot help but perceive that many public policies discriminate systematically against women and so reinforce male dominance. If women's interests were genuinely given equal weight with men's, many public policies would be different. From the feminist point of view, it is not feminism that is irrational or biased, but rather positions that ignore or discount the specific in-

terests of women. Far from constituting a disqualifying bias, feminist commitment is a defense against one very common and damaging form of bias. Impartiality is not undermined by feminism; instead, feminist commitment helps to safeguard impartiality.

Of course, feminists are not the only ones charged with teaching sedition. Socrates was only the first in a distinguished line accused of corrupting the youth. Not all philosophy teachers face exactly the same dilemmas as do feminists. The western philosophical tradition in practice has tended to reinforce male dominance rather than to undermine it; for instance, it has valued public over private life, reason over emotion, and has emphasized the

meeting of minds rather than of whole persons. Nevertheless, in my opinion, philosophy itself is intrinsically subversive to a hierarchical, authoritarian, and male dominant society. For this reason all teachers of philosophy confront at least some version of the feminist dilemma.

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Workers, Owners, and Factory Closings

In *The Fight Against Shutdowns*, Staughton Lynd writes: "Workers in Youngstown and elsewhere are beginning to ask: Why is the company allowed to make a shutdown decision unilaterally? Since the decision affects my life so much, why can't I have a voice in the decision? . . . The communities in which shutdowns occur are starting to ask the same questions."

The thrust of these questions is moral, not practical. Lynd is asking why companies *ought* to be allowed to exclude workers and communities from shutdown decisions, and he is suggesting that the latter have a *right* — a moral right, which ought perhaps to be made a legal right — to participate in these decisions.

From some perspectives, these questions seem to answer themselves. The free market defender may say: it is the company that owns the factory, makes the investments, and takes the risks; in accepting jobs, workers freely consent to certain ground rules. Thus, the firm has the right to move whenever it chooses. The committed democrat, on the other hand, may insist that a person ought to have some say in matters that crucially affect his or her life. A shutdown decision touches deeply the lives of workers, their families, and their communities; so they ought to have a say in what happens to the factory on which their livelihood depends.

These are polar views, framed in the strongest terms — in terms of rights, moral "musts." But there are positions short of the poles which, though expressing some of the same underlying concerns, do not state the issues as inescapable moral imperatives. Defenders of laissez-faire may think not that firms have a natural or God-given *right* to make shutdown decisions unilaterally, only that our kind of economic system is preferable and that for it to work, firms must completely control investment deci-

sions. Similarly, advocates of workers' participation in company decisions may think not that they have a *right* to participate, but simply that the possibly disastrous consequences of plant closings make a moral claim on our concern.

How can we adjudicate between these conflicting points of view? Suppose we begin with the view that challenges the status quo, in which workers have no voice in shutdown decisions. What reasons are there for thinking that the status quo is not as it should be, that workers and communities ought to have some say in decisions about whether a plant stays or goes?

At least two basic kinds of argument support worker participation. One focuses on the idea that although in our legal system factories belong to stockholders, workers may acquire a kind of moral property right, a moral claim to some control over their workplaces. The other emphasizes that, through their relations over time with workers, firms have incurred obligations to them that preclude unilateral shutdown decisions.

The first view rests on the labor theory of property, originally developed by John Locke. The germ of the theory is that property rights are acquired by "mixing one's labor" with, and thereby adding value to, external objects. To make this view workable requires many qualifications, but its essential core is persuasive: having worked on an object and transformed it into a socially valuable commodity gives one *some* claim to the fruits of one's labor.

The second argument for workers' rights to a say in shutdown decisions expresses the idea that when a company has dug deep over generations into people's lives, perhaps affecting a whole community, it incurs obligations to those people and that community. Although the com-