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„Feminism" and „Postmodernism"

Are There Some Things at Stake in Lyotardian Thought for Feminist Theorizations?

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In the late 1970s and early 1980s more and more feminist theorists came to the conclusion that the attempted and partially realized „alliance" between „Marxism" and „feminism" had ended in an „unhappy marriage" marked by significant theoretical inadequacies of various Marxist currents for feminist theorizations (Sargent; Benhabib, Uneasy Alliance 137; Nicholson, Feminism 56). Slowly taking shape in the mid-1980s and developing into full-scale debates and projects by the turn of the decade, a „new alliance" became an issue for a growing number of feminist theorists. The supposedly „natural ally" (Nicholson, Introduction 5) was located in „postmodernism"--along with „feminism" among the most significant political and cultural currents on the Western intellectual and academic landscapes throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Issues and implications of the „postmodern turn," for example, the critique of the traditions of Western philosophy stemming from Enlightenment ideals, in particular of the latter's male-centered universal and unified subject, seemed to shed new light on crucial goals and problems, still unsettled today, of feminist theorizations. Placed at the center of the contemporary fragmentation of the feminist movement, the identity category „woman"--the subject and object of feminist theorizations and practices--is heavily fragmented itself, contested in an activating of difference by their assumed constituencies ranging from „women of color" to biracial lesbian separatists (Herrmann and Stewart 1-2).

The controversies over what is, among others, portrayed as either „alliance" or „misalliance" (Benhabib, Uneasy Alliance 137) between „feminism" and „postmodernism" has led to a multitude of responses and positions, from embracing at least some of the „alliance's" putative promises to rejecting any form of engagement between the two as the „destruction" of „feminism" per se (Di Stefano, Dilemmas 77). The ongoing debate is still--and given the proclaimed openness of the theoretical currents in question, it might be said has to remain--open, leaving any theorization of a „postmodern feminism" with an „uncertain valence" (Wicke and Ferguson 3). Among the

purported „postmodernists," whose work was widely discussed by feminist theorists and thus fueled the exchanges in question especially in the 1980s, was the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the intersections and conflicts between „feminism" and „postmodernism." To phrase it more precisely, two crucial aspects in the approaches of Jean-François Lyotard, i. e. first, his handling of „philosophy" and its implications for social criticism and second, his conceptualization of the social and the subject with its implications for the core category of feminist theorizations, „woman," will be presented and discussed in the light of the project of a „postmodernist feminism" as advanced by the American feminist theorists Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson. It will be shown that an „alliance" in the sense of a „lock-step symmetry" following predicaments of linkage is not--and cannot be--at stake in an „encounter" between Lyotardian „postmodern" thought and „feminism." Rethought to the ends of feminist projects, the former, however, is capable and does inform feminist thinking as shown in and beyond the Nicholsonian and Fraserian perspective. Nevertheless, crucial elements and implications of the Lyotardian version of „postmodernism" have to be rejected, while others, for example, the conception of the „differend," once they are rethought and substantiated, fruitfully inform feminist approaches to deal with the fragmented subject of their discourses and to conceptualize theoretical as well as political projects.

To do so, the paper will give a brief account of the two issues concerned in Lyotard's work, focusing mainly on his Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge, and then outline the theorizations of Nicholson and Fraser which deal with this matter. In the following section, Lyotard's thinking as well as Nicholson and Fraser's approaches will be discussed, showing strengths and weaknesses of the French philosopher's perspective for feminist thinking and of the Fraserian and Nicholsonian „postmodernist feminism." In addition, attempts will be made to indicate ways in which perceived impasses and flaws can be rethought.

Jean-François Lyotard's philosophical thinking is predominantly informed by the „linguistic turn" of Western philosophy (Lyotard, Differend xiii). In his earlier work The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge, he draws significantly on Ludwig Wittgenstein's later studies as well as on the work of Anglo-American philosophers such as J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle. With the publication of this „report," which became widely known and discussed on the American academic landscape, Lyotard triggered the controversy over „postmodernism" in the academic discipline of philosophy (Welsch 116). The philosophy of language, especially a particular focus on the „pragmatic aspect" of the „facts of language" (Postmodern Condition 9), is seen as the key to an adequate analysis of society (Rüb 87).

In his „report," Lyotard constructs his argument and analysis around the hypothesis that the „metanarratives"--or grand récits--of modernity have collapsed and thus lost their credibility. Three „metanarratives" are or more precisely used to be dominant: the emancipation of humanity, i. e. of the rational subject (narrative of Enlightenment), the hermeneutics of meaning (narrative of Historicism), and the dialectics of Spirit (narrative of Idealism) (Postmodern Condition xxiii). Following Lyotard, the „modern" sciences legitimate--and have to legitimate--the rules of their language games by referring to „metanarratives" as „discourses of legitimation" in order to distinguish themselves from mere fables. In this respect, „Truth" and „Justice," for example, far from being universal values, appear as grounded in „metanarratives" of philosophy. The collapse of the „metanarratives" of legitimation does not only have a far-reaching impact on the sciences, but is also linked to the crisis of metaphysical philosophy (xxiv). Not being able to serve as an apparatus of legitimation anymore, philosophy is, nevertheless, not condemned to disappear, but--in a rather limited approach--to focus on areas like the „history of ideas" and „systems of knowledge" (41).

An approach such as this also sheds new light on the problematic of thinking through the relationship between men and women. Following Lyotard, (traditional) Western philosophy offers the „direction for an answer" (Women's Struggles 14) to the problematic concerned. The very question, however, is and can only be phrased in its male-centered „metalanguage"--or one of its „metanarratives." Thus the possibility and impossibility of an answer is marked by a pre-constituted binary opposition between „man" and „woman," predetermining it and foreclosing others. The philosopher turns out to be „a secret accomplice of the phallocrat." The claim to speak the „Truth" is based on

a discourse of knowledge grounded in a „decision" that cannot be proven, but is rather „a fact of power." Therefore men themselves have to be regarded as „a minority in a patchwork where it becomes impossible to establish . . . any major order" (15-6). As a consequence of this line of reasoning, the „destruction" of--or further destruction of, since their collapse has already been stated--„metanarratives" (of philosophy) is „one of the things at stake in women's struggles" (14, 9). According to Lyotard, it is not an affirmation of a „feminine principle" set against a „male" one which needs to be at the core of the political and theoretical efforts of the women's movement, but a move beyond a safeguarding of the „difference between sexes," because the „feminine principle" only helps to secure the dominance of the „masculine" one by functioning as its „outside" (11-2).

In a most basic and simplified way, Lyotard defines the „postmodern" as an „incredulity toward metanarratives." Dealing mostly with the problem area of knowledge, he refers to its condition in most highly developed contemporary societies as „postmodern" (Postmodern Condition xxiii), perceiving this condition not as a monolithic and unchangeable „state," but as a movement. Something in the representation and use of knowledge is „shifting" and has not yet stopped (Which Resists 414). Due to the collapse of the „metanarratives" of legitimation, contemporary science is not only incapable of legitimating itself, but also of legitimating--and subduing--the wide range of other language games as it used to. Thus it is refined to „play[] its own game" (Postmodern Condition 40). Following Lyotard, there is a multitude of language games which are both heteromorphous and incommensurable. „[S]ubject[ed] to heterogeneous sets of pragmatic rules," language games cannot be subsumed under a consensus, which is incapable of including the „totality of metaprescriptives" in the first place, without the exercise of some form of „terror" (65-6; Answering 81). Developing and setting up this position against Jürgen Habermas' theorization of a „universal consensus" achieved by the means of Diskurs, Lyotard considers the striving for an overarching consensus as linked to the collapse of the „metanarratives" of modernity and thus defunct. The price to pay for an „illusion" such as this is too high to sustain the means in question.

The Lyotardian „postmodern" model of legitimation, by contrast, revolves around the concept of plural, local, and immanent petits récits, i. e. little narratives in a given culture which are legitimated „by the simple fact that they do what they do." The model

advances the conceptualization of „paralogy" to legitimize „postmodern" science in its production of „the unknown" (Postmodern Condition 60, 23). Rejecting any notion of a meta-model, „paralogy" stresses the search for dissents and testifies to differences (66). The concept which evokes an understanding of „faulty or deliberately contradictory reasoning" is part of Lyotard's approach to transform the structure of „reason" itself (Connor 34). As a core principle of „postmodern" knowledge, it heightens thereby the capability to „tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard, Postmodern Condition xxv). At stake in the Lyotardian quest for „paralogy" is the recognition of the heterogeneity of language games. Any consensus--contradicting Habermasian thinking--on the rules of a language game has to be understood as „local" and a mere „stage" in a dialogue, but not as its end (66) which is captured by the conceptualization of „paralogy."

„Paralogy" as a model of legitimation opposes the criterion of performance improvement. Operating as „a kind of legitimation" for the technical language game, the latter gains more and more dominance in science--and beyond--today (46-7; Answering 76-7; „Post-" 103). „Truth" and „Justice" have stopped to serve as its criteria and are replaced by performativity and efficiency, the guiding principles to maximize the output while minimizing the input (Postmodern Condition 44). The goal inherent in this development is „power" which assumes a self-legitimating status by legitimating science and the law on the grounds of the latter's efficiency and this very efficiency on the basis of the law and science (46-7). As a consequence, the status of science towards technology is shifting in a way that dominance is given to the latter. Furthermore, the condition of knowledge has been profoundly changed (4), it no longer bears any adherence to notions of „Truth" or to those of immanence and locality. Beyond the realm of science, the criteria of efficiency and performativity are „forced" on other language games, transforming „language" itself into a „productive commodity" and the means of „terror" are used (46; Lyotard, Svelte Appendix 27-8).

Concerning Lyotard's thinking, it seems to be important to heighten our awareness of his conceptualization of the term „postmodernism" which he himself used in the book focused on above and with which he has been credited ever since. In a lecture given years later, Lyotard pointed out that he had merely made use of the term in a „provocative way to put the struggle in the foreground of the field of knowledge" (Re-

Writing 8). In attempts to clarify what he then refers to as an „honorable postmodernity"
(Differend xiii), Lyotard stresses that his conceptualization neither appeals to a notion of
a linear temporal sequence according to which „postmodernity" follows „modernity,"
treating the two as „clear-cut historical entities" (Re-Writing 3) nor to a mode of an
„anything goes" eclecticism of the kind he perceives the architect Charles Jencks
advancing (Answering 76). For Lyotard, „post-modernity"--not clearly distinguishing the
term from „postmodernism"--is marked by „a whole range, a whole series of hypotheses
. . ., many possible readings of the contemporary world," implying „resistance." (Which
Resists 414) It is a „re-writing of modernity," carrying with it the sense of „resistance,"
which is considered to have always been at stake in modernity (Re-Writing 8). Put in
other words, „post-modernity" is „a promise with which modernity is pregnant definitely
and endlessly" (4) to the extent that modernity „presupposes a compulsion to get out of
itself and to resolve itself," striving for a „final equilibrium," for instance, in the form of a
„utopian order."

Lyotard's clarification of his use of the term „postmodernism" goes beyond a more
precise elaboration on the problem area in question by reversing some of its aspects. The
term „postmodern" is, for example, at least to a certain extent freed from the opposing
binary construction it formed with „modern," which bore much more than temporal
notions, by locating the former as part of the latter. Overall the (revised) Lyotardian
conceptualization resembles more Andreas Huyssen's notion of a „postmodernism of
resistance," rejecting an „easy postmodernism of the 'anything goes' variety" and
abandoning the dichotomy of aesthetics and politics (Huyssen 52), than Andrew Ross'
call for an appropriation and redefinition of „postmodernism" in its „profusion of
meanings" dependent on particular contexts and purposes (Ross xi).

Lyotard's „philosophical" approaches touched upon above offer ways to social
analysis as well as the prospect of social criticism. In The Postmodern Condition, he
draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's conceptualization of language games as „bring[ing] into
prominence the fact that the speaking of language is a part of an activity, or of a form of
life" (Wittgenstein § 23). Since the Lyotardian critique of „metanarratives" entails a
significant move away from the metaphysics of the subject, in which the notion of
humanity as a collective and universal subject is rejected, a different approach to the

questions of subjectivity and the social is necessary--and wanted (<u>Postmodern Condition</u> 66; <u>Answering</u> 73). The Lyotardian concept of an „agonistics of language," based on an understanding of speaking as „fight[ing] in the sense of playing" of language games, is paired with the conceptualization of „observable social bonds" as constituted by language „moves" as part of language games (<u>Postmodern Condition</u> 10-1). Following the crisis and collapse of „metanarratives," contemporary sociality is characterized by dispersed „clouds of narrative language elements" and a multitude of language games (xxiv).

The political project going along with social criticism entails a safeguarding of the very heterogeneity and incommensurability of language games. Following Lyotard, „a war" need to be wage[d] on totality" which is seen at work, for instance, in a universal and unified subject and consensus (<u>Answering</u> 82). Applying his conceptualization of „paralogy" from the realm of science to the one of sociality, Lyotard puts an emphasis on the need to „assume responsibility for the rules and effects" of language games and to validate the rules in question by the means of „paralogy," securing difference and preventing the emergence and spread of „terror" (66). An approach such as this goes beyond a traditional conceptualization of the political. Perceiving „politics" in itself as „defeated," for instance, in a Marxist and non-Marxist sense of capturing the political sphere of the State, the French philosopher advance a conceptualization of bearing witness to and activating differences by „resistance"-bearing „writing" in its „strong and broadest sense" (<u>Which Resists</u> 416; <u>Answering</u> 82).

In his conceptualization of subjectivity, Lyotard grasps the „self" as something which is „in each moment transitory" (Reijen 310). In an approach which makes use of the terminology of system theory, the „self" is not referred to as „an island," but as „exist[ing] in a fabric of relations" and thus more mobile and complex in nature than ever before (Lyotard, <u>Postmodern Condition</u> 15). Both „man" and „woman" are situated at „'nodal points' of specific communication circuits." They are positioned by the effects of language games as sender, addressee or referent in a multiplicity of ways and as such never „entirely powerless." „Not woven with a single thread," the social bonds are formed by at least two, in most of the cases even more, language games (40). Though Lyotard does not claim that the social in its „entirety" is composed of language games, they are seen as the „minimum relation" which is necessary for the former's „exist[ence]"

(15). Furthermore, the province of „a pragmatics of language particles" is portrayed as the dominant realm concerning any approach to contemporary and future sociality (xxiv).

In The Differend. Phrases in Dispute, Lyotard tries to clarify and lay out his approach in a way that avoids some of the fallacies and problems posed in his earlier work. To do so, he moves from the model of language games to the one of „phrases" (xii-i). Basing his argument on the hypothesis that „there are phrases" (Which Resists 405) defended by the argument that they are--even in the phrasing of a doubt about their existence--„immediately presupposed," Lyotard conceptualizes a „phrase" as constituted in accordance with a set of rules called its „regimen" (Differend xi-i). A „phrase" of a specific „regimen" cannot be translated into another „phrase," if the latter is not of the same „regimen" as the former. However, the two can--and have to be, since there is no „non-phrase" and it simply must „happen"--linked onto one another according to a „genre of discourse" which is to be established. This linking proves to be problematic and to assume the form of a conflict which cannot be avoided, since there is no „universal genre of discourse," which could serve as a means to regulate it. The legitimacy of one side of the two or more „phrases in dispute" does not entail the lack of legitimacy of the other side (or sides). Lyotard conceptualizes the conflict concerned as a „differend" (xi).

An approach such as this enables the French philosopher to dispel any notion of „intentionality" on the part of the subject, as is still the case with the „player" of a language game. The latter is now situated in the universes presented by phrases 'before' any intention (Lyotard 17). The „I" and „we" are „immersed in 'language'" and oriented by „phrases" (Which Resists 408). In a phrase, the „I" is given a „proper name," which is not to be understood as a „subjectivity." It is rather an identity „around which many phrases come and go" (410). „Language," therefore, is not a „human creation" with a „human being" endowed with it, but „man," the „we" as well as the „I" are a „creation of language." (409; Différend, Referent 4). Following the consequences of his thinking, Lyotard, rejects the very existence and notion of an „actor," replacing it with his concept of an „actuality of phrases." Neither the social nor the subject position, however, is all discursive, but they are marked by the universes of phrases which encompass a multitude of discursive as well as non-discursive ones, for example, „phrases of the body" (411).

Once working from a socialist-feminist perspective (Fraser, Practices 2; Nicholson, Feminism 54), Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson are among the more prominent American feminist philosophers and social theorist who joined the debates over Lyotardian thought and „postmodernism" in the early and mid-1980s. In their theorizations, Nicholson and Fraser attempt to take a first decisive step in an „encounter" between „feminism" and „postmodernism," identifying the French philosopher with this „current" based on his elaborations on what is perceived as „postmodernism's" cherished positions, i. e. the „end of metanarratives," the question of legitimization, and finally, the overall critique of any „meta"-dimension of concepts and discourses (Fraser and Nicholson 242-4). What is seen to be at stake in staging this „encounter" is revealed by their choice of the term „postmodernist feminism," which is not be equated with „[New] French Feminisms," i. e. the writings of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, among others, for which the term was originally used (Tong 217). Perceiving „many points of overlap" between the two „currents" in question (Nicholson, Introduction 5), Fraser and Nicholson's perspective of a „postmodernist feminism" aims at encompassing the supposed strengths of „postmodernism" and „feminism" which are seen as supplementing one another, while ridding itself of the two „currents'" respective weaknesses (Fraser and Nicholson 243). „Postmodernism"--in a critically reread version--functions in a sense as an „imperative" to develop new theoretical paradigms, following the „linguistic turn," in order to arrive at a version of „social criticism without philosophy" (Fraser, Wende 145; Antithesis 170) which is intended to serve both the ends and means of a feminist project. In its broadest sense, the latter, according to Fraser and Nicholson, can be seen as leading to an accomplishing of women's liberation and emancipation.

Nicholson and Fraser perceive Lyotard's thinking to a certain extent as fruitful for their own theorization, since his approaches present a „deep and far-reaching criticism of the institution of philosophy" entailing and leading to a project of social criticism which rejects the underpinnings of traditional philosophy (Fraser and Nicholson 242-3). This point of overlap between feminist and Lyotardian thinking stems from the latter's „anti-foundationalist" perspective which is identified as having been placed at the core of his hypothesis of the end of legitimating „metanarratives."

The two American feminist theorists, however, criticize Lyotard's approach for still granting the term „philosophy" a „structural privilege" over social criticism and political practice despite its devaluing of „philosophy" and its inherent claim to

conceptualize a form of „social criticism without philosophy." „Philosophy" is used as the starting point of the entire project guided by a rather unspecified „metapolitical commitment . . . to anti-totalitarianism" (249). Thus the approach is marked by „political naivete," leading to an ignorance towards the needs of political practice and social criticism (243-4). Furthermore and adding to this particular weakness, the Lyotardian conceptualization of an alternative source of legitimation and its emphasis on „petit récits" has to be seen as incoherent and inconsistent. Even in Lyotard's project there is a necessity to develop a mode of social criticism which transcends the local, plural, and immanent little narratives in order to counter the analyzed, increasing dominance of the technical language game and its legitimating criteria of performativity and efficiency which threaten to transform the condition of knowledge as well as the social. To make a claim such as this, Lyotard himself has to rely on a „normative judgment" and is thereby contradicting his rejection of this very step (247). Finally, the Lyotardian farewell to the legitimizing „metanarrative" and „foundationalist philosophy" takes, as is argued by Nicholson and Fraser, the entire project a step too far by excluding genres of social criticism perceived as needed by „feminism"--most of all those capable of identifying macrostructures of inequality like the subordination of women--and still not necessarily grounded in „philosophy" (257, 247). The abandonment of „social theory" which is seen as the most decisive weakness leads the two American feminist theorists further away from Lyotardian thinking.

Interpreting the Lyotardian approach, in sum, as a „weak and inadequate conception of social criticism without philosophy" (257), Fraser and Nicholson advance their own theorizations, partially making use by the former's thought, but shutting core positions out. Committed to an „anti-foundationalism," they develop „robust" versions of social criticism which do not rid themselves of their „social-critical force" (243). The two feminist theorists' approach of a „social criticism without philosophy"--regarding „philosophy" as an „ahistorical, transcendental discourse claiming to articulate the criteria of validity for all other discourses" (Fraser, Antithesis 170)--takes the „subordination of women to and by men" as its starting point and its social object to be analyzed. As a result, the project is thought to be grounded in a critical political perspective and thus opposing the Lyotardian privileging of philosophy. An approach

such as Fraser and Nicholson's opens up various roads to the different genres of social criticism foreclosed by Lyotardian „postmodernism" (249). The use of „large narratives about changes in social organization and ideology" and „institutional analysis of cultural production" as well as „normative theories of justice," for instance, does not only become possible, but is regarded as indispensable for an adequate social analysis and criticism of the complex and multi-layered phenomena of male dominance and female subordination. The prospect of developing „emancipatory alternatives" entailing „normative judgments" and following the feminist commitment to „liberatory politics" is not abandoned and has not fallen prey to a theoretical and practical perspective of an „anything goes" (Fraser, Antithesis 175).

Nicholson and Fraser's theorizations retain the very notion and concept of „criticism" and „critique," grasping the latter as both „situated and amenable to self-reflection," radical as well as „subject to warrants" (175), and placing it in their overall perspective of a „carefully constructed" „postmodern[ist] feminism" (Nicholson, Introduction 9). „Criticism" therefore is in no need for „philosophy," since it assumes the form of a „contextualizing historical narrative" which „genealogizes" norms and values, situating them in a more exact way (Fraser, Antithesis 170). Conceptualized as „pragmatic and fallibilistic," the Nicholsonian and Fraserian perspective seeks to remain rooted in its criticism of „foundationalism." To move away from any „foundationalist" grounding, the methods and theoretical as well as practical political approaches deployed are culturally and historically specific, each of which is only developed for a particular task, and thus avoid any universalistic appeal, replacing it by an emphasis on a comparativist perspective (Fraser and Nicholson 258). In this respect, the „smaller" narratives and rather „non-theoretical" approaches also counteract the distorting aspects of the „larger" and „theoretical" ones--and vice versa--arriving at fruitful middle grounds (Fraser, Antithesis 168).

The „anti-foundationalism" placed at the core the Nicholsonian and Fraserian perspective of a „postmodernist feminism" is used as the main approach in an attempt to abandon one of the supposed weaknesses of many feminisms and by doing so, to dismiss the metaphysically grounded claim of a „single feminist theory or method," hindering contemporary feminist theorizations (258). What is seen at work in older as well as more recent feminist writings is a grounding in „quasi-metanarratives" (250), i. e. „very large social theories," for instance, construed to analyze sexism based on premises of cross-

culturally valid „natures" of human beings and social conditions, thus ignoring the historical context of the latter and their cultural as well as regional specificity. The persistence of these lines of „foundationalism" are, according to Fraser and Nicholson, disabling for its unawareness of difference between women of different ethnicity/races, classes, and sexual orientations, among others, therefore impeding „sisterhood" and feminist alliances with „other progressive movements" due to its insistence on „an essential definition" (243, 257, 259). The Fraserian and Nicholsonian fallibilistic and pragmatic perspective, by contrast, takes difference as a decisive aspect into account without merely celebrating it „for its own sake" and dismissing all lines of communality among women. Thus, the forms of inquiry offered by „postmodernist feminism" seem to speak to the problems and forms of feminist political practices in useful ways (Nicholson, Introduction 10; Fraser and Nicholson 259).

Criticizing the Lyotardian approaches to „philosophy" and „foundationalism," Nicholson and Fraser extend their criticism to the French philosopher's conceptualization of sociality which is closely linked with his „anti-foundationalism." Embedded in nontotalizable and heterogeneous notions, it proves to be incapable of deploying categories of social analysis such as gender in a fruitful way and accounting sufficiently on the subject of feminist theorizations, i. e. „woman" (Fraser and Nicholson 247). Repudiating a stance that the category „woman" is unavoidably too reductive and thus has to be given up, the two American feminist theorists elaborate on a conceptualization which does reject „woman" as well as „feminine gender identity" as universal and unified categories, but advances an approach which encompasses a plurality and complexity of social identities. Not privileging gender, it rather locates the concept in its intersections with race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, among others (258). As a non-universalistic category, „woman" is still considered to be useful and necessary in order to advance „generalizing claims about 'women'," which, according to the overall fallibilistic and pragmatic theorizations, always have to be subject to revision (Fraser, Antithesis 174-5). What is seen to be at stake is not a mere „deconstruction," but also a „reconstruction" of „woman," offering a project of „utopian hope" (175). To do so, the category has to be „genealogized," i. e., following Fraser and Nicholson, like the norms deployed in the perspective „framed by a historical narrative and rendered temporally and

culturally specific" (Nicholson, <u>Feminism</u> 66). To think „woman" as a cultural construction, however, does not entail a sense of powerlessness on the part of the subject referred to. In regard to its subjectivity, „woman," by contrast, is and has to be seen as „endowed with critical capacities" (Fraser, <u>Antithesis</u> 175).

In essays published after outlining their „postmodern-feminist" project, both Fraser and Nicholson consider approaches to theories of language as advanced by the later Wittgenstein and American pragmatism as compatible with their readings of „postmodernism" and useful for their feminist theorizations (63, 69; Fraser, <u>Discourse Theory</u> 191). Among others and taking the approach touched upon above a step further, a pragmatic theory of discourse is seen as offering ways to an adequate analysis of the formation and shifting of social identities in their complexity and plurality (178). Conceptualized as a „set of historically situated practices," „language" allows a linkage between the study of discourse and society (Nicholson, <u>Feminism</u> 63-4). In maintaining the category „woman," Fraser stresses that „no one is simply a woman" and „not always . . . to the same degree" due to the subject's acting according to various „set[s] of descriptions" in multi-layered social contexts (<u>Discourse Theory</u> 178). By doing so, she rejects a unified and universalistic notion of gender identity and „woman," thus opening up a much broader field for feminist analysis and politics by rethinking social identities as complex, changing and discursively constructed. Combined with larger narratives of structural analysis of the political economy and institutions, the appropriation of a reread version of a pragmatic language philosophy and discourse theory proves, following Nicholson and Fraser, to be fruitful for the „postmodern feminism" at stake in their project (Fraser, <u>Wende</u> 148-9).

Having outlined crucial aspects of the Fraserian and Nicholsonian project of a „postmodernist feminism," which appropriates, but mostly rejects aspects of Lyotardian thought, I would like to undertake a closer critical examination of the problem area in question in order to grasp the prospects and flaws of their „perspective" as well as the contributions and difficulties with Lyotardian thinking.

In their conceptual and theoretical efforts to take the first steps in an „encounter" between „feminism" and „postmodernism," Fraser and Nicholson conflate approaches of

Lyotard as presented in his work <u>The Postmodern Condition</u> with „postmodernism" in its entirety. To do so ignores the multiplicity of „currents" termed „postmodern," since Lyotardian thinking does not represent all of „postmodernism" (Butler, <u>Foundations</u> 151). Forced under a single „paradigmatic designator," the very aspect of difference on which the „currents" in question insist is occluded (Singer 464). Furthermore, the attempts by the French philosopher to clarify--and partially modify--his position and draw boundaries towards those postmodernisms forwarding a notion of an „anything goes" are not sufficiently taken into account. Even if the ends and means of feminist theorizations have to be taken into account first and foremost in the project concerned, rendering a--if at all possible--clear-cut distinction between „modern" and „postmodern" less important (Nicholson, <u>Introduction</u> 16), a rereading of Lyotard such as this forecloses other ways of making use of his thinking. His conceptualization of „resistance" in the attempt to „re-write" modernity, for instance, could be fruitfully rethought for the perspective in question and in a more basic way, the form of the „encounter" more critically thought through.

To shift the focus to the other „current" in the „encounter" in question, „feminism," does not lessen the problems in grasping a term, its meaning as well as its deployment. A rudimentary definition of „feminism" and „feminist," acceptable to Fraser and Nicholson, might be the one given by Rosalind Delmar which refers to a feminist as „someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change . . . in the social, economic and political order" (5). Beyond this, it proves to be extremely difficult--if not impossible--to come up with any common definition which could be shared by feminists due to the plurality and fragmentation of contemporary „feminism" both in theory and practice. This does not mean that a drive for a „single feminist method" or a „single feminism" should be at stake again. To secure the multiplicity of feminisms is a crucial step in any feminist project trying to avoid discrimination against members of its own constituency. However, as far as the Fraserian and Nicholsonian project is concerned, it remains necessary to discriminate between what does and what does not belong to feminist approaches.

In staging an „encounter" between „feminism" and „postmodernism," the two terms working as „textual designators" depend on some criteria of exclusion as well as inclusion to be credible and useful (Singer 464). Since both of them also function as

„forms or contexts for social production and exchange," leaving--as indicated above--the two signifiers, their scope as well as apparatus open to revision (465), a theorization of a „perspective" which seeks to conjoin the two „currents" becomes a questionable endeavor. In this respect, it is striking that Fraser and Nicholson aim to develop their „postmodernist feminism" as a perspective, which combines the strengths of the two „currents," while ruling out their supposed weakness--thus framing, borrowing a term from Linda Singer, a „lock-step symmetry" (471). Besides oversimplifying the whole picture, a „symmetry" such as this does violence to various aspects at stake in both „currents"--even in Lyotardian thought per se--by simply precluding them. A mere resemblance in targeting the discourses of traditional Western „philosophy" as well as traditional hegemonic authorities and partially in regard to their origins in the (counter)cultural practices of the 1960s speaks more in favor of a „cross-fertilization," thematic interplay, and strategic engagement between the two „currents" than a perspective, integrating the two by following a „paradigmatic protocol of linkage" (465, 475). Furthermore, the notion of an „alliance" working more in support of the latter seems to be too vague to bear any illuminating insight into the „encounter" in question. As discourses of resistance, evoking difference and being permanently reworked and revised, feminisms and postmodernisms cannot be rethought as clear-cut dogmatic forms serving as the necessary basis for a formal linkage.

In their attempts at outlining a „postmodernist feminism," Fraser and Nicholson resist merely applying ready-made concepts of Lyotardian thinking considered fruitful to their feminist project--vaguely defended as such by an emphasis on „liberatory politics" for women, encompassing a drive for „emancipatory alternatives." Since Lyotardian thought cannot be referred to as overall „feminist" per definitionem--only in his better-known piece on „women's struggle" does he ponder over the subordination of women, assuming, however, the position of a phallocratic philosopher he attempts to criticize in the first place by showing „women" „one of the things at stake" in their struggle and not concerning himself with conceptualizing change--it is rethought, for the most part dismissed, but partially appropriated according to the specific ends and needs of the project. The Fraserian and Nicholsonian approaches entail, for example, a rethought version of the Lyotardian coinage of „metanarrative" in form of the conceptual tool of „quasi-metanarratives." By rewriting this tune of androcentric thought, the two feminist theorists still place themselves in the problematic feminist tradition of transforming

androcentric frameworks as practiced with the multitude of Marxisms, leaving feminisms with „no-win dilemmas" due to androcentric notions not completely ruled out (Harding 649). In other respects, however, their theorizations go beyond a rewriting such as this, evoking a fallibilistic as well as pragmatic approach and embracing the instability of categories and concepts as a chance and not an impasse of feminist theorizing.

Focusing on the means to criticize other feminisms offered by the „anti-foundationalism" of the Fraserian and Nicholsonian „postmodernist feminism," I would argue that a rethought line of Lyotardian thought and criticism of „philosophy" appears nevertheless to be fruitful. The use of supposed universal and cross-culturally valid claims about social conditions, notions of subjectivity, and norms can be dismantled and shown in their concealing of difference. At the same time, the Nicholsonian and Fraserian rejection of a rereading of Lyotardian thought as claiming the „end" of „metanarratives" of the Enlightenment, for example, has to be supported not only with respect to the foreclosing of forms of social criticism needed by feminist theorizations, but also in regard to incoherencies and contradictions not elaborated on by the two feminist theorists. As Ernesto Laclau convincingly points out, the very conceptualization of an „end" as realized in Lyotardian thought merely reproduces the modernist „logic of foundations" criticized by the latter (329). Even if Lyotard would repudiate the latter's labeling as „modernist" due to his close linkage of the „modern" and „postmodern" in articles following his Postmodern Condition, the claiming or stating of an „end" is not theoretically sound given the maxims of his approaches, since he ends up being caught in what resembles the establishment of a „metanarrative" of his own. However, problems predominantly concerning the question of adequacy for a feminist project remain with the Nicholsonian and Fraserian alternative as will be shown below.

In his later writings, however, Lyotard also goes beyond the concept of an „end" himself, stressing a notion of „shifting," while dismissing the one of a monolithic „state," and places his thinking more explicitly in the realm of „modernity." Nevertheless, his main emphasis on the incommensurability of heteromorphous language games and--in his later work The Differend, the heterogeneity of „phrases"--which are not to be subordinated to the ends of a consensus going along with a broader ethical stance such as the project of an „emancipation of women" remains unaltered. Arguing from a

position based on critical theory and displaying aspects of the „Habermas-Lyotard-debate," the feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib criticizes the French philosopher for his conceptualization of the „agonistics" of language and the paralogistic approach to legitimation, since they either lead to a „polytheism of values" or to a privileging of „one domain of discourse and knowledge" over other domains, contradicting the Lyotardian striving for difference and against universal norms (Rejoinder 113). In both cases--either relativist or inconsistent--a distinction between performativity and emancipation is seen as not possible. Furthermore, the Lyotardian approach does not differentiate between making a validity claim--which would, following Lyotard, only be possible in a local and context-specific way in the first place--and „forcing" someone to believe in the validity of some particular claim (114).

Concerning Benhabib's first charge, who is not willing to give up a „minimal criteria of validity" for political and theoretical practices, the Lyotardian radical anti-totalitarian perspective in fact rejects any notion of a „foundationalist" grounding. It acknowledges, however, the danger of currents gaining influence which are to be termed non-democratic or discriminatory against women according to criteria advanced by the kind of emancipatory stance favored by Benhabib. The principal means to counter moves of currents such as these are the Lyotardian political project of testifying to „difference." The charge of relativism, therefore, is not fully convincing. A direction following some normative grounding cannot be given, in fact is regarded as a use of „force" in itself, but the approach still proves to be capable of counteracting totalizing tendencies, partially matching those referred to as anti-feminist.

In regard to the second charge, Lyotardian thought does not ignore the problem of power and force. The language games are, for example, understood as being threatened in their incommensurabiltiy and heterogeneity by the performance criterion in contemporary society. However, Lyotard's perspective--even if it enhances a conception of „resistance"--is incapable of going all the way in a complex analysis of coercion and power, leaving out various dimensions to be analyzed and the problematic unsettled.

In developing their project of a „postmodernist feminism," Nicholson and Fraser do not follow Lyotard all the way in his conceptualization of incommensurable and heteromorphous language games and rejection of any normative notion and „theoretical" endeavor. Their advancing of „larger narratives" of social criticism, still not assuming a „foundationalist" grounding due to the counteracting tendencies of smaller narratives

also deployed and their overall fallibilistic and paradigmatic approach, answers the need for an „adequate" analysis of the realms of the economy and state institutions and sheds light on the question of justice not sufficiently tackled in Lyotardian thought.

Concerns about the Nicholsonian and Fraserian version of a „social criticism without philosophy," however, have to be raised in regard to the feminist commitment to „emancipation" and „radical social change." Benhabib, for example, perceives any „social criticism without philosophy" as not „possible" (Uneasy Alliance 143). Instead of debunking any notion of „foundationalism," which would render the „emancipatory interest" of women „inconceivable," political engagement incoherent, and abandon a utopian projection, she insists on a grounding of feminist social criticism in a „foundationalist philosophy" committed to critical self-reflection (143, 147). „Situated social criticism" as advanced by Fraser and Nicholson has to make use of „immanent" criteria of legitimation which are, however, not available in a coherent and non-conflictual set in a given culture and thus need to be construed according to some normative principles (146). As Fraser herself points out, Benhabib does approach the Fraserian and Nicholsonian project by construing a „false antithesis" (Antithesis, 170). A commitment to „anti-foundationalism" neither precludes social criticism nor political practice. The „postmodernist feminism" advanced here does not exclude larger narratives which make normative claims, for example, about justice. „Situated criticism" itself, and thereby deploying another version thereof than Benhabib, does not reject an appeal to a normative perspective, but perceives the latter as „situated." It is in need--and so is any critical self-reflection on it--to be located and analyzed in its specific historical, social, and cultural context.

What remains problematic, however, is the question of the distinction between what can and cannot be regarded as „adequate" and useful for the „postmodern-feminist" approach in question. With no „rules" given, the boundary has to be a floating one. Considering the rereading of Lyotardian thought as „anti-foundationalist," allowing the development of categories such as the one of „quasi-metanarrative," the problematic concerned also stems from the Lyotardian oeuvre per se, demonstrating the possible fallacies of an appropriation of androcentric thought. Nevertheless, the impossibility to clearly discriminate methods and categories working to anti-feminist ends from those working to feminist ones, does not have to be seen as an impasse of the entire project. An embracing of instability, e.g. of categories and concept, as the result of the

paradigmatic and fallibilistic approach can also be read as a chance to avoid the mere appropriation and rethinking of androcentric thought and the totalizing aspect of feminist theorizing.

Reconsidering finally the question of the subject and category of feminist discourses and theorizations, „woman" or „women," it may be fruitful to start by focusing on Rosalind Delmar's dictum of „women" as „feminism[s'] greatest problem" (21). It indicates the insufficiency of the category „woman" to grasp the multitude of meanings and contents contemporarily ascribed to it, rendering it too incoherent to serve as a unified and unifying category and thus raising far-reaching questions of its applicability in feminist theorizations. Lyotardian thought with its move away from the universal subject, stressing the transitory nature of the self in the light of their being positioned by the effects of language games, can inform a reconceptualization of feminisms' most crucial category to the extent that „women" as the „hidden companion" of „universal man" is dissolved. Fraser and Nicholson's „postmodernist feminism" reflects this implication of Lyotardian thought by attempting to conceptualize categories of „woman" and „feminine gender identity" as plural and complex and neither universally nor „foundationally" grounded.

Most explicitly developed in his conceptualization of „phrases," orienting the „I" and their being „in dispute" with one another, expressing the determination of the „self" by antagonisms, Lyotardian thought, however, does reject key features of feminist theorizations, most of all the conceptualization of a subjectivity which distinguishes between „woman" and „man." The very lack thereof neither allows for analyzing differences between the two as well as elements of discrimination nor for thinking through the subject „woman" as endowed with critical capacities. Therefore, the Nicholsonian and Fraserian debunking of these aspects of Lyotard's approaches becomes a necessary requirement for the safeguarding of central features of feminisms, preventing their „postmodernist feminism" from sliding into a „postfeminism." They are able to show that pragmatic theories of discourse, which partially overlap with the contexts of Lyotard's own work, can still inform feminist thinking, letting it accept a critique of „foundationalism" without giving up core categories.

Lyotardian thought, nevertheless, still offers possibilities to inform „postmodern-feminist" theorizations. Instead of proceeding in the direction of a „great beyond" concerning the „difference between sexes" as advocated in Lyotard's <u>One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles</u>, it may be more fruitful to focus on the Lyotardian concept of the „differend." Being one of the paradoxes of many feminisms, the difference between the sexes is both embraced--to formulate political claims towards the male-centered heterosexist hegemonic regime and to form identities, allowing at least some sort of feminist alliances--and attacked--as the basis of the discrimination and exclusion of women. Thinking through it, borrowing from an impulse by Bill Readings, as imposing a „differend" (xxvi), it becomes possible to testify to the difference between the sexes, while conceptualizing it not as something „true," unchangeable, and monolithic, but constructed and marked by dispute and force. An approach such as this does not seek to overcome difference, but to be able to acknowledge it and the „impossibility and necessity of exchange" around a „differend" „over which no agreement can be reached." By doing so, it becomes possible to open up alternative approaches to reconceptualize difference which leave the heterosexist matrix to be freed in a multiplicity of alternative imaginaries.

The Nicholsonian and Fraserian approach of ruling out universally and „foundationally" grounded conceptualizations of the categories „woman" and „feminine gender identity" by „genealogizing" them and opening them to a plurality and complexity achieved by their fallibilistic and paradigmatic theorizing does avoid fallacies of other feminist currents, but does little to analyze the „foundational" notion of a unified self and universal subject, which is still at work at the basis of androcentric theorizing. In this regard, theoretical approaches advanced by the feminist scholar Judith Butler prove to be fruitful, shedding new light on the problem area in question. Without rejecting the notion of the subject, but also not taking it as its very point of departure, Butler interprets it as produced by a matrix of power and discourse which are part of the specific social relations in a given culture and society, opening up new perspectives to think about the problematic of power (<u>Foundations</u> 155-7). The constitution of the subject takes place by differential and exclusionary means--an interpretation partially overlapping with the Lyotardian conceptualization of an „outside" as securing the dominance of a category or principle--which are concealed by notions of „autonomy." As a consequence, no so-called unified and universal subject is ever completely constituted, indicating the

direction for a subversive practice. Butlerian thought, using this analysis to the ends of a feminist project, aims at relieving the notion of a subject of its „foundationalist" weight by reconceptualizing its production as not foreclosing future „claims for inclusion," but as permanently open, contingent, and contested (154).

The Nicholsonian and Fraserian fallibilistic and paradigmatic conceptualization of the category „woman" which places the latter in its cultural and historical context will still encounter resistance by parts of the constituencies referred to, since „woman"--as an „identity category"--does not only function in a descriptive, but also in a normative way, thus also by exclusionary means (159-60). Going a step beyond the Nicholsonian and Fraserian approach, Butler, also not willing to announce the „death" of the subject „woman," elevates a conceptualization that designates it as a „site of permanent openness and resignifiability." Unlike Fraser and Nicholson and more like the Lyotardian claim to activate and testify to difference, Butler wants to preclude any set of norms from pinning down what is an „adequate" „resignification" of the „woman" and what is not. Only an unconstrained use of the category is capable of expressing, following Butler, the „radical democratic impetus of feminist politics"(161).

To conceptualize an instability of categories, including the one of „woman," as part of feminist projects can work against androcentric notions still inherent in rethought frameworks of Western philosophy, including Marxist and deconstructionist currents. However, a releasing of „woman" „into a future of multiple significations" as advocated in the Butlerian approach cannot--in fact explicitly rejects to--foreclose the possibility of its being carried out to non-feminist ends (161), which is still an issue in the Fraserian-Nicholsonian approach. Furthermore, a move such as this also bears, as Fraser rightfully points out, some normative notion by giving the very process of „resignification" a positive charge and privileging some theories of subjectivity over others (Antithesis 172-3), putting her strong anti-normative stance in question. Given these objections, it seems to be fruitful to attempt to integrate Butlerian thought in the theorizations of Fraser and Nicholson, finding a way to account on normative notions which--accepted by Butler (Lesen 131)--cannot be avoided at least in regard to the necessary formulation of political aims, while avoiding exclusion.

Focusing on a perspective for a feminist project that makes use of the intersections between feminist theorizations and political practices on the one hand and Lyotardian „postmodernist" thinking on the other reveals a wide variety of prospectives ranging from fruitful approaches to crucial impasses. What is not at stake is some sort of a „lock-step symmetry" between feminisms and postmodernisms--not even with Lyotardian thought alone--due to the radical fluidity and changing nature of the currents in question which can be seen as discourses of resistance. What appears fruitful is the perspective of a „cross-fertilization" and „strategic engagement," embracing a critical and partial informing of feminist projects by Lyotardian thought--and vice versa.

The Fraserian and Nicholsonian project of a „postmodernist feminism" is based on some questionable premises, among others, a misconstrued equation of Lyotardian thought and postmodernisms as well as an appeal to a--however paradigmatic--„protocol of linkage" between the two currents in question. Nevertheless, their approaches have much to offer in further attempts to approach „encounters" between feminisms and postmodernisms.

Hardly to be underestimated, the „anti-foundationalism" of Lyotardian thought informs feminist theorizations, working in the direction of the latter's weariness towards philosophy and „foundational" groundings of categories, concepts, and methods of social theory and criticism. The Fraserian and Nicholsonian theorization of „social criticism without philosophy," advancing instead a fallibilistic and paradigmatic approach, retains both local and immanent small narratives as well as larger narratives, enhancing some normative perspective of „situated criticism" which is constantly subject of being rethought. By doing so, they reject the universe of phrases or--at an earlier point in his work--language games and their heterogeneity and incommensurability in Lyotardian thought, which remains problematic as far as its shortcomings for a political practice and an analysis of power are concerned. Nevertheless, Lyotardian thinking can fruitfully inform feminist projects in ways missed by Fraser and Nicholson, among others, in regard to the former's conceptualization of „resistance" and the „differend."

Approaches to and implications for the core category and subject of feminisms, „woman," reveal further problems of Lyotardian „postmodern" thinking for feminist theorizations. The former can fruitfully inform a move away from the notion of the universal and unified subject „woman" as hidden companion of universal „man." Yet, the dispersal of the subject in the universe of phrases appears to be insufficient for an

analysis which aims at tackling discrimination on the basis of gender and advancing feminist political perspectives. The Fraserian and Nicholsonian conceptualization informed by an overall „anti-foundationalist" approach embraces a rethinking of the category in question without dismissing it. Their „genealogizing" and placing of „woman" in specific cultural, social, and historical settings appears to be a fruitful step in the direction of pursuing solutions to a crucial problematic of the contemporary feminist movements. Their approach, however, still bears exclusionary means, leading to other conflicts and blocking a further fruitful openness and instability of the term which could be secured by rethinking the Butlerian conceptualization of a „site of permanent openness and resignifiability."

The paper poses far more questions and problems than it attempts to discuss and answer. Having tried to problematize the very notions of „feminism" and „postmodernism," I also perceive it as necessary to do so with the term „philosophy," the multi-layered traditions of the discipline referred to by it and its conceptual frameworks as well as different deployments. It does not seem unlikely that the traditions in question have more to offer than what is labeled and attacked as „foundationalism." In regard to the Lyotardian oeuvre which is itself changing and fluid it might be fruitful to consider the announced--yet still unpublished--sequel to his work <u>The Differend</u> (Bayard 302) dealing with the „body" and „language" for its potential to shed new light on the Lyotardian conceptualization of subjectivity. Finally, two core problem areas need to be discussed (further), both informing key questions and problematics dealt with in this paper, i. e. the one of justice and the one of power.

Despite its problems and inconsistencies, Lyotardian thought does have something to offer feminist theorizations. At stake, however, is not a „new" marriage of two major intellectual and academic „currents," but a careful and critical cross-fertilization and - informing which promises to be fruitful in dealing with contemporary problems of the many feminisms currently at work to realize radical change.

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