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Eilish Rooney
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Beyond sex and gender?
A Belfast response to Wendy Brown

I eagerly anticipated Wendy Brown’s keynote presentation in Belfast at the 15th annual Women’s Studies Network (UK) Conference in September 2002. Although I did not expect her to address the Irish–British conflict, I hoped that her insights into the impossibilities of extracting race from gender, or gender from sexuality, or masculinity from colonialism (Brown, 1997) might enable us – different local and visiting feminists – to come to grips with conversations about these matters (as they pertain to feminisms in conflict, sectarianism, class, race and so on). We have needed these conversations, locally, for a long time. However, I was frustrated and disappointed and, perhaps worse, I felt an opportunity was missed. On hearing the keynote I changed my presentation for the following day’s panel on ‘Irish Identities’. Instead of a paper on women’s identifications, community activism and the British government’s ‘conflict management’ approaches in the north of Ireland (Rooney, 2002), I continued some of the critical conversations provoked by the keynote.

I did not ‘mourn’ the passing of women’s studies from the academy – in the institution where I teach (University of Ulster), I was ambivalent. I miss the students and the loss of the Centre for Research on Women (CROW) has been detrimental to knowledge and general debate about women in this society. The women’s studies access course we taught is now taken by students in the local college of further and higher education and these students may proceed to degree level women’s studies in Queen’s University, Belfast.

The women’s studies programme on which I taught never managed to sustain conversations about women and democracy in the north of Ireland in the context of the conflict. Neither did it include study of the differential impacts of state sponsored endemic sectarianism on ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ women. The reasons for this are complex and, like all politics, fraught with personal political perspectives, dispute and power hierarchies. The desire to avoid addressing the conflict in favour of retaining a unified feminist approach in women’s studies was almost overwhelming at my institution. The reasons for this relate to Wendy Brown’s theoretical insights about the impossibility of isolating ‘women’ from historical,
socio-economic, political and cultural contexts and contingent ‘realities’. These complexities, in a situation of violent conflict, assume sharper dimensions than academic debate generally involves.

Let me note what I appreciated about Wendy Brown’s keynote address. She called for a rethought, re-visioned feminist radical democratic politics. She proposed a revival of the emancipatory goals in women’s studies. Like her, I too hope for a future where struggles for human rights, justice and dignity are consigned to history. I hope for a world where people become free to explore ways of being, as yet unimagined but, surely, ‘free from sex and gender’ and from hierarchies of class, race and other oppressions. In the context of the recent USA and British war on Iraq, the feminist left in the USA, as well as elsewhere in the world, faces huge challenges. However, the temptation to set aside what appear to be less significant ‘differences’ needs to be resisted. I speak from where I have lived and what I have learned about challenging gendered state power – on the streets, in the home and in public discourse in the north of Ireland (see Rooney, 2000a, 2000b).

Wendy Brown recalled her wonderful experience of ‘revolutionary feminism’ and how she held the conviction that ‘the people’ would inevitably triumph. Perhaps I envy her that experience. I remember a similar dream. I was one of thousands of people gathered in the sharp January sunshine in Derry in 1972 marching from the Creggan to the city centre in protest at internment without trial. Despite the danger of facing six months’ imprisonment if arrested at the march, I believed, perhaps for the first time, certainly for the last, that we could ‘overcome’. Internment would have to end, faced with such peaceful opposition – the ‘power of the people’ protesting. But that day, Bloody Sunday, 31 people were shot by British soldiers. Fourteen of them were killed. Everything changed. Perhaps the conflict that accelerated in the north thereafter would be categorized by Wendy Brown as one more ‘violent ethno-nationalism’ that has ‘darkened’ the 20th century. And arguably, the democracy that is being built in the north is, for now, consolidating unionist and nationalist identifications, rather than encouraging ‘working-class unity’. However, conflict resolution and, indeed, democracy (like feminism) are uncertain processes and not end games.

What I heard in the keynote (and later read) being mourned was a form of feminism that had a utopian, world vision. It was shared by some people in a few places, mainly in the USA, in the 1960s and 1970s. Variants of this feminist vision produced a useful and sometimes valuable legacy and a literature that continues to influence feminists and gender discourse in many parts of the world today. However, the vision was partly made possible by the raced, gendered, socio-economic, historical and local political circumstances (civil rights protest; anti-war activities) and perhaps the age, of the people who shared it, as much as by the certainties of enlightenment notions of human progress and revolutionary conviction. The last two, Wendy Brown reasoned in her keynote, provided the intellectual context for revolutionary feminism’s vision of social transformation. The keynote was both a paean to revolutionary feminism and
a ‘call to feminist arms’ by way of re-visioned, emancipatory women’s studies.

Unlike ‘subaltern’ feminists, including raced and ethnicized feminists, and feminists from war zones, Wendy Brown neither explained her perspective nor limited her claims to the specificities of place and space from which she wrote. Consequently, she seemed untroubled by explaining away unspecified others in the keynote. Thus, she claimed that revolutionary feminism gave birth to lesbian separatism and various feminist nationalisms based in race and ethnicity and that these offspring had a more conservative Weltanschauung than their progenitors.

Setting aside the arrogance of claiming a particular (influential and dominant) form of feminism as being the ‘mother of all feminisms’, which ‘feminist nationalisms’ are being referred to? Which ‘lesbian’ feminisms? All of them? Everywhere? Brown went on to claim that these ‘identity’ based feminisms are often inward turning in their politics, less consistently critical of capitalism and liberalism and more inclined toward interest-bound reformism than with propounding a comprehensive vision for society. Does this refer to Palestinian feminisms? African American feminisms? South African feminisms? Islamic feminisms? Irish feminisms? Scottish feminisms? US/American feminisms? East European feminisms? Any or all of the above?

And for what reasons might particular feminisms be considered ‘interest-bound’ and reformist? What factors are considered in the assessment? Are matters of moment considered – of historical, raced, colonial history? Of geo-political location? What kinds of relationships exist between anti-racist politics and critiques of capitalism and feminism? Between anti-sectarian politics, challenges to liberalism and feminism? The answers are complex and complicated by the place in question. These considerations are not a block to understanding how to develop radical politics within societies stratified and divided by race, ethnicity, sect and so on. They are essential.

Some work on the implications of these questions is to be found in the body of ‘indigenous’ feminist literature. Some is to be found in the US/American feminist theorizing particularly on race, equality and poverty, which Wendy Brown uses elsewhere in her work. In the keynote, her analysis assumed the centre and source position – and presumed the power to define other feminist experiences and analyses to the periphery, if not ‘beyond the pale’.

At conferences and in publications, I often tell about the (changing) place I come from and my (changing) place in it. This is not motivated by some romance with biography. It is the requirement and the opportunity that comes with being an outsider. Also, many people already ‘know’ something of the place I come from, for instance, that the conflict is about ‘Catholics and Protestants’. The 30 years’ war in the north of Ireland has received intermittent and partisan attention from the international media. The politicized coverage and construction of the conflict I am part of is one of the first sites to be tackled. The meanings and assumptions built in to the very words used to describe the place is where I have to begin.

The paper I intended to present at the conference opens with a brief
historical context setting section under the sub-head: ‘A Partial Political Map’. The account is ‘partial’ in many senses. The paper critiques simplifications about ‘Protestant women’, ‘Catholic women’ and the construction of women as existing ‘apart from the war’. It may be judged by Brown’s criteria as deriving from feminism that is ‘inward turning’, since it fails to engage directly with a critique of capitalism and only implicitly analyses liberalism. I would hope that it might be found to address questions Wendy Brown sees as critical ‘for feminist revolution’ namely, what sustains a willingness to risk becoming different kinds of beings, a desire to alter the architecture of the social world from the perspective of being disenfranchised in it, a conviction that the goods of the current order are worth less than the making of a different order.

Making a different order has been the political project of many people in the north of Ireland for over 30 years. When Wendy Brown’s ‘revolutionary feminism’ was in its heyday, towards the end of the 1960s, the struggle in the north of Ireland was a struggle for ‘democracy’ (linked to African American civil rights protests in the USA). Not a revolutionary aim even then, although many young leftists (Irish and British ‘Internationalists’) believed that the British state would collapse as a consequence. It was argued that the struggle in Ireland could be the key to the British revolution. Faced with the brutality of state strategies, blatant, subversive and discursive, and the subtleties of state sponsored agencies, the belief was short-lived. Democracy remains a goal – closer to realization, but a goal nevertheless.

We still need those conversations.

Notes
1. The comments I make about the keynote talk in this piece refer to notes I made at the time of the talk and from a copy of the talk which Wendy Brown kindly provided.
2. This stubborn binary constructs, as it describes and simplifies, the political history of the partition of Ireland.

References

Eilish Rooney is a feminist community activist in Belfast. She works in the Faculty of Social Sciences in the University of Ulster. Recent publications include contributions to the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vols 4 and
5: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions and ‘Community Development in Times of Trouble: Reflections on the Community Women’s Sector in the North of Ireland’, Community Development Journal, 37(1) 2002. She has been awarded the Cornell University Law Faculty’s Gender, Sexuality and Family Project Visiting Lectureship, 2003.

Address: University of Ulster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Jordanstown, BT37 0QB, North of Ireland. Email: e.rooney@ulster.ac.uk