

## 5 | *Consciousness Raising*

I am a woman committed to  
a politics  
of transliteration, the methodology  
of a mind  
stunned at the suddenly  
possible shifts of meaning—for which  
like amnesiacs  
in a ward on fire, we must  
find words  
or burn.

—Olga Broumas, "Artemis"

. . . there is something else: the faith of those despised and  
endangered that they are not merely the sum of damages  
done to them.

—Adrienne Rich, "Sources"

**F**eminism is the first theory to emerge from those whose interest it affirms. Its method recapitulates as theory the reality it seeks to capture. As marxist method is dialectical materialism, feminist method is consciousness raising: the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it. Marxism and feminism on this level posit a different relation between thought and thing, both in terms of the relationship of the analysis itself to the social life it captures and in terms of the participation of thought in the social life it analyzes. To the extent that materialism is scientific it posits and refers to a reality outside thought which it considers to have an objective—that is, a nonsocially perspectival—content. Consciousness raising, by contrast, inquires into an intrinsically social situation, into that mixture of thought and materiality which comprises gender in the broadest sense. It approaches its world through a process that shares its determination: women's consciousness, not as individual or subjective ideas, but as

collective social being. This approach stands inside its own determinations in order to uncover them, just as it criticizes them in order to value them on its own terms—indeed, in order to have its own terms at all. Feminism turns theory itself, the pursuit of a true analysis of social life, into the pursuit of consciousness, and turns an analysis of inequality into a critical embrace of its own determinants. The process is transformative as well as perceptive, since thought and thing are inextricable and reciprocally constitutive of women's oppression, just as the state as coercion and the state as legitimating ideology are indistinguishable, and for the same reasons. The pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice.

Consciousness raising is the process through which the contemporary radical feminist analysis of the situation of women has been shaped and shared. As feminist method and practice, consciousness raising is not confined to groups explicitly organized or named for that purpose. In fact, consciousness raising as discussed here was often not practiced in consciousness-raising groups. Such groups were, however, one medium and forum central to its development as a method of analysis, mode of organizing, form of practice, and technique of political intervention. The characteristic structure, ethic, process, and approach to social change which mark such groups as a development in political theory and practice are integral to many of the substantive contributions of feminist theory. The key to feminist theory consists in its *way* of knowing. Consciousness raising is that way. "[An] oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself. All revolutionary movements create their own way of seeing."<sup>1</sup> One way to analyze feminism as a theory is to describe the process of consciousness raising as it occurred in consciousness-raising groups.

As constituted in the 1960s and 1970s, consciousness-raising groups were many women's first explicit contact with acknowledged feminism. Springing up spontaneously in the context of friendship networks, colleges and universities, women's centers, neighborhoods, churches, and shared work or workplaces, they were truly grassroots. Many aimed for diversity in age, marital status, occupation, education, physical ability, sexuality, race and ethnicity, class, or political views.

Others chose uniformity on the same bases. Some groups proceeded biographically, each woman presenting her life as she wished to tell it. Some moved topically, using subject focuses such as virginity crises, relations among women, mothers, body image, and early sexual experiences to orient discussion. Some read books and shared literature. Some addressed current urgencies as they arose, supporting women through difficult passages or encouraging them to confront situations they had avoided. Many developed a flexible combination of formats. Few could or wanted to stick to a topic if a member was falling apart, yet crises were seldom so clarifying or continuous as entirely to obviate the need for other focus.

Participants typically agreed on an ethic of openness, honesty, and self-awareness. If a member felt she could not discuss an intimate problem or felt coerced to do so, this was typically taken as a group failure. Other usual norms included a commitment to attend meetings and to keep information confidential. Although leadership patterns often emerged, and verbal and emotional skills recognizably varied, equality within the group was a goal that reflected a value of nonhierarchical organization and a commitment to confronting sources of inequality on the basis of which members felt subordinated or excluded.

What brought women to these groups is difficult to distinguish from what happened once they were there. As with any complex social interaction, from laboratory experiment to revolution, it is often difficult to separate the assumptions from the discoveries, the ripeness of conditions from the precipitating spark. Where does consciousness come from? The effectiveness of consciousness raising is difficult to apportion between the process itself and the women who choose to engage in it. The initial recruiting impulse seems to be a response to an unspecific, often unattached, but just barely submerged discontent that in some inchoate way women relate to being female. It has not escaped most women's attention that their femaleness defines much of who they can be. Restrictions, conflicting demands, intolerable but necessarily tolerated work, the accumulation of constant small irritations and indignities of everyday existence have often been justified on the basis of sex. Consciousness raising coheres and claims these impressions.

Feminists tend to believe that most if not all women resent women's

status on some level of their being; even women's defense of their status can be a response to that status. Why some women take the step of identifying their situation with their status as women, transforming their discontents into grievances, is a crucial unanswered question of feminism (or, for that matter, of marxism). What brings people to be conscious of their oppression as common rather than remaining on the level of bad feelings, to see their group identity as a systematic necessity that benefits another group, is the first question of organizing. The fact that consciousness-raising groups were there presupposes the discovery that they were there to make. But what may have begun as a working assumption becomes a working discovery: women are a group, in the sense that a shared reality of treatment exists sufficient to provide a basis for identification—at least enough to begin talking about it in a group of women. This often pre-articulate consensus shapes a procedure, the purpose of which becomes to unpack the concrete moment-to-moment meaning of being a woman in a society that men dominate, by looking at how women see their everyday experience in it. Women's lives are discussed in all their momentous triviality, that is, as they are lived through. The technique explores the social world each woman inhabits through her speaking of it, through comparison with other women's experiences, and through women's experiences of each other in the group itself. Metaphors of hearing and speaking commonly evoke the transformation women experience from silence to voice. As Toni McNaron put it, "within every story I have ever heard from a woman, I have found some voice of me. The details are of course unique to the speaker—they are our differences. But the meaning which they make is common to us all. I will not understand what is common without hearing the details which reveal it to me."<sup>2</sup> The particularities become facets of the collective understanding within which differences constitute rather than undermine collectivity.

The fact that men were not physically present was usually considered necessary to the process. Although the ways of seeing that women have learned in relation to men were very much present or there would be little to discuss, men's temporary concrete absence helped women feel more free of the immediate imperative to compete for male attention and approval, to be passive or get intimidated, or to support men's version of reality. It made speech possible. With these constraints at some remove, women often found that the group

confirmed awarenesses they had hidden, including from themselves. Subjects like sexuality, family, body, money, and power could be discussed more openly. The pain of women's roles and women's stake in them could be confronted critically, without the need every minute to reassure men that these changes were not threatening to them or to defend women's breaking of roles as desirable. The all-woman context valued women to each other as sources of insight, advice, information, stimulation, and problems. By providing room for women to be close, these groups demonstrated how far women were separated and how that separation deprived women of access to the way their treatment is systematized. "People who are without names, who do not know themselves, who have no culture, experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness. The first step is to connect and learn to trust one another."<sup>3</sup> This context for serious confrontation also revealed how women had been trivialized to each other. Pamela Allen called these groups "free space."<sup>4</sup> She meant a respectful context for interchange within which women could articulate the inarticulate, admit the inadmissible. The point of the process was not so much that hitherto-undisclosed facts were unearthed or that denied perceptions were corroborated or even that reality was tested, although all these happened. It was not only that silence was broken and that speech occurred. The point was, and is, that this process moved the reference point for truth and thereby the definition of reality as such. Consciousness raising alters the terms of validation by creating community through a process that redefines what counts as verification. This process gives both content and form to women's point of view.<sup>5</sup>

Concretely, consciousness-raising groups often focused on specific incidents and internal dialogue: what happened today, how did it make you feel, why did you feel that way, how do you feel now? Extensive attention was paid to small situations and denigrated pursuits that made up the common life of women in terms of energy, time, intensity, and definition—prominently, housework and sexuality. Women said things like this:

I am nothing when I am by myself. In myself, I am nothing. I only know I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world. Other people recognize him as real, and take him into account. He affects other people and events. He does things and changes things and they

are different afterwards. I stay in my imaginary world in this house, doing jobs that I largely invent, and that no-one cares about but myself. I do not change things. The work I do changes nothing; what I cook disappears, what I clean one day must be cleaned again the next. I seem to be involved in some sort of mysterious process.<sup>6</sup>

Intercourse was interrogated: how and by whom it is initiated, its timing, woman's feelings during and after, its place in relationships, its meaning, its place in being a woman.<sup>7</sup> Other subjects included interactions in routine situations like walking down the street, talking with bus drivers, interacting with cocktail waitresses. Women's stories—work and how they came to do it; children; sexual history, including history of sexual abuse—were explored. Adrienne Rich reflects the process many women experienced and the conclusion to which many women came:

I was looking desperately for clues, because if there were no clues then I thought I might be insane. I wrote in a notebook about this time: "Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relationships—e.g., between my anger at the children, my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean sex in its broadest significance, not merely sexual desire)—an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately. Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs." I think I began at this point to feel that politics was not something "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition.<sup>8</sup>

Woman's self-concept emerged: who she thinks she is, how she was treated in her family, who they told her she was (the pretty one, the smart one), how she resisted, how that was responded to, her feelings now about her life and herself, her account of how she came to feel that way, whether other group members experience her the way she experiences herself, how she carries her body and delivers her mannerisms, the way she presents herself and interacts in the group. Contradictions between messages tacitly conveyed and messages explicitly expressed inspired insightful and shattering criticism, as with women who behave seductively while complaining that men accost them. Complicity in oppression acquires concrete meaning as women emerge as shapers of reality as well as shaped by it. A carefully detailed and critically reconstructed composite image is built of

women's experienced meaning of "being a woman." From women's collective perspective, a woman embodies and expresses a moment-to-moment concept of herself in the way she walks down the street, structures a household, pursues her work and friendships, shares her sexuality—a certain concept of how she has survived and who she survives as. A minute-by-minute moving picture is created of women becoming, refusing, sustaining their condition.

Interactions usually overlooked as insignificant if vaguely upsetting proved good subjects for detailed scrutiny. A woman mentions the way a man on the subway looked at her. How did this make her feel? Why does she feel so degraded? so depressed? Why can the man make her hate her body? How much of this feeling comes from her learned distrust of how men use her sexually? Does this show up in other areas of her life? Do other women feel this way? What form of power does this give the man? Do all men have, or exercise, such power? Could she have done anything at the time? Can the group do anything now? Women learn that the entire structure of sexual domination, the tacit relations of deference and command, can be present in a passing glance.

Realities hidden under layers of valued myth were unmasked simply by talking about what happens every day, such as the hard physical labor performed by the average wife and mother, the few women who feel strictly vaginal orgasms and the many who pretend they do. Women confronted collectively the range of overt violence represented in the life experience of their group of women, women who might previously have appeared "protected." They found fathers who raped them; boyfriends who shot at them; doctors who aborted them when they weren't pregnant or sterilized them "accidentally"; psychoanalysts who so-called seduced them, committing them to mental hospitals when they exposed them; mothers who committed suicide or lived to loathe themselves more when they failed; employers who fired them for withholding sexual favors or unemployment offices that refused benefits when they quit, finding their reason personal and un compelling. Women learned that men see and treat women from their angle of vision, and they learned the content of that vision.

These details together revealed and documented the kind of world women inhabit socially and some of what it feels like for them to inhabit it, how women are systematically deprived of a self and how that process of deprivation constitutes socialization to femininity. In

consciousness raising, women become aware of this reality as at once very specific—a woman's social condition and self-concept as it is lived through by her—and as a social reality in which all women more or less participate, however diversely, and in which all women can be identified. Put another way, although a woman's specific race or class or physiology may define her among women, simply being a woman has a meaning that decisively defines all women socially, from their most intimate moments to their most anonymous relations. This social meaning, which is unattached to any actual anatomical differences between the sexes, or to any realities of women's response to it, pervades everyday routine to the point that it becomes a reflex, a habit. Sexism is seen to be all of a piece and so much a part of the omnipresent background of life that a massive effort of collective concentration is required even to discern that it has edges. Consciousness raising is such an effort. Taken in this way, consciousness means a good deal more than a set of ideas. It constitutes a lived knowing of the social reality of being female.

What women become conscious of—the substance of radical feminist analysis—is integral to this process. Perhaps most obviously, it becomes difficult to take seriously accounts of women's roles or personal qualities based on nature or biology, except as authoritative appeals that have shaped women according to them. Combing through women's lives event by event, detail by detail, it is no mystery that women are who they are, given the way they have been treated. Patterns of treatment that would create feelings of incapacity in anybody are seen to connect seamlessly with acts of overt discrimination to deprive women of tools and skills, creating by force the status they are supposed to be destined for by anatomy. Heterosexuality, supposed natural, is found to be forced on women moment to moment. Qualities pointed to as naturally and eternally feminine—nurturance, intuition, frailty, quickness with their fingers, orientation to children—or characteristics of a particular subgroup of women—such as married women's supposed talent for exacting, repetitive, simple tasks, or Black women's supposed interest in sex—look simply like descriptions of the desired and required characteristics of particular occupants of women's roles. Meredith Tax summarized this insight: "We didn't get this way by heredity or by accident. We have been molded into these deformed postures, pushed into these service jobs, made to apologize for existing, taught to be unable to do anything



requiring any strength at all, like opening doors or bottles. We have been told to be stupid, to be silly."<sup>9</sup>

If such qualities are biological imperatives, women conform to them remarkably imperfectly. When one gets to know women close up and without men present, it is remarkable the extent to which their so-called biology, not to mention their socialization, has failed. The discovery that these apparently unchangeable dictates of the natural order are powerful social conventions often makes women feel unburdened, since individual failures no longer appear so individualized. Women become angry as they see women's lives as one avenue after another foreclosed by gender.

More than their content, it is the relation to lived experience which is new about these insights. It is one thing to read a nineteenth-century tract describing a common problem of women. It is quite another for women to hear women speak the pain they feel, wonder what they have to fall back on, know they need a response, recognize the dilemmas, struggle with the same denial that the pain is pain, that it is also one's own, that women are real. Susan Griffin expressed it: "We do not rush to speech. We allow ourselves to be moved. We do not attempt objectivity . . . We said we had experienced this ourselves. I felt so much for her then, she said, with her head cradled in my lap, she said, I knew what to do. We said we were moved to see her go through what we had gone through. We said this gave us some knowledge."<sup>10</sup>

It was common for women in consciousness-raising groups to share radical changes in members' lives, relationships, work, life goals, and sexuality. This process created bonds and a different kind of knowledge, collective knowledge built on moving and being moved, on changing and being changed. As an experience, it went beyond empirical information that women are victims of social inequality. It built an experienced sense of how it came to be this way and that it can be changed. Women experienced the walls that have contained them as walls—and sometimes walked through them. For instance, when they first seriously considered never marrying or getting a divorce, women often discovered their economic dependency, having been taught to do little they can sell or having been paid less than men who sell comparable work. Why? To understand the precise causation would be to identify the supportive dynamics of male supremacy and capitalism. But an equivalency, at least, was clear: women's work is

defined as inferior work, and inferior work is defined as work for women. Inferior work is often considered appropriate for women by the same standards that define it as inferior, and by the same standards that define "women's work" as inferior work—its pay, status, interest or complexity, contacts with people, its relation to cleanliness or care of bodily needs. Inextricably, women may find themselves inwardly dependent as well: conditioned not to think for themselves, to think that without a man they are nothing, or to think that they are less "woman" when without one. The point is not how well women conform to this standard but that there is such a standard and women do not create it. The power dynamic behind these facts is brought into the open when women break out, from the panic they feel at the thought and from the barriers they encounter when they try. It becomes clear, from one horror story after another, that men's position of power over women is a major part of what defines men as men to themselves, and women as women to themselves. Challenge to that power is taken as a threat to male identity and self-definition. Men's reaction of threat is also a challenge to women's self-definition, which has included supporting men, making men feel masculine, and episodically being treated better as a reward. Men's response to women's redefinition as in control is often to show women just how little control they have by threatening women's material or physical survival or their physical or sexual or emotional integrity. Women learn they have learned to "act independently in a dependent fashion."<sup>11</sup> And sometimes they find ways to resist all of this.

This place of consciousness in social construction is often most forcefully illustrated in the least materially deprived women, because the contrast between their economic conditions and their feminist consciousness can be so vivid:

As suburban women, we recognize that many of us live in more economic and material comfort than our urban sisters, but we have come to realize through the women's movement, feminist ideas and consciousness raising, that this comfort only hides our essential powerlessness and oppression. We live in comfort only to the extent that our homes, clothing, and the services we receive feed and prop the status and egos of the men who support us. Like dogs on a leash, our own status and power will reach as far as our husbands and their income and prestige will allow. As human beings, as individuals, we in fact

own very little and should our husbands leave us or us them, we will find ourselves with the care and responsibility of children without money, jobs, credit or power. For this questionable condition, we have paid the price of isolation and exploitation by the institutions of marriage, motherhood, psychiatry and consumerism. Although our life styles may appear materially better, we are, as all women, dominated by men at home, in bed, and on the job, emotionally, sexually, domestically and financially.<sup>12</sup>

Women found they face these conditions sharply through nonmarriage or divorce or on becoming openly lesbian. Women who do not need men for sexual fulfillment can suddenly be found "incompetent" on their jobs when their bosses learn of their sexual preference. Similarly, when a women's health clinic is opened, and women handle their own bodies, male-controlled hospitals often deny admitting privileges, threatening every woman who attends the clinic. These conditions arise when women suggest that if housework is so fulfilling men should have the chance to do it themselves: it is everybody's job, women just blame themselves or do it when it is not done or done well. Always in the background, often not very far, is the sanction of physical intimidation, not because men are stronger but because they are willing and able to use their strength with relative social impunity; or not because they use it, but because they do not have to. In addition, identity invalidation is a form of power a man has for the price of invoking it: you are an evil woman, you are a whore (you have sex on demand), you are a failure as a woman (you do not have sex on demand). Women learn they have to become people who respond to these appeals on some level because they are backed up by material indulgences and deprivations. The understanding that a social group that is accorded, possesses, and uses such tools over others to its own advantage is powerful and that it exercises a form of social control or authority becomes not a presupposition or rhetorical hyperbole but a substantiated conclusion.

Perhaps the most pervasive realization of consciousness raising was that men as a group benefit from these same arrangements by which women are deprived. Women see that men derive many advantages from women's roles, including being served and kept in mind, supported and sustained, having their children cared for and their sexual needs catered to, and being kept from the necessity of doing

jobs so menial they consider them beneath them unless there is no other job (or a woman) around. But the major advantage men derive, dubious though it may seem to some, is the process, the value, the mechanism by which their interest itself is enforced and perpetuated and sustained: power. Power in its socially male form. It is not only that men treat women badly, although often they do, but that it is their choice whether or not to do so. This understanding of power is one of the key comprehensions of feminism. The reality it points to, because it is everywhere and relatively invariant, appears to be nowhere separable from the whole, from the totality it defines.

Women, it is said, possess corresponding power. Through consciousness raising, women found that women's so-called power was the other side of female powerlessness. A woman's supposed power to deny sex is the underside of her actual lack of power to stop it. Women's supposed power to get men to do things for them by nagging or manipulating is the other side of the power they lack to have their every need anticipated, to carry out the task themselves, to be able to deliver upon sharing the responsibility equally, or to invoke physical fear to gain compliance with their desires without even having to mention it. Once the veil is lifted, once relations between the sexes are seen as power relations, it becomes impossible to see as simply unintended, well-intentioned, or innocent the actions through which women are told every day what is expected and when they have crossed some line. From the male point of view, no injury may be meant. But women develop an incisive eye for routines, stratagems, denials, and traps that operate to keep women in place and to obscure the recognition that it is a place at all. Although these actions may in some real way be unintentional, they are taken, in some other real way, as meant.<sup>13</sup>

These discussions explored the functioning of sex roles in even one's closest "personal" relations, where it was thought women were most "ourselves," hence most free. Indeed, the reverse often seemed to be the case. The measure of closeness often seemed to be the measure of the oppression. When shared with other women, one's most private events often came to look the most stereotypical, the most for the public. Each woman, in her own particular, even chosen, way reproduces in her most private relations a structure of dominance and submission which characterizes the entire public order. The impact of this insight can be accounted for in part by the fact that it is practiced

on the level of group process, so that what could be a sociopsychological or theoretical insight becomes a lived experience. That is, through making public, through discussing in the group, what had been private, for example sexual relations, it was found that the split between public and private, at least in the context of relations between the sexes, made very little sense, except as it functioned ideologically to keep each woman feeling alone, particularly in her experiences of sexual violation.

After sharing, we *know* that women suffer at the hands of a male supremacist society and that this male supremacy intrudes into every sphere of our existence, controlling the ways in which we are allowed to make our living and the ways in which we find fulfillment in personal relationships. We know that our most secret, our most private problems are grounded in the way that women are treated, in the way women are allowed to live.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis that the personal is the political came out of consciousness raising. It has four interconnected facets. First, women as a group are dominated by men as a group, and therefore as individuals. Second, women are subordinated in society, not by personal nature or by biology. Third, the gender division, which includes the sex division of labor which keeps women in high-heeled low-status jobs, pervades and determines even women's personal feelings in relationships. Fourth, since a woman's problems are not hers individually but those of women as a whole, they cannot be addressed except as a whole. In this analysis of gender as a nonnatural characteristic of a division of power in society, the personal becomes the political.

Pervasively implicit in these substantive insights is feminism's method of knowing about the world in its epistemological and political ramifications. Consciousness raising is a face-to-face social experience that strikes at the fabric of meaning of social relations between and among women and men by calling their givenness into question and reconstituting their meaning in a transformed and critical way. The most apparent quality of this method is its aim of grasping women's situation as it is lived through. The process identifies the problem of women's subordination as a problem that can be accessed through women's consciousness, or lived knowing, of her situation. This implicitly posits that women's social being is in part constituted or at least can be known through women's lived-out view

of themselves. Consciousness raising attacks this problem by unraveling and reordering what every woman "knows" because she has lived it, and in so doing forms and reforms, recovers and changes, its meaning. This is accomplished through using the very instrument—women experiencing how they experience themselves—that is the product of the process to be understood. The apparent circularity of this as a theory of knowing about the world is not a barrier to analysis, but rather the core of the method, the way it breaks the circularity of that which it is attempting to understand in order to change. The seemingly self-enclosed character of feminist consciousness and the community it inhabits by creating it is, in reality, the opposite of solipsism: what it sees is that it is male reality that is self-enclosed. Feminism only seems to be circular from the point of view of the existing epistemology because that is the relation of a new paradigm to the old one:

Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice is not and cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures characteristic of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issue. When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defense.<sup>15</sup>

✓ Theories of right knowing are epistemologies. An epistemology is a story of a relation between knower and known. In the history of thought, this relation has been variously cast as a relation between subject and object, value and fact, phenomena and noumena, mind and matter, world and representation, text or evidence and interpretation, and other polarities and antinomies. The point of such distinctions is to establish an account of how knowing connects with what one purports to know. One purpose of this has been to establish an authoritative account of the real in order to expose errors and delusions conclusively in an agreed-upon way. The point is to establish world in mind. Science, for example, seeks empirical certainty over opinion or fiction or delusion or faith. All approaches to knowledge set up modes by which to tell whether what one thinks is real, is real. This connection embodies what is called methodology; adherence to it

defines what is called rationality. Method thus puts into operation a way of acquiring that knowledge that a particular epistemological stance approves as real.

Scientific epistemology defines itself in the stance of "objectivity," whose polar opposite is subjectivity. Socially, men are considered objective, women subjective. Objectivity as a stance toward the world erects two tests to which its method must conform: distance and aperspectivity. To perceive reality accurately, one must be distant from what one is looking at and view it from no place and at no time in particular, hence from all places and times at once. This stance defines the relevant world as that which can be objectively known, as that which can be known in this way. An epistemology decisively controls not only the form of knowing but also its content by defining how to proceed, the process of knowing, and by confining what is worth knowing to that which can be known in this way.

The posture scientific epistemology takes toward its world defines the basic epistemic question as a problem of the relation between knowledge—where knowledge is defined as a replication or reflection or copy of reality—and objective reality, defined as that world which exists independent of any knower or vantage point, independent of knowledge or the process of coming to know, and, in principle, knowable in full. For science, the tests of reality are replicability and measurability, the test of true meaning is intersubjective communicability, the test of rationality is formal (axiomatic) logical consistency, and the test of usefulness, as in technology, is whether it can be done.

Social science attempts to view the social world objectively, as physical science has viewed the physical world. One effect has been to uncover many roots of what has previously been taken as the simply given. That which previously was used as explanation becomes that which is to be explained. The scientifically real is found to embody many determinants that science sees as getting in the way of knowing social reality, to the extent they can be accounted for by that reality. In this perspective, for example, psychology traditionally constructs problems of personality, development, and psychosis as intervening within the knower between knowledge and reality, producing distortions from some combination of the person's "nature" and "nurture." Thus Piaget's stages of cognitive development can be viewed as progressive stages of epistemological growth, cognitively grasping the world at a given developmental stage.<sup>16</sup> There is seldom

any questioning of the objective "out there" reality of the world the child is attempting to come to know, the possibly distinct and changing object world the child inhabits.

Consistent with this approach, social science attacks the problem of its own knowing largely in terms of the limitations on the "in here" of the knower, with concern for how these limits can be overcome, exorcised, or contained.<sup>17</sup> Its model of knowledge posits a mind needing to overstep its determinants in order to get outside itself in order to get at the facts. Otherwise, it is thought, the mind will only propagate and project its delusions, its determinants, the limitations of its experiences, onto social reality, remaining forever trapped within itself. The movement to uncover the sources of social experience has thus also been a movement that has devalued these sources by regarding them as barriers or distortions between the knower and the known. If social knowledge can be interpreted in terms of the social determinants of the knower, it is caused. Therefore, its truth value, in this definition of tests for truth, is undercut. If it has a time or place—or gender—it becomes doubtful because situated.

Feminist method as practiced in consciousness raising, taken as a theory of knowing about social being, pursues another epistemology. Women are presumed able to have access to society and its structure because they live in it and have been formed by it, not in spite of those facts. Women can know society because consciousness is part of it, not because of any capacity to stand outside it or oneself. This stance locates the position of consciousness, from which one knows, in the standpoint and time frame of that attempting to be known. The question is not whether objective reality exists but whether that concept accesses the is-ness of the world. Feminist epistemology asserts that the social process of being a woman is on some level the same process as that by which woman's consciousness becomes aware of itself as such and of its world. Mind and world, as a matter of social reality, are taken as interpenetrated. Knowledge is neither a copy nor a miscopy of reality, neither representative nor misrepresentative as the scientific model would have it, but a response to living in it. Truth is in a sense a collective experience of truth, in which "knowledge" is assimilated to consciousness, a consciousness that exists as a reality in the world, not merely in the head. This epistemology does not at all deny that a relation exists between thought and some reality other than thought, or between human activity (mental or otherwise) and



the products of that activity. Rather, it redefines the epistemological issue from being the scientific one, the relation between knowledge and objective reality, to a problem of the relation of consciousness to social being. This move contextualizes verification, rendering epistemology, in the words of Jane Flax, "the study of the life situation of consciousness, an inquiry which is ultimately political and historical."<sup>18</sup>

An epistemology preempts the definition of reality when its criteria for conclusiveness become taken for granted, as constituting "reality itself," as rules or standards in terms of which other forms of knowing are tested. For science, these criteria are distance and aperspectivity. Though apparently general, and asserted by science as not constructs of reality but ways of getting at it, they have specific social roots and implications. These include devaluing as biased and unreliable the view from the inside and within the moment, and the perspective from the bottom of the social order. For science not only etches itself on the world through its technology, making the world a scientific place in which to live, but also propagates itself through its picture of social reality. This picture exists complete with those categories that a scientific epistemology can perceive as real. Social science provides no account of this prior picture of social reality upon which its "empirically derived" explanations are then superimposed, which its data then "confirm." Because social science is crippled by its mythos as distanced and aperspectival, it cannot give an account of the social reality it approaches because it cannot give an account of its approach.

The social power of science creates a reality that conforms to its image. Conflicting views of reality, although they retain a subcultural or subconscious life and power, are authoritatively defined as unreal or irrational. Sanctions behind the ruling reality construction range from whatever happens inside people who never seem to have conscious thoughts of different ways of being, to bad grades in school, jailing, and mental hospitalization for those who do. The choice of an epistemology is, in Kuhn's words, "like the choice between competing political institutions"<sup>19</sup> because it *is* a choice of political institution—one that women never chose.

Consciousness raising discovered that one form of the social existence of male power is inside women. In this form, male power becomes self-enforcing. Women become "thingified in the head."<sup>20</sup> Once incarnated, male superiority tends to be reaffirmed and reinforced in what can be seen as well as in what can be done. So male

4 power both is and is not illusory. As it justifies itself, namely as natural, universal, unchangeable, given, and morally correct, it is illusory; but the fact that it is powerful is no illusion. Power is a social relation. Given the imperatives of women's lives, the necessity to avoid punishment—from self-rejection to involuntary incarceration to suicide—it is not irrational for women to see themselves in a way that makes their necessary compliance tolerable, even satisfying. Living each day convinces everyone, women and men alike, of male hegemony, which is hardly a myth, and of women's innate inferiority and men's innate superiority, a myth that each day's reliving makes difficult to distinguish meaningfully from reality.

The deepest paradox of consciousness raising and its most potent contribution is that it affirms that there both is and can be another reality for women by doing nothing but examining the current society's deadest ends. Effectively, the process redefines women's feelings of discontent as indigenous to their situation rather than to themselves as crazy, maladjusted, hormonally imbalanced, bitchy, or ungrateful. It is validating to comprehend oneself as devalidated rather than as invalid. Women's feelings are interpreted as appropriate responses to their conditions. This analysis need not posit that feelings are asocial or universally correct as a representation of experience. Nor does it mean that women who feel what they are supposed to feel validate the society that forces them to feel that way. The distinction between "in here" and "out there" made in society through scientific objectivity is, however, seen to operate as a legitimating ideology that supports men's views of what women should think and be by powerfully stigmatizing as irrational and unreal women's feelings of rage and rebellion, by individualizing them, and by keeping the "privacy" (that is, isolation) of home and sexual life from being comprehended as gender's collective realities.

Of course, objective data do document the difficulties and inequities of woman's situation. Whether such data can scientifically conclusively demonstrate that women are oppressed, deprived of power, and objectified is something else again. Certainly a good deal of men's tyranny over women can be observed through data, experiments, and research; in this form it can be communicated to people who do not experience it. Many things can be known in this way. Yet seemingly regardless of objective conditions this knowing does not move people to see their own or others' condition as lacking in power—and for good

reason. Knowing these facts as object removes it. Nor does it show that it is unnecessary or changeable, except speculatively, because what is not there is not considered real. Women's situation cannot be truly known for what it is, in the feminist sense, without knowing that it can be other than it is. By operating as legitimating ideology, the scientific standard for verifying reality can reinforce a growing indignation, but it cannot create feminism that was not already there. Knowing objective facts does not do what consciousness does. Patterns of abuse can be made to look more convincing without the possibility of change seeming even a little more compelling. Viewed as object reality, the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply "there." And the more real it looks, the more it looks like the truth.

As a way of knowing about social conditions, consciousness raising by contrast shows women their situation in a way that affirms they can act to change it. Consciousness raising socializes women's knowing. It produces an analysis of woman's world which is not objective in the positivistic sense of being a perfect reflection of reality conceived as abstract object; it is certainly not distanced or aperspectival. It is collective and critical. It embodies shared feelings, comprehensions, and experiences of women as products of their conditions, through being critical of their condition together. In so doing, it builds a community frame of reference which recasts the perceived content of social life as it alters the relation between the "I," the "other," and the "we." (Consciousness raising, through socializing women's knowing, transforms it, creating a shared reality that "clears a space in the world" within which women can begin to move)<sup>21</sup> Seen as method, this process gives the resulting analysis its ground as well as its concreteness, specificity, and historicity.

Consciousness raising can also affirm that although women are deprived of power, within the necessity of their compliance is a form of power which they possess but have not yet seized. Mostly, women comply. Women learn they are defined in terms of subordinate roles; failing to challenge these roles confirms male supremacy in a way it needs. Daily social actions are seen to cooperate with and conform to a principle. They are not random, natural, socially neutral, or without meaning beyond themselves. They are not freely willed, but they are actions nonetheless. From seeing that such actions have meaning for maintaining and constantly reaffirming the structure of male suprem-

acy at their expense, women can come to see the possibility, even the necessity, of acting differently. Women can act because they have been acting all along. Although it is one thing to act to preserve power relations and quite another to act to challenge them, once it is seen that these relations require daily acquiescence, acting on different principles, even in very small ways, seems not quite so impossible.

Consciousness raising also affirms that women can know because it does not place correct knowledge beyond them. Women need not stand outside experience to validly comprehend it. The instrument of social perception is created by the social process by which women are controlled. But this apparent paradox is not a solipsistic circle or a subjectivist retreat. Realizing that women largely recognize themselves in sex-stereotyped terms, really do feel the needs they have been encouraged to feel, do feel fulfilled in the expected ways, often actually choose what has been prescribed, makes possible the realization that women at the same time do not recognize themselves in, do not feel, and have not chosen this place.

Thus feminism recognizes that cognitive judgments need not be universally agreed upon to be true. It redefines validity as nonuniversal but nevertheless correct, rather than (as does relativism, for instance) undercutting the ability to cognitively judge. The account of error, of women's nonfeminist perception of their situation, is that the perception is probably as justified by aspects of the woman's experience as a feminist perception would be.<sup>22</sup> This is a problem for the account only if one argues that *only* authoritative or universal truth is truth or that feminist consciousness is inevitable. In contrast to science, consciousness raising does not devalue the roots of social experience as it uncovers them, nor does it set up rules for certainty. It allows a critical embrace of who one has been made by society rather than demanding a removal of all that one is before one can understand one's situation. The process affirms a product of the determinants—self as knower of one's condition—while building a criticism of the conditions that have produced one as one is. It also makes everyone a theorist.

Feminism locates the relation of woman's consciousness to her life situation in the relation of two moments: being shaped in the image of one's oppression, yet struggling against it. In so doing, women struggle against the world in themselves as well as toward a future. The real question, both for explanation and for organizing, is what is

the relation between the first process, woman becoming her role, and the second, her rejection of it?

What is the feminist account of how women can come to reject the learning portrayed as so encompassing? The analysis of how one gets to be the way one is does not readily explain how some come to reject it, much less the view that one must and can change it into something specifically envisioned. What accounts for some women's turning upon their conditioning? In other words, what is the relationship between consciousness and material conditions for feminism? A theory that explains how some women come to be critical does not explain why others, who are for all purposes of the analysis identical, are not critical. Yet an explanation of why many women do not even seem to notice their oppression fails to interpret, except as exceptions, those who do.

Feminism, through consciousness raising, has grasped the completeness of the incursion into who one really becomes through growing up female in a male-dominated society. This effect can be understood as a distortion of self. It is not only one's current self one is understanding, but the self that understands what one has become *as* a distortion. On one level, this is exactly right. On another level, it exposes a dilemma: understanding women's conditions leads to the conclusion that women are damaged. If the reality of this damage is accepted, women are in fact not full people in the sense men are allowed to become. So on what basis can a demand for equal treatment be grounded? If women are what they are made, are determined, women must create new conditions, take control of their determinants. But how does one come to know this? On the other hand, if women go beyond the prescribed limitations on the basis (presumably) of something outside their conditions, such as being able to see the injustice or damage of inequality, what is the damage of inequality? The early twentieth-century feminist movement may have run aground on its version of this rock.

A similar tension arises in marxist theory, if in a slightly different way. Attempting to account for the consciousness of the proletariat is very difficult to the extent consciousness is historicized and the ruling ideology reifies class relations. How can consciousness be alienated, hence ideological, as a result of capitalist social relations and yet be aware of the necessity to revolutionize this system? Capitalist social relations distort cognition; yet it is precisely the relation to the mode

of production under capitalism that gives the point of view of the proletariat (through its material position and its struggle against it) its revolutionary potential and makes the old society the midwife of the new. If one substitutes "knowledge of the truth about their social condition" for "science" (which is what Marx often seemed to mean by the term), Marx's description of proletarian consciousness at certain historical times could describe women's consciousness today:

But in the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece . . . From this moment, science, which is a product of this historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to become doctrinaire and has become revolutionary.<sup>23</sup>

The question then becomes not whether such knowledge is possible, but whether women are such a people and now is such a time.

→ Consciousness raising has revealed that male power is real. / It is just not the only reality, as it claims to be. Male power is a myth that makes itself true. To raise consciousness is to confront male power in its duality: as at once total on one side and a delusion on the other. In consciousness raising, women learn they have learned that men are everything, women their negation, but the sexes are equal. The content of the message is revealed as true and false at the same time; in fact, each part reflects the other transvalued. If "Men are all, women their negation" is taken as social criticism rather than as simple description, (it becomes clear for the first time that women are men's equals) everywhere in chains. The chains become visible, the civil inferiority—the inequality—the product of subjection and a mode of its enforcement. Reciprocally, the moment it is seen that this life as we know it is not equality, that the sexes are not socially equal, womanhood can no longer be defined in terms of lack of maleness, as negativity. For the first time, the question of what a woman is seeks its ground in and of a world understood as neither of its making nor in its own image, and finds, within a critical embrace of woman's fractured and alien image, the shadow world women have made and a vision of the possibility of equality. As critique, women's communality describes a fact of male supremacy, a fact of sex "in itself": no woman escapes the meaning of being a woman within a

gendered social system, and sex inequality is not only pervasive but may be universal (in the sense of never having not been in some form), though "intelligible only in . . . locally specific forms."<sup>24</sup> For women to become a sex "for itself"<sup>25</sup> is to move community to the level of vision.