TEMPORALITY AND SORGE
IN THE ETHICAL FASHIONING
OF THE FEMINIST SELF

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This essay is dedicated to George Molnar who passed away in 1999, to a teacher who communicated the excitement of libertarian socialist traditions and the value of lucid thinking.

An attempt to consider the question of ‘feminist temporalities’ has plunged me, in the writing of this paper, into an attempt to elucidate the terms of feminism as an ethical call to action. Yet the connections between temporality, action and ethical relations between self and other are not of the kind that can be put forward in terms of a logical set of propositions. Instead, the very experience of writing this paper—of plunging into one question while thinking about the other—suggests that we are dealing here with phenomena that somehow pre-suppose one another. I will argue that temporality and self/other relations are indeed absolutely basic structures in our social constitution as beings, but that feminism (and other projects that share some of the features I will single out) is able to give us unique access to these structures, which are normally hidden or muted in everyday experience. It is able to do so, I suggest, by virtue of its action orientation towards social change, which gives a
certain affective charge and urgency to these underlying structures of human experience and, in doing so, renders them more directly accessible.

While the argument will take its own time to unfold, as an initial presentiment or premonition of the shape of these connections I offer Derrida's striking figure of the spectre or ghost. The ghost is both other to the self and, as that which has been or is yet to come, other to the present. Yet, in its potent capacity to haunt, the ghost cannot be dismissed or banished as pure difference. Instead, it seems to demand of us an attempt to communicate:

Could one address oneself in general if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the 'scholar' of the future, the 'intellectual' of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. Derrida's formulation of the ghost that one has to learn how to speak to, may have a particular resonance for someone who, as an anthropologist, is currently trying to write about the practices of spirit possession, temporality and gender in rural India. But his notion of ghosts that render present time non-contemporaneous with itself, ghosts that give the lie to the seeming self-sufficiency of selfhood and subjectivity, is also extremely suggestive in terms of relating the concerns of this paper to the question of difference and, as he points out, to justice.

Two kinds of concerns with justice motivate me in writing this paper. First, I am concerned with doing a phenomenological justice to feminism's existential structures, its particular structures of affect, its peculiar temporality, its disclosure of a certain social and indeterminate basis to our being. Second, I am concerned with a longer term commitment to requiring that feminism in turn do justice to the structure of women's diverse experiences and to the question of differences among women. These two concerns for justice which come together in this paper are not usually treated together. Indeed, it has often been the reverse—certain characterizations of feminism as a 'politics of identity' characterizations that result in a levelling off or diminution of feminism's phenomenological richness, are justified in the name of trying to do better justice to differences among women (see below).

I will proceed rather from the premise that the critiques by 'minority' women are better served by a fuller characterization of feminism's complexity, and that the two kinds of concerns for justice are inter-related. Doing justice to feminism allows us to better understand its power of address the world over. Rather than remaining confined to any originary location one might wish to confine it to, such as a 'white', 'Western' or 'middle class' mooring, feminism has shown a capacity to seep outside such locations. This capacity is not to be understood as separable from the questions of race and colonialism. Rather, it has been an integral part of the way in which women from diverse parts of the world have taken up the historical situation in which they find themselves in the wake of colonial modernity. Nor does it serve the cause of these diverse women's movements to have the consideration of feminism's blindness to 'difference' restricted to the question of white or Western women. Blindness to difference and privilege is equally a problem for feminism all over the world to address. In India, for example, the rise of Hindu religious nationalism in the 1990s has brought social challenges, occasionally explicitly voiced by women in Muslim and Christian minorities, that require feminists to recognise the privileges of belonging to a Hindu majority. Equally, the upper-caste backlash against affirmative action legislation ('reservations') for Dalit communities has made many feminists newly aware that their feminism draws some of its meanings from a taken-for-granted upper-caste background. In Japan, socialist feminist agitations around issues of Japanese colonialism in Asia notwithstanding, it has taken women of Korean descent and other immigrant labouring populations to challenge the assumptions of a culturally homogenous 'Japanese woman' that feminism could address.

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If I speak of feminism in the singular rather than in the plural, it is in an effort to discern the basic orientations that underlie both the strengths and the weaknesses that appear, not simply in a 'Western' feminism, but in the many feminisms.

**Can feminism be subsumed by the critique of 'identity politics'?**

A certain summary understanding of feminism which has circulated over the last decade is that it is an 'identity politics'. The term 'identity politics', then, feminism is supposed to draw on such an understanding of the identity category 'woman', and mobilise on the basis of such a category. Behind this characterisation lurk the many charges levelled at feminism in the last fifteen years—as 'essentialist' in understanding female identity in terms of fixed essences, qualities or experiences; as unacceptably universalising in taking these fixed attributes of identity and generalising them to all women everywhere. If these criticisms have successfully pinpointed weaknesses in certain kinds of self-understandings generated by feminism, they have also operated in turn as taken-for-granted assumptions 10.

I would like to consider just one example of such a characterisation, in one of its strongest and most cogent presentations, in order to ask the question, Does it do justice to the structure of feminism as a project? In her various texts, Judith Butler repeatedly elaborates an understanding of feminism as an 'identity politics' in order to critique it. If we take our cue from her description of 'identity' in *Gender Trouble*, then this would have to be a politics based on the presumption that identities are self-evident, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent. 11 In taking 'woman' as the identity that it speaks 'of and for', 12 feminism, she writes, takes female identity as a self-evident entity and awards it a 'foundational' status. 13 Such a foundationalism gives feminism its 'coercive' and 'regulatory' effects in terms of continually excluding differences among women. Although Schor congratulates Butler for re-thinking, in her 'most political text' of 1992, her already influential position on identity in relation to politics, in fact we only find an elaboration of distinctions already made in her first book. Unlike her ongoing efforts to clarify other influential theses, such as those on the relation between drag and gender and between performance and performativity, Butler's position on feminism as an identity politics does not alter. The 1992 text *Contingent Foundations* repeats the earlier understanding: although the conception of identity represents a false metaphysics, that false metaphysics has to be reckoned with. It is sustained by certain politically dominant juridical structures. These structures recognise subjects only in and through representations of identity. Therefore, feminism as a practice necessarily has to engage with lobbying, demonstrations and legislative efforts. Meanwhile, we are to understand that the term 'woman' is really not of this kind at all—it is a term that 'designates an undesignatable field of difference'. 15 In a later text she questions Foucault for precisely that entirely juridical understanding of identity that has contributed to her own characterisation of identity. Yet this questioning of Foucault has not produced a fresh appraisal of her own understanding of feminism. Feminism remains what it always was, a mobilisation of the necessary error of identity, 16 subsumed by the new deconstructive understanding that we suspend commitment to that to which the term 'the subject' refers. 18

To follow such a recommendation is, I would suggest, to go much further than to simply come to understand and recognise certain splits in subjectivity. It is rather to take up a stance that determinedly and assiduously cultivates a specific form of split subjectivity as a conscious attitude. In a paper on feminism and temporality, it is also of some interest to note that despite Butler's casting doubt 'upon the possibility of a "new" that is not in some way already implicated in the "old"', her particular way of interpreting this relation between the old and the new feminism brings in a form of temporality that is dominant under modernity, the temporality of progress, even if it is a complicated form of progress. The new project of a politics that will engage in but suspend all commitment to notions such as the subject, representation and identity, relegates to a superseded past a feminism...
that is a 'politics of identity'. I readily agree that feminist politics has not cultivated the kind of consciously and deliberately split subject that Butler recommends. Here I will not take up the question of whether such a feminist 'subject' is desirable or viable, but rather the question of whether this retrospective and comparative designation of feminism as an identity politics is adequate to its object.

Let me begin by looking a little more carefully at the examples Butler provides of feminism as an 'identity politics'. In 'Contingent Foundations', Butler gives a list of identities that form a point of departure for feminism. The list includes those who claim an ontological specificity to women as child-bearers and make that the basis for legal and political representation; and those who understand maternity as a socially and historically specific social relation; those who claim a feminine specificity to ways of knowing. This is already a vastly heterogeneous list. To the same list, Butler assimilates the critiques made by women of colour:

In the early 1980s, the feminist 'we' rightly came under attack by women of colour who claimed that the 'we' was invariably white, and that the 'we' that was meant to solidify the movement was the very source of a painful factionalization. The effort to characterize a feminine specificity through recourse to maternity, whether biological or social, produced a similar factionalization and even a disavowal of women who are not mothers; some cannot be, some are too young or too old to be, some choose not to be, and for some who are mothers, that is not necessarily the rallying point of their politicization in feminism.

Let us examine this list to see if these are identities of the kind that Butler has ascribed to feminism. Let me begin first with 'whiteness'. Whiteness and race are not identities that feminism has taken as bases for political action. Rather, their operation within feminism has been implicit, the effect, as Butler herself describes it elsewhere, of 'unmarked dimensions'. This is precisely why it has taken a critique by women of colour for race and colour to emerge from their shadowy recesses as a powerful and constitutive force in identity formation even within feminism, and as a continuing source of privilege. But if it is this taken-for-granted status rather than an explicit availability to consciousness that has made it all the more insidious a power within feminism, then we cannot simply assimilate it to the general description of 'identity politics'. For race to function as a form of feminist identity politics, feminism would have to take up and explicitly elaborate a racial identity.

But if whiteness is not of this kind of 'identity', does the next item on the list, 'maternity', quite fit this description either? Certainly maternity seems a much better candidate. As a profoundly embodied process that is also socially an explicit and privileged marker of female identity, it could not escape being rendered explicit in the self-awareness of any woman who is a mother. But here again, we are not discussing maternity in the consciousness of women who are mothers, but maternity in the political consciousness of feminists. Butler makes little distinction between the two. Indeed (on her stated judgement), insofar as feminists who take up questions to do with maternity are to be distinguished from 'women who are not mothers, women who cannot be mothers, those who are too young or too old to be mothers, or women who choose not to be mothers', we can only assume that feminists are mobilising on the basis of maternity because of their identity as mothers or as those who aspire to be mothers. In Butler's reading, taking their maternal or maternalist identities as a starting point, feminists mobilise politically, illegitimately generalising ('universalising', 'coercively regulating') this maternal identity to all women and inevitably excluding the various groups of women who cannot or who choose not to identify with maternity.

But is this any kind of plausible description of the place of maternity in feminist politics? Certainly many women around the world have mobilised on the basis of their maternity, spectacularly so in the case of the 'mothers of the disappeared' in military regimes in Latin America. However, this kind of mobilisation describes only one kind of relationship between maternity and women's mobilisations, and does not quite capture the specificity of feminism as a political project. Christine Battersby has specifically taken up Butler's
restrictions on the ascription of commonalities between women on the basis of maternity. She argues that notions of female commonality that have been operative in feminism need not be understood as based entirely on shared female experience:

Insofar as there is 'sameness between women', this is not a matter of shared experiences or life-histories. It is rather, a question of a shared positioning vis-à-vis the founding metaphysical categories that inform our notions of individuality, self and 'personhood'. Thus, whether or not a woman is lesbian, infertile, post-menopausal or childless, in modern Western cultures she will be assigned a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth.25

Although earlier feminists may not have employed Battersby's particular language, not taken up the task she poses, that of re-thinking identity from the position of one who 'has a body that bleeds with the potentiality of new selves',24 maternity became a political issue not simply because it shapes the lives of women who are or wish to be mothers, but because it has broad implications for all women—and in many more cultures than just the contemporary West—through the normative power of cultural and ideological socialisation. In this sense, the women who cannot be mothers, or who choose not to be mothers, are still shaped by the implicit dominance of that specific category, and it is this relentless dominance which made feminists take it up as a political cause, as much so that women may, precisely, in the future not have to define themselves in a necessary relation (if only of rejection) to maternity.25

Could such a generalised understanding, one that precisely does not remain confined to the vagaries and flux of one's own life experience, have been produced by the kind of feminist self conjured up by Butler and others who understand an earlier feminism as an 'identity politics' in the sense outlined above? Indeed, could any kind of feminist project have proceeded from a self that knew its own defining characteristics before any engagement with the other, and which simply mapped this self on to the world at large? Has the feminist self ever been able to thus precode its relationship to the other woman?

The phrase 'identity politics' conjures up the image of a feminist who knows her identity prior to her politics. Her identity is transparent to her—as a mother, as a white, as a woman. She then places this known identity into language simply as a 'descriptive' category, totalising on that basis and surreptitiously turning her identity into a norm for other women. As such, identity politics necessarily produces factions and disputes which, however, Butler asks us to accept and remain open to as part of the democratic process.

Butler does not believe any more than I do that this is how identity 'works'. However, she attributes such a working understanding to feminist politics: I grant that such a vision of the self and of identity is certainly characteristic of the dominant language available, not only in philosophy but in everyday language as well. Nor should we overlook the peculiar dominance of such language in the United States. No doubt such dominance has influenced the language of self-presentation employed by feminism as well—but again, I doubt that the phrase 'identity politics' would so readily have hit off the self-understanding of traditions of a more socialist-inspired feminism such as I have encountered in Australia and in India.

The problem may be located in a readiness to understand feminist politics entirely in terms of a certain kind of metaphysics in Western philosophy, not because this metaphysical outlook best characterises or explains feminism, but simply because there is, ready to hand, a sophisticated critique of such a metaphysics. In descriptions of feminism as an identity politics that universalises from a knowledge of self's identity to all other women, the feminist self is assimilated to the classic epistemic model of identity as the knowing subject. But has the feminist self and, with it, the feminist project distinguished itself so little, in general, from the metaphysical subject (target of the post-structuralist critique), one whose self-identity is clear and accessible to the reflecting consciousness, and whose identity is somehow assumed to be fashioned prior to an engagement with the world? Could such a monadic and self-absorbed feminist self possibly have enjoyed the power to slip its moorings in Western...
colonial modernity and inspire so many diverse women’s movements around the world? Indeed, what becomes, in this formulation, of the emphasis on movement that is so characteristic of feminism? What is the status of action, always central to feminism, if all feminism does is to take up a given identity as a starting point and proceed to perform totalising operations on that basis? Can feminism in any case be assimilated to an epistemic enterprise? Or have we not, in doing so, already by-passed its central characteristics?

Whatever the language employed by feminism to describe its terms of mobilisation, Butler’s description does not begin to capture the richness and complexity of the structure of the enterprise. I shall not rely, therefore, primarily on the self-descriptions that feminism may or may not give of itself, but rather try to find access (however indirectly) to the nature of the enterprise, initially through seeking to characterise the nature of feminism’s temporality.

Feminism’s temporality and the central place of action

It is possible to interpret feminism’s relation to time as something external to feminism itself. Feminism may thus be considered as a series of events such as those that make up the struggle for female suffrage, or entry into educational institutions, events which occur in time. Such an orientation is not necessarily disturbed by controversies over whether one writes histories that aim to uncover the participation of women in what are already established as major political events (e.g. world wars, anti-colonial nationalist movements), or whether one writes histories that seek to question the categories of politics, economics, and of gender itself. In either case, events may continue to be located in a time that is conceived of as in itself empty and homogeneous, like the mathematical time of the calendrical or clock. Each event is unique, unrepeatable, proceeding according to an inner principle of development. The enquiring subject, the historian, must attempt to approximate this externally given object as closely as possible. This way of conceiving of time characterises a certain view of the relationship between the enquirer and the world that has been variously analysed as ‘historicism’, ‘intellectualism’ and ‘objective’.

Given its dominance within academic scholarship, elements of such a view continually find their way into and organise feminist historiography. However, such an orientation towards time as an externally given entity is not, I will argue, primary to feminism. Feminism does not simply adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion towards objectivism, nurturing critical enquiries into the way in which knowledge has been framed and conditioned by male interests and by the facticity of male dominance. If this were all there was, the critique could just as well stop at the point of scepticism, having accomplished its task of throwing doubt on the possibility of objectively knowing the world. Instead, feminists have pressed ahead with a sense of positive discovery and excitement about the possibility of recovering voices, perspectives and lives ‘hidden from history’, and in the process rectifying our knowledge of history itself.

Where does this epistemic optimism stem from? A clue may be derived from the hermeneuticist model of history developed by Dilthey in the 1880s. For Dilthey, any science of history must ground itself, not in classical texts as had been the case in Biblical hermeneutics, but in the actual experience of historical life. History is unlike our knowledge of the natural world, he argued, but this does not mean we cannot understand history. On the contrary, we cannot understand history, culture and society in a different way from the way we understand the object of the physical sciences—precisely because we too are bound up, as human beings, in traditions and practices that are historically conditioned. In other words, history opens up to us because we are already involved in it. Instead of history as fact collecting, it becomes a matter for interpretation. Instead of starting from isolated events, history starts with the attempt at understanding the totality of the experience within which elements attain their meaning. Resonances between this kind of historiography of a past society and the way in which the Western anthropological project has attempted to understand another culture are evident here, insofar as the latter has also tended to move between elements the enquirer shares with the people of the other culture (a common shared ‘humanness’) and an appreciation of its difference. Such a hermeneutic historiography comes a little closer to
the way feminism approaches women in other societies of the past or in other cultures—seeking to understand them, not as factual objects but as open to understanding because they share a similar structure of experience with the enquiring feminist. Thus the feminist historian/anthropologist reaches out to women from past societies or other contemporary societies, seeking to re-locate their experiences in terms of a totality newly conceived as the totality of gender relations, seeing them not as external and detached from herself but as open to understanding because of a shared experience of what it is to be positioned and constructed as a woman.

However, the hermeneutic model diverges sharply from feminism insofar as it remains within the subject/object dichotomy that characterises so much of the Western epistemological tradition. The subject is exclusively understood as the enquirer, seeking to know and understand an externally given object. Although there is in this model an acknowledgement of a common structure of experience, Verstand, that links the enquirer to the object of enquiry, it preserves the dichotomy that is the prerequisite for transforming all questions into varying forms of the question of epistemology: how then are we to arrive at an accurate and objective knowledge of the object? Even when qualities like ‘empathy’ are admitted into the historiost of the anthropological traditions, requiring an immersion into another time or another place, they rest on positing a fundamental break between present and past, and between one’s own culture and another’s culture respectively. This gulf must then be bridged by bringing in considerations of value, externally located according to this formulation.

Feminism has had little need or use for such instructions to bring in, as an added ingredient, the quality of empathy with other women. Far from needing to find the resources with which to imagine the women of the past, or of another society, feminism’s project finds itself already there with other women, ahead of itself as it were, in the midst of a bond of solidarity that is not as external as the bringing of ‘values’ into enquiry.

I will suggest that instead of seeking to find how feminism relates to time, we seek instead to see how the feminist project itself constructs time, attempting to uncover its own way of structuring temporality, of unfolding over time. This is, of course, what Kristeva attempts in her paper ‘Women’s Time’, finding not one but two structures of temporality in European feminism. One of these seeks incorporation into the linear temporality of progress and equality with men, while the other attempts to bring into symbolisation women’s difference, as that which has hitherto remained unrepresented, or has been symbolised in extraordinarily restrictive and hypostatised ways within a male-dominated symbolic order.

It is significant that neither of these temporalities bears any resemblance to either the objectivist or the hermeneutic models of historicism I have outlined thus far. Neither may be described in terms of a detached gaze, or even in terms of a sympathetic gaze. In fact, the striving for equality with men and the attempt to symbolise women’s difference both break with the ocularity of epistemology. This shared structure leads me to seek a more fundamental and primary experience of temporality within feminism, one which can be said to underlie both the strands distinguished by Kristeva.

This is a temporality given by action, not by knowingness. This is not the action of our everyday comportment, where we are typically so immersed in the minutiae of immediate tasks that the world, and ‘time’ itself, may well appear as a ‘given’, having nothing to do with our stance or orientation. In this version, our own primary level of involvement in the social basis of the world and in time is obscured. Rather, we are discussing feminism, a highly conscious and interventionist structure of action that makes it a political project oriented towards change. This orientation changes our experience of time and of others in the world. Or more accurately, it discloses, by virtue of heightening and intensifying, that which is already there. Temporality and others in the world are already, at the basic level of our primary socialisation, part of our being, and it is this capacity to draw on and mobilise what is already fundamental to human existence that gives the project, I believe, its power of address.

I am here taking up Heidegger’s thesis in Being and Time. The thesis posits Sorge or ‘care’ as primary to our involvement in the world we find ourselves in. As Dreyfus points out in his lucid commentary, this is ‘care’, not in the sense of ‘worry’ but in the English sense which includes the meaning of ‘caring’ and ‘concern’.
However, even this etymology is misleading in that it overlaps with the meanings of a concern with the well-being of others, whereas Heidegger wishes to argue that such solicitude and what he terms 'welfare work' is only one manifestation of Sorge. Sorge can equally be manifested in a range of modes of indifference, perfunctoriness and even inconsiderateness of others in the world, although these are all deficient in relation to our social constitution. In fact, Heidegger is trying to point to a level that is more primary than any particular subjective attitude or psychological trait because it precedes the very bifurcation between subject and object, between human subjectivity and world as objective. Rather, it underlies every possible subjective stance we take up towards the world because all of them presume a basic structure of pre-involvement—the world matters to us, and it is this mattering that creates a kind of 'clearing' around us. Our concerns allow us to pick out a meaningful world as one that is near; close at hand. Not only does Sorge therefore orient our spatial existence, but it also has an irreducible temporal dimension. Our concerns orient us to a futural horizon, in the process again 'picking out' what is meaningful and relevant from the past.

The 'present' is therefore not what Derrida critically describes as a notion of 'the modalised present', a series of 'nows' cut off from one another, but rather there is a transcendence or ek-stasis involved which allows the present to be simultaneously a process of retrieval and of expectations. Of particular interest, given my description of a call to action as central to feminism, is the centrality of activity to Heidegger's description of Sorge itself. The present is an active process of making present, of retrieval and pushing forward into a futural horizon.

Such a structure of active involvement in the world is normally covered over and hidden. This is so in part because of the structure of Sorge itself—our immersion in the world of tasks requires us to take the world as, to some extent, objectively given, and not (as we would now describe it in social theory) as 'socially constructed'. Heidegger argues that forms of thought that transpose scientific thought to human existence are made possible by this very appearance. The very modus operandi of intellectual reflection then proceeds to effect a further rupture with that which it seeks to illuminate. When
around the alleviation of suffering. Recognition of female agency is shaped by this orientation, rather than the other way around.

As a political project that seeks to release women from suffering, feminism's temporality is fundamentally futural in orientation. The debates over female equality versus female difference have little bearing at this fundamental level. Both look forward to a time when the present sufferings, whether they are born of inequality or of a failure of male-dominated symbolic orders to successfully allow an entry of female difference into language and cultural symbolisation, will be at an end. Feminism reveals the transcendence built into temporality—its futural orientation towards the end of suffering flows back into recognising the present as a time of suffering. Simultaneously, there is a transcendence in the direction of the past. Again, the project gives an existentially charged version of the past. No longer is the past to be viewed as an inert series of events. Instead, it is a past in which the suffering of women is already visible, in its emotional colouring and physiognomy.

It is this basic existential urgency, rather than the re-interpretation of any particular set of events, which allows feminism to break from history taken as historicism. The past is no longer irreducibly different or cut off from the present. In this sense, feminism is not fundamentally an epistemological relation to the world, nor is it primarily a way of knowing the world. Neither the past, present nor future are to be contemplated and known—instead, all the temporal dimensions are given by an urgent political mission, a search for new ways of being woman or, for some, of being human.

Both sides of the subject/object dichotomy that conceals the structure of Sorge are undone in following this call to action. In so responding, the subject is revealed, not as an isolated individual but as shaped in a commonality of social pre-conditions that construct her and others in her position, as a woman. Simultaneously, the world that so constructs her is revealed as something other than a given object. It is revealed as indeterminate, as changeable, as shaped by social forces and therefore open to intervention. This is a very different structure to the one Butler describes for feminism as an 'identity politics.' One does not start with an identity already understood as female, and then move on to generalise to other women. Rather, it is in the process of undoing the dichotomy between self and others that the self can be recognised as 'woman' and others as 'women', bearers of a special claim to one's attention. Both recognitions are born simultaneously as the subject/object dichotomy loses its reified quality.

This structure is by no means unique to feminism. It is shared by socialism in all its variants—'utopian' socialisms, 'scientific' Marxism, anarchism, syndicalism, libertarian socialism. It is virtually impossible to write about feminism as a call to action rather than as epistemic contemplation without being overtaken by Marx's famous eleventh statement in his Theses on Feuerbach: 'philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it.' The same transformation of 'history' occurs in all of these political projects—the past becomes of intimate concern as extensions and precursors of the suffering of the proletariat and the working people, but it is the futural orientation towards emancipation that gives a specific charge to the past as that which must be retrieved. As with previous generations that were politicised by Marxism and socialism, Marxists and libertarian philosophers and activists in the 1970s handed down to us university students the traditional watchword that transformed our relationship to past, present and future: scan the past to avoid repeating its mistakes; watch the horizons of the future to recognise new dangers and new possibilities. Each generation exposed to such a socialisation experiences anew the capacity of the call to action to transform the history text-book learning of schooling and universities into an active watching of horizons to correctly interpret the signs that will allow them greater agency towards the future. All of this watching makes sense only as an answer to the question of action always posed by the present: What is to be done?

Religious 'structures of feeling'

I have described this structure as one that draws on a religious genealogy. The structure is described with great eloquence by Walter Benjamin who, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' written
in 1940, draws effortlessly on the revelatory language of the Hebrew scriptures in order to put forward what I am describing as the heightened structure of Sorge in Marxism:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it ‘the way it really was’ (Rankè). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist.

Writing in a context where the earlier Marxist perceptions of a historic choice between socialism or barbarism was materialising horribly in the form of German fascism, Benjamin speaks of the ‘state of emergency’ as one that is no exception but, from the perspective of the tradition of the oppressed, is the rule. He explicitly contrasts this highly charged version of history in which the past is existentially alive, in an integral unity with the present and potentialities of the future, with the ‘universal history’ of historicism:

Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. When thinking stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it is crystallised. In this structure, he [the historical materialist] recognises the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework.

There is no sense of contradiction here as Benjamin conceives of the revolution as the coming of the Messiah. The religious discourse fuels the critique, not only of historicism but of the politics of Social Democracy that believes in gradual incremental change and shies away from the bloodiness of revolution—the proletariat is to be understood as the Messiah, who is not only redeemer but the subduer of the Anti-Christ. The proletariat is not only the carrier of a new world order, but a bloody destroyer of the previous ruling class and of all class systems. Like the early Christians that St Paul writes about, for whom ‘wakefulness’ and vigilance were essential as a mode of waiting for the second coming, the Jews, for Benjamin, had already laid down the basic structure of the past as remembrance and the future, not as empty homogeneous time, nor as the magical time of soothsayers, but as ‘the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter’.

I suggest we have to more fully acknowledge the presence of these religious pasts and ‘ghosts’ in the making-present of modernity’s political projects (and no doubt a fuller consideration would have to consider the ghosts of religion in fascism as well, particularly given the biographical trajectory of Heidegger). Once again, before we can learn to ‘speak to’ these ghosts, we have to first acknowledge their presence—a task massively hindered by modernity’s attempt to make temporality into a linear progression. Marx explicitly makes of religion the very prototype of all ideology, a source of confusions, ghosts and fetishisms that must be conjured away, while the Christianity in Heidegger and the Judaic elements in Benjamin have been, astonishingly enough, not seen. According to Hodge, influential readings of Heidegger have proceeded without reference to Christianity, while as recently as 1972, Benjamin’s friend and Jewish theologian Gershom Scholem was pleading to a generation of Marxists born of the student movement for recognition of the religious in Benjamin’s Marxism. I suggest that only by learning to speak to these ghosts will we better understand the strengths and weaknesses of these modern forms of political interpellation, learn how we might ‘address’ them.

The universalism at work here has virtually the opposite structure to a politics of identity. We are not dealing here with isolated
Identities who know their own identities in advance, and then deliberately generalise to others in an abstracting mood of totalisation. Rather, that same rush of intentionality, that outward-directedness of the Marxist or the feminist towards the suffering of the proletariat or of women, obliterates the previous structure of the self/other distinction, making the self rush ahead of itself to find itself already there in the other. The feminist self does not start with the self and then move to the other—it is formed in the movement outward, carried by the structure of Sorge or caring. The feminist finds herself already engrossed in the burning of the witch in medieval Europe, the persecution of the hysteric by the modern structures of science. If the past is no longer history, then other cultures are no longer Other. The structure of spatial distancing is also one which is dependent on the structure of Sorge and, with the heightened mode of concern, the feminist is already there with the burning ‘sutee’ widow in India, with the young girls enduring cliterectomy and infibulation in the Sudan or in an immigrant population. Indeed, the feminist or the socialist self is only formed in this movement outward, restoring movement to its proper place in political projects of this kind.

I have deliberately drawn examples that have been highlighted by critiques of the colonial in feminism. However, allowing for this richer experiential structure of feminism also allows us to better understand the success of these forms of interpellation in locations to which feminism travelled as part of colonisation. Indeed, the original inspiration for my characterisation of feminism comes from a description of the Indian women’s movement by Mary John. In India, no less than in the West, feminism has historically had its strongest class base in the middle class, but there everywhere else, feminism leaps out of its own class location and lodges itself in care and concern over the plight of labouring women from the poorest and most underprivileged groups. Indeed, if anything, the far greater intensity of the suffering associated with the enormity and visibility of poverty and, after the first two decades of independence, by the failure of ‘developmental’ agendas, not only made the socialist and the feminist projects more closely intertwined than in the West, but it created an even more dramatic sense in which feminist caring was located even more firmly out in the world of the suffering poor, often in rural areas, rather than with the feminist self in the urban middle class. John argues that through the 1970s and 1980s, middle-class feminism figured the self only in the process of identification with those less privileged:

“...women eager to represent India’s women—in the villages, at the wrong end of development, suffering the injustices of the state or the limitation of leftist politics and so on—have been doing so while rendering their own identities within the dominant culture largely transparent”

Earlier in the same piece, John refers to the formation of a peculiar kind of ‘split subject’ in Indian feminism, ‘composed of the investigating subject and the subject of inquiry, at once populated by “selves” and “others”’. At the same time, she immediately adds that such a formulation is potentially misleading because ‘the use of the distinction between “selves” and “others” is open to the kind of reified interpretation that would not capture the complexity of the Indian situation’.

What then is the complexity of the Indian situation? It is ‘that Indian feminism was born through an active process of representation, with the need to speak on behalf of the vast majority of the nation’s women’ Yet it seems to me that even this talk of split subject does not capture the process John seeks to describe, for that is a process, I would argue, in which there is no feminist self that pre-exists the immersion in the social situation of the other less fortunate woman. The self is formed entirely in the process of not only representing but occasionally acting on behalf of the other. My interpretation suggests a much more complex structure to representation than the juridical one suggested by Butler: as a necessary concession to the dominance of bourgeois parliamentary processes. The process of representation within feminism has not entailed a pre-given female identity (‘woman’) speaking for other such identities (‘women’). Rather it has entailed a leap out of the old self, which may or may not have been conscious of its own gendered identity as a woman at all, to a new self that is conscious of itself as a gendered and unacceptably
inferiorised being, but this occurs only in and through its heightened involvement with others. In fact there is no way of describing this as a linear process, since heightened involvement with others is in turn predicated on a prior recognition of a commonness between self and others, but also a recognition of the self in the other, distinguishing feminism from ‘welfare work’.

**Conclusion: the question of difference**

Having tried to do justice to the structure of feminism, we are now in a better position to re-situate the difficulties of locating differences within the chosen group. The same structure I have described, in all its richness, also makes it very difficult to discern and pick out fundamental differences within the ‘chosen group’. The other is already picked out in advance, as it were, and given significance by the orientation of the project, that which renders the others ‘recognisable’ as shared carriers of a common fate, a common destiny, as women, as Jews, as Christians, as proletarians.

Critiques by women in various minority positions have raised questions about the continued place of class, caste, religious affiliation and positioning by race and colonialism in the articulation of gender relations and in the shaping of women’s experiences. We have come to discuss in various forums the privileges of functioning and acting as the ‘unmarked category’, the problem of feminists who are unaware of their own whiteness, their own class location and so on.

But there are problems with this way of speaking. First, while it may hit off a certain covert way in which categories and social forces operate to maintain privilege, it remains a description quite external to the phenomenological structure of the way feminism’s mobilising capacity works, or the way feminist selves are re-fashioned in the process. This would perhaps not seem too high a price to pay if the problem were limited to a few privileged categories of women whose experiences could be discounted in the name of bringing greater justice to the cause of black, third-world women, or Indigenous women. But feminism is far more widespread than this, and so are the problems. The problem of how to deal with difference and emancipation at the same time is internal to modern political projects, and modern political projects cannot be limited to any particular social category of people in the world although there are certainly differences to be traced in the repetition of these projects around the world.

Secondly, this way of talking about the problem of race or class or colonialism is all too readily assimilated to the model of subjects who should be aware of all the dimensions of their being, but have failed to be so. Again, attention to the phenomenological structure of feminism suggests otherwise. In the religious structure of the political projects that I am drawing attention to, a new kind of self is re-made, a re-birth occurs in the recognition of a shared destiny. Under the impact of the existential ‘nearness’ with other women created by this structure, the old pre-feminist self seems distant and temporally irrelevant, particularly in those aspects of social location that are not already picked out by the particular structure of concern. Thus Marxists notoriously fail to recognise their own gendered location, feminists their class and racial location, but more salient still is the fact that the complexities of one’s prior social location as a whole seem irrelevant in the midst of the more compelling experience of a re-fashioned self.

Such a structure, where the self is effectively re-born or re-fashioned in the structure of commonality, would also help explain why it is that when some members of the chosen group turn around and introduce new criteria of social construction, it is experienced not as an illuminating lesson in one’s own social construction, but as a depletion of the self. The threat here is of being thrown back on to the old, discarded self, which in retrospect seems unbearably isolated and individuated, impoverished in comparison. Again, we cannot afford to ignore this response since it is not limited to the privileged group. The sense of impoverishment experienced in the face of critiques that seem to deny commonality altogether is experienced not only by women in positions of privilege, but also by minority women. I have heard Muslim feminists in India, the very minority most vulnerable to the onslaught of Hindu nationalism and Muslim counter-response, lament a new hyper-reflexivity within the
women's movement in India regarding their privileges as 'Hindus'. Such a response seemed to them to foreground religious identities at the expense of a previous commitment (however blind in certain respects) to a common struggle.

Equally, however, the critiques by minority women seem to me to raise an even more basic question about blindness. Can we expect that an accumulation of such critiques will allow feminism to overcome the blind spots to privilege and expand to a fullness of vision and sight? Or is there not a blindness that necessarily accompanies and is at the heart of vision of any kind, including the political vision made possible by projects such as feminism?

Certainly, the social relations that constitute us can be partially brought into view through a combination of experience, shared reflection and critical analytical categories—the consciousness-raising of the 1970s would not have worked if this were not the case. Nor would social, philosophical and political theory we teach at universities have the capacity to illuminate to the extent they do.

Moreover, the structure of feminist critiques and the critiques mounted of feminism itself by those affected by colonialism and class suggest that from certain kinds of vantage points, a greater visibility is afforded. Constitutive relations of power are more visible to those who are located differently— but pure difference is not enough to afford this greater visibility, nor does it generate the sense of involvement necessary for a departure from indifference. In order for this departure to occur, different location has to be combined with being still directly affected by the same social relations. Thus the privileged status of masculinity is visible only to women directly affected by those particular cultural forms of masculinity, but so also the privileges and shaping power of class, race and dominant culture are visible only to those who are subject to these relations rather than subjects of them. No doubt the reason that the presence of Christian and Judaic understandings in Western philosophy and politics positively leaps out at me but remains invisible to other readers is not only because of a different religious socialisation, but because the blindness modernity cultivated about its supposed displacement and victory over tradition, over feudalism and pre-capitalism, was also the very basis on which countries like India were assigned an inferior

place. As postcolonial theorists like Dipesh Chakrabarty argue, the place of religion in Western modernity looms large for peoples whose entire civilisation was gathered under the inferiorising and temporally disassociating rubric of 'Hinduism' or 'Islam'.

However, the enlightenment goal of making the world totally transparent to the knowing subject cannot any longer, I believe, be understood to be a viable feminist goal. The hidden and taken-for-granted bases for social subjecthood are only ever partially visible to those shaped by them. This makes it all the more urgent that we fight for political structures that remain open to the vision that can only come from those who are situated differently and unequally. Butler seems to arrive at a similar conclusion. I would put it slightly differently, however. It is not that foundationalism or identity politics has produced the rifts and factions; it is rather that no political project can be utterly transparent to those who are mobilised by it as agential members. It is not a question of replacing ideology with science, as Marxism posited, nor can consciousness-raising and political activism provide the full clarity that feminism once believed in. Nor will an accumulation of critiques reveal all that there is to be revealed. The prerequisites of the production of any social subject or political project will necessarily have a certain opacity. It takes those who are simultaneously outsiders and insiders to those power relations to bring to light some of the hidden dimensions, but even here there is no promise that all that is hidden will be brought to light. It is this necessary blindness that necessitates an openness to critique from diverse vantage points, not the assumption of a fixed or closed identity.

It also flows from my account that a complete denial of commonality in the name of difference, tutoring ourselves to henceforth regard 'woman' as 'designating an undesignatable field of difference', will also be experienced as impoverishment, not simply by the privileged but also by the very women who mount critiques of feminism in the name of reminding others of the realities of race or colonialism or caste or religious privilege. This is because the very blindness to differences among 'women' has also afforded feminism its vision. Towards the end of his life, Merleau-Ponty wrote about the inter-relation between vision and blindness, the visible
and the invisible. He wrote in terms of clearings, clear zones about which pivot their opaque zones. The two are inter-related by our immersion in the world: insofar as the social forms the ground on which we stand, the presuppositions from which we speak, the social is at once that which enables us to stand and speak as subjects, and that which prevents us from being able to see and speak everything that goes into our constitution.

We can no longer, therefore, treat feminism and kindred projects as culpable for falling short of the goal of total vision which these projects themselves have socialised us into expecting. The shortcomings will have to be addressed in different terms, and they cannot be addressed without considering the strengths. Feminism’s very blindness to something of its own ground (whether that happened to be religion, race, colonialism, class) also permitted it to ‘see’ something of the broad generality that runs through the constitution of femaleness. Instead of the reifications of isolated and individuated subjects confronting an external and ‘given’ world, feminism and socialism gave us a fundamental insight into a world that is socially constituted through embodied social practices such as labour and gender socialisation, a world that has a certain indeterminacy and changeability about it. As against a version of Sorge as indifference, a version promoted by the reified way in which the world can be experienced as the ‘facts’ of everyday life, these projects enjoy a vital form of concern very different from the abstractions we are meant to find in universalism—instead, they make the world appear ‘close’ to us. They have allowed us to see that we enjoy a certain dehistoricisation and openness to a world that is shared not because of any non-material human essence but precisely through our material situatedness. The question that remains is, how do we address the blind spots without trading in, as we so often seem to do, the accurate and enabling dimensions of the vision they produced?

1 I am grateful to Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitte Obias for the absolute timeliness of their invitation to speak at a conference in Hobart on ‘Feminist Temporalities’, in which participants were asked to reflect on ‘how to think feminism in and as time’. The questions of temporality and difference are among my current preoccupations (Kalpana Ram, Genealogies of ‘The Woman Question’: The Colonial Past in Multiculturalism’s ‘Present’, in Ghassan Hage and Rownane Couch (eds), The Future of Australian Multiculturalism. Reflections on the Twentieth Anniversary of Jean Martin’s The Migrant Presence, Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1999, pp. 255-71; Dancing the Past into Life: The rasa, raga and rasa of Immigrant Existence, Australian Journal of Anthropology, special issue, The Politics of Dance, vol 11, no 3, 2000, pp 261-74), so the chance to explicitly relate these questions to feminism has been welcome. It was also valuable to give a revised version of this paper at the Feminism conference at Macquarie University and to receive Cathrina Mackenzie’s warm encouragement. I thank Ian Bedford for his editorial suggestions. I wish also to thank the Australian Research Council for its generous fellowship scheme that has made this paper possible.

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2 Jacques Derrida, Spectres of Marx, Routledge, New York, 1994, p 176
3 Practices such as spirit possession render explicit and culturally elaborate the presence of otherness both in the present and in the human subject.
4 See also Andrew Lattas, Cultures of Secrecy: Reinventing Race in Bush Kalahari Cargo Cults, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wis., 1998, pp. xxvi-xxxvii
5 Derrida, Specters of Marx, pp 25
7 Flavia Agnes, ‘Redefining the Agenda of the Women’s Movement within a Secular Framework’, in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (eds), Women and the Hindu Right, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 136-57
11 For ongoing reconsiderations of these charges levelled at feminism, see Naomi Schor, French Feminism Is a Universalism, Bad Objects: Essays


13. Butler, Gender Trouble, p 5

14. Schor, 'French Feminism is a Universalism, p 12

15. Butler, Contingent Foundations, p 16


18. Butler, Contingent Foundations, p 15

19. Ibid., p 6

20. Ibid., p 15, emphasis added

21. Ibid., p 15

22. Butler, Gender Trouble, p 14

23. Battersby, The Phenomenal Woman, p 16

24. Ibid., p 17

25. There is a separate question here as to whether it is possible or conceivable that there should ever be a culture which does not apprehend a body that menstruates, has the potential for pregnancy, gives birth and lactates, as always already a bearer of specific meanings


30. On this question, see Heidegger, Being and Time, esp pp 161–3. I am indebted to Barnbach's excellent examination of the German historicist tradition, with its particular effort to illuminate the differences and shared elements between Dilthey and Heidegger (Charles W Barnbach,
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