FEMINIST THEORY AND DISCURSIVE INTERSECTIONS

ACTIVATING THE CODE OF 'POLITICAL CORRECTNESS'

Alison Convery BA (Hons), MA

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Alison Convery

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Abstract

This thesis is impelled by the unsettling suspicion that academic feminism has adopted modes of theorising which undermine its political *raison d'être*. Specifically it argues that certain discursive conventions observed in popular attacks on feminism have, somewhat surprisingly, been imported unchanged into feminist theory. From the late 1980s, attempts were made to silence minority claims of discrimination and subordination via the discourse of 'political correctness'. In particular, this discourse belittled such claims as the exaggerated and irrational expression of largely self-inflicted 'victimhood', an argument which depended for its force on denigrating the figure of the 'victim' as a morally, and not just practically, diminished status. I suggest that the same logic occurs in a more or less sublimated form in feminist theory – the self-identified victim is positioned as having crossed a threshold of reasonableness, the standard for which is set by non-victim others. With a few notable exceptions most feminist scholars have failed to address, let alone notice, this resonance.

However, this thesis goes beyond documenting a surface correspondence between these two ostensibly incompatible discursive domains. Its significant claim is that a discursive strategy designed specifically to undermine the basis for feminist claims has become integral to the meaning-making practices of academic feminism. The issue is not simply one of a disturbing coincidence with a discourse from which feminist theory nevertheless remains largely autonomous. On the contrary, the claim here is that readers of feminist theory cannot make sense of certain modes of argument without reference to anti-feminist systems of meaning erected elsewhere. In that sense, the discourse of 'political correctness' has infected the very core of feminist theorising.

An additional contribution of the thesis is that, in the process of establishing precisely how this discursive imbrication is accomplished, it utilises a theory of reading practice which is applicable to the study of discourse more broadly. This approach addresses questions about the mechanisms by which prominent discursive tropes come to act upon and be transmitted by otherwise disparate subjects, a point which has remained largely unresolved by discourse scholars. The argument is that the discourse of 'political correctness' facilitates the accurate recognition by readers of the denigrated 'victim' in

feminist theory, normalising it and making it comprehensible in the absence of other explanation within the individual texts themselves. Successfully accomplishing these acts of recognition is furthermore a criterion of membership of the feminist discourse community, demonstrating competence at deploying its knowledge standards and a willingness to collude in the exclusions those standards entail.

Corresponding to the way the devaluation of victimhood has been discursively normalised in feminist theory, it is argued that the concept of 'agency' has achieved an ontological primacy in feminist thinking which is far from innocent. Analyses of agency and resistance operate as moral correctives to an alleged historical preoccupation with victimisation, rather than as disinterested scholastic endeavours aimed at expanding our knowledge of women's behaviour under conditions of oppression. The binary opposition of victimhood and agency therefore oversees a normative structuring of feminist approaches and modes of argument, a structure supported at its origins by the meanings encoded in a hostile discourse.

In an attempt to disrupt that normativity, the thesis concludes by sketching the possibilities for a less coercive feminist rhetorical practice which does not embed exclusionary assumptions about victimhood. Such a practice would not have as its primary intention the resumption of supposedly more neutral modes of referring to victimhood, although that is certainly proposed as a conduit to greater inclusivity. Rather, that ostensible neutrality is itself a politically invested discursive usage which is aimed specifically at initiating only those interpretive processes that must refuse the discourse of 'political correctness' as a meaning enabler. This thesis therefore provides a method of discursively re-politicising feminist theory in a way which is neither simply reactive nor resigned to its inevitable imbrication with other discourses.