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Feminism at the Millennium

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analyses that assume male dominance and female otherness as a natural state. In short, there is much food for thought in this book, certainly enough to whet an appetite for more.

Taken together, these two volumes provide a window on the current status of these two areas within the academy and in the real world. The investigation of masculinities within international relations underscores the obstacles and realities faced by development workers and their clients, who must operate in the world constructed around male privilege in both domestic and international arenas. Both books highlight practical and analytic issues confronting those who seek the empowerment of women and the integration of gender into their study and practice, and both provide a jumping-off point for future studies of the gendered states of international relations and economic development. ■

Speaking of Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality. By Deborah L. Rhode. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Everyday Sexism in the Third Millennium. Edited by Carol Rambo Ranoi, Barbara A. Zsembik, and Joe R. Feagin. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Subtle Sexism: Current Practice and Prospects for Change. Edited by Nijole V. Benokraitis. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997.

Carol Sanger, Columbia University

Sexism of all kinds — subtle and blatant, criminal and legal, commercial and private — is the topic of the three books under review. The books initially sort themselves out by discipline: *Everyday Sexism* and *Subtle Sexism* are anthologies whose editors and contributors are primarily sociologists; *Speaking of Sex* is written by a law professor and offers a more focused argument about the persistence of gender inequalities. Distinctions in authorship aside, the three books pose a pair of similar and painfully familiar questions: Why is so much still organized to the disadvantage of women, and what can (feminist) academics contribute to a solution?

The first question is largely empirical and requires exposing the deep structures of family, ideology, and market that sustain the unequal treatment of men and women. Each of the books contributes in varying degrees to that substantive project. The second question, as I frame it here, is pedagogical. How does what we teach — the materials we select and require —

induce or advance critical thinking by students on the topic of sexual inequality?

I take up the second question first, in part because it has been much on my mind. I have recently spent time in my own discipline — law — examining shelves of nonlegal gender scholarship in order to supplement the cases and statutes that are the core of most law school courses on sexual inequality. For example, students regularly read judicial decisions about whether requiring flight attendants to be pretty or slim or unmarried is unlawful sex discrimination. But what should they read to understand why airlines required (and customers seemed to desire) those characteristics in the first place? How does one convey the concrete experience, causes, and persistence of sexism over the course of a semester, especially when, as all three books acknowledge, there is disbelief among the citizenry that sexism is still a social problem? After all, everyone has now seen flight attendants with wrinkles.

To answer these questions, I begin with the two anthologies, whose titles (varying only by adjective) suggest a common purpose and whose introductions claim the same audience: undergraduate and graduate students in the social sciences. Despite such similarities, the books are not equals. *Subtle Sexism* is the more satisfying, partly because of its organization and partly because of the quality of the essays themselves. Perhaps most crucially, *Subtle Sexism* conveys a sharper sense of what a teaching anthology can realistically aspire to accomplish.

By contrast, *Everyday Sexism* goes wrong in its pedagogical ambition almost from the start. Its introduction sets forth two motivating questions: “Is there still sexism in the late twentieth century? And if so, how does it manifest itself in our everyday lives?” (2). So far so good. But in their enthusiasm to acquaint students with the depths of the problem, editors Carol Rambo Ronai, Barbara A. Zsembik, and Joe R. Feagin impose on their query an intentionally dense overlay of feminist methodologies, perspectives, topics, and theories. The attempt to reveal *pervasive* gender injustice comes out instead as a *smattering* of injustice. There is too much structure, too much politics (every essay is “an overt act of resistance”), and too much jargon. Not all readers, for example, will immediately be able to “fuse the concepts of ‘gendered space’ and ‘dialectical relationships’ together to expand the matrix of domination into a ‘dialectic of domination’” (5). The result is that many of the essays work overtime and somewhat self-consciously to display their narrative method and their sensitivity: one interesting essay on male-female Internet interaction, for instance, includes a pro-forma apology that the “chronically marginalized” are without computers.

The organizing principle of *Everyday Sexism* is “gendered space,” and its thirteen essays are distributed under three headings: “Identity as Gendered Space,” “The Body as Gendered Space,” and “The Political/Economic Arena as Gendered Space.” But even formally, the structure does not hold: essays on sexual harassment appear in every category, an essay on identity politics turns up in the economic section, and articles on the academy are in two different sections. This complaint is not to deny the editors’ point that the many facets of women’s existence — status, politics, family, work — are interrelated and that the resulting synergy often works to women’s disadvantage. Yet the “dialectical linkages” that the structure is meant to reveal cover so much ground that the links, while visible, also feel stretched. The editors’ conception of “sexism” provides an example of what I mean. Three of the essays focus on family violence: one is a detailed retelling of father-daughter incest, another of spousal abuse, and the third of the author’s memories of her mother’s beatings. While each of these narratives has a certain power, I question whether serious cases of criminal behavior are best considered as examples of “everyday sexism.” *Sexism* seems too mild a term. Without question, the mistreatment of women can be plotted on a spectrum, and, as two contributors point out in their study of customer harassment of video store employees, when demeaning treatment becomes normalized, the behavior goes unnoticed and uncontested. Yet distinguishing incest from, say, posting incendiary messages on-line or flirting with the check-out girl is important if we mean to encourage students to reflect seriously on remedies as well as outrages, large and small.

Several of the essays in *Everyday Sexism* treat problematic issues as though the feminist answer were easy or obvious. One author interviewed childhood sex abuse survivors, sharing with them her own history of abuse. She contrasts this abuse with what she identifies as the sexism of standard social science, the “male standards of the emotionless, so-called objective scientific method” (134). Without question, women have long been disserved by the sciences, both as subjects of research and as objects of treatment, but the place of self-revelation in research is complicated. Data collection is not (always) therapy. Yet the issue goes undiscussed, a special problem if this anthology is a student’s first foray into the complexities of feminist practice. Similarly, in the essay on video store harassment, I read the employees to say that they enjoyed flirting with the cute customers: “A guy that beautiful can be as big a jerk as he wants,” one says (145). The author characterizes this response as a form of denial. But it may be that not all sex-based interactions fit into a preexisting picture of coping strategies by the oppressed. At least the issue ought to be raised.

I found the essays in *Everyday Sexism* most valuable as models of the

kind of focused, local scholarship that students themselves might attempt in examining issues of sexism in their own lives. The essays' scope was appropriately small: an interview with three biracial lesbian couples, surveys of two classes regarding the sexual harassment of Asian American women, observation in one video store of customer-employee interaction, and several autoethnographies. Each author located the subject of her particular investigation within a paragraph or page of existing scholarship. What was too often missing, however, was a sufficiently critical assessment of what was uncovered.

Like *Everyday Sexism*, *Subtle Sexism* also poses two framing goals: "to sensitize students to the widespread practice of subtle sexism and to suggest how such practices can be changed" (xii). Its sixteen essays are organized into four parts that track the two goals: "The Continuing Significance of Sexism," "Sexism in Organizational Settings," "Sexism as Social Control," and, finally, "Changing Sexist Practices." The progressions make sense. For example, the first two essays introduce basic concepts and vocabulary; the next two provide examples of how sexism writ small ("micro inequities") play out for women in the contexts of law and the academy. Part 2 deals with specific workplace settings such as the military and the field of engineering and with the ethnically specific case of Latinas and work. This section also considers the implications of sexism for *men*—a valuable chapter addresses the problems of male child-care workers.

I want to mention one other chapter in particular, "Who's Laughing? Hillary Rodham Clinton in Political Humor," an analysis of familiar Hillary jokes, mostly of the nastier lesbian and pussy-whipped-husband variety. Like the old joke about feminists and lightbulbs, the author concludes that Hillary jokes are not funny and represent a deep hostility toward influential women. On first reading, I did not like the article, in part because I did not enjoy the voyeurism of reading the jokes. Since then, however, I have changed my view on its usefulness in an anthology on sexism's subtleties. When the jokes were solicited in 1993, Hillary was a self-promoting, Bill-trouncing harridan. By March 1999, when this review was written, Hillary as a source of mirth is no more. Hillary is no longer joke-worthy because during the interim year of scandal and impeachment she demonstrated grace under intense pressure. Or was it because she stood by her man? Whatever one's view, the question regarding the jokes remains. Is there less sexism with Hillary off the humor hot seat? Are women better-off when the mocking stops, or is the disrespect of political humor a comforting sign of progress?

The anthology concludes on two notes: one of promise and one of restraint. Promise is presented through concrete suggestions about how the

“academic we” might make things better: there is a chapter on experimental classroom role-plays and a sober piece on how a task force on women at one university made some progress. But the difficulties of making progress across the board are not underestimated, and one concluding essay takes on a troubling challenge to pat notions of gendered oppression: the problem of domestic violence in the context of lesbian relationships.

In some ways, *Subtle Sexism* does less than *Everyday Sexism*. There is little explicit talk of identity and no demonstration of feminist methodologies. Yet, while there are no autobiographical accounts, women’s stories emerge nonetheless. Part of *Subtle Sexism*’s success may be its length; with one hundred more pages than *Everyday Sexism*, it has room to breathe, and editor Nijole V. Benokraitis uses her extra pages to deepen, not to expand, the concepts under investigation. The volume accepts the pedagogical premise that exposing the dimensions of just one aspect of sexual disadvantage—subtle sexism tightly defined—is sufficient for a semester’s exploration.

Deborah Rhode’s *Speaking of Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality* similarly recognizes the value of taking on just one problem, if a comprehensive one. The challenge of *Speaking of Sex* is what Rhode identifies as “the ‘no problem’ problem.” She explains that a central difficulty of gender inequality is exactly that most people perceive that there *is* no such problem, or that there is no such problem *anymore*, or that it is not *their* problem, or that gender inequality is not a matter of *injustice* but just a consequence of biology or personal preferences and therefore not a problem at all. Taking this denial as her starting point, Rhode sets about the massive task of exposing the range of cultural forces that sustain today’s sexist beliefs and practices. Her argument is that until we understand why treating women differently from men seems odd instead of natural, wrong instead of inevitable, suspect instead of satisfying or sexy, programmatic changes are unlikely to get much past the cosmetic. (There is, in addition, a terrific chapter on cosmetics.) Thus, Rhode explores the underlying sexism of the media, of child-rearing practices, of the workplace, the academy, and so on. *Speaking of Sex* offers a compendium of cultural and economic data.

Because Rhode is also a legal scholar, the role of law is woven into her account of each substantive area. Thus, one learns about the *law* regarding single-sex schools, as well as about educational success rates; one learns about the regulation of pornography, as well as what is known about its effect; and one learns the legal significance of the number of women in job applicant pools, as well as the sociological reasons fewer women might apply for certain kinds of work. At the same time, the book is not legalistic in tone. The narrative is cheerfully accessible, as anecdotes regularly accompany statistics. With its excellent notes and a superb research index,

Speaking of Sex could supplement or jump-start a college or graduate course in women's studies, just as gender studies from other disciplines contribute to more complex understandings of sexual inequalities for those in law. ■

Gender, Families, and State: Child Support Policy in the United States. By Jyl J. Josephson. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911–1929. By Joanne L. Goodwin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Welfare's End. By Gwendolyn Mink. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998.

Family Shifts: Families, Policies, and Gender Equality. By Margrit Eichler. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Laura Lein, University of Texas at Austin

Ending “welfare as we know it” has focused research on the experiences of families in poverty, especially those headed by women, and produced a rich new interdisciplinary literature exploring the development and current results of social welfare policy in the United States. Scholars have paid particular attention to how beliefs about poor women and their lives shape policy and, in turn, how those lives are shaped by government programs. Historians, sociologists, policy analysts, and others are finding social welfare an important lens for work in feminist theory. The four books reviewed here represent part of that growing vision and perspective.

These books differ significantly in a number of ways. Two of the books developed out of doctoral dissertations, one grew out of a technical report, and one is a more general critique and overview of current policy directions and possible futures. Three concern the United States, while one draws on data from Canada. One author is a sociologist, one a historian, and two political scientists. Taken together, however, the books show (1) the nature of the myths policy makers and the public have about low-income single mothers, (2) the ways these beliefs and assumptions become self-fulfilling prophecies, and (3) how much more researchers and the public at large must learn about the beliefs underlying welfare reform and its effect on mothers and children in poverty if we are to participate fully in the critique and design of new public policy.

As might be expected, the two books that arose out of dissertations have