Book Review: Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology
Lisa Parmiani
Feminist Theory 2005; 6; 221
DOI: 10.1177/1464700105053698

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://fty.sagepub.com

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Feminist Theory can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://fty.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://fty.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
The relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis has always been a complex and changing one. Some feminists have accused psychoanalytic theories of phallocentrism, and of naturalizing women's oppression, while other feminists have used those theories to reinforce their accounts of the formation of a feminine subject. The diverse use of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis through different contexts and periods provides a very good example of such a changing relationship. In this book Kristen Campbell presents her personal re-reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which she uses to construct an original theory of social relations based on third-wave feminism. Her main concern is to explain how feminism can change the way we understand ourselves and others, and to show how a feminist epistemology informed by Jacques Lacan’s theory can be useful in this.

Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology is a book of great interest to lecturers and advanced students in the fields of sociology, philosophy and cultural studies; however, a good knowledge of Lacanian psychoanalysis is needed to fully appreciate it. The book comprises five chapters, with a rich bibliography. Campbell starts with an exploration and a definition of the field of feminist epistemology, and traces the shared set of theoretical positions emerging in this area, despite its hybridity and diversity. She then considers how Lacan's theories, both in his Écrits and in his later seminars, encounter the theoretical and political aims of feminism, by offering new key ways to conceive the formation of knowledge. She considers Lacan’s theory of the four discourses and shows their relevance to a new understanding of the relationship between knowledge, subjectivity and sociality. In Chapter 3, she discusses the formation of a feminist subject, and relates this process to that of becoming a sexed subject. In the following chapter she considers the limits of Lacan's social theory, arguing that it does not take account of the importance of class and ethnicity, and that it lacks any significant account of the possibility of change in social relations. In the concluding chapter, she presents feminism as a modern discourse, leading to new representations of the symbolic order, of intersubjectivity and of the feminine subject who is formed within them.

In Campbell’s exploration of feminist models of sexual and political
identities, I appreciated her emphasis on the process of the constitution of such identities, never considered as given qualities. Instead, she addresses feminism itself as a social product which needs to be deconstructed, in the same way as other forms of knowledge. Her reading of Lacan, which she describes as productive and strategic, is most illuminating: she extracts concepts from his theories, and then transfers them to feminist epistemology. She claims that her aim is not to comment on Lacanian theory, but to take from it what can be useful to a feminist epistemology concerned with social change. She describes every passage of this operation in a very precise way, never taking for granted her theoretical choices, and always distinguishing her own reading of Lacan from Lacan’s theory itself and from other readings (i.e. Kristeva, Irigaray, Rose, Grosz), which she presents and discusses thoroughly.

The result of the operation is undoubtedly creative and fascinating, but one may wonder whether psychoanalytic concepts, formulated and used by Lacan in a clinical setting, can actually have the same meaning when transferred to other disciplines and to different theoretical frameworks. Summing up the four discourse theory is a difficult task, which means that Chapter 2, in particular, in which Campbell details each of them, is hard reading for anyone who is not familiar with Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Despite this, her style of writing, rich in useful repetitions of complex concepts, is of great help to the reader. However, further use of examples from social issues or empirical research could probably have helped in making the reading lighter.

The relevance and novelty of Campbell’s work draws on the fact that most feminist criticism on Lacan is based upon his first publications (Ecrits), and usually does not consider the later developments of his work. Campbell’s original and refined use of Lacan’s later Seminars (Encore and L’Envers de la Psychanalyse, first translated into English only in 1998) is a very interesting and challenging operation, which may lead to further reconsiderations of Lacan’s contribution to theories of subjectivity and social relations. Furthermore, Campbell’s work suggests a new project for third-wave feminism, deserving attentive consideration and research.

LISA PARMIANI
Università Cattolica, Milano


Feminist Philosophy is the English translation of Nagl-Docekal’s 1999 book, originally published in German. Owing to difficulties of translation, the English volume has a somewhat cumbersome style that is jarred and uninviting. Beyond the language issues there are also certain cultural differences that did not travel well across the channel. The author draws freely on material from the Continental philosophical tradition with which the typical Anglophone reader may not be familiar, and little in the way of introduction to that tradition is provided. The tone of Nagl-Docekal’s book is surprisingly defensive. The author begins by trying to justify feminist philosophy, stating, ‘the thesis that women still face discrimination in many ways is well founded’ (p. xiv). Thus the problem of discrimination and the attempts to tackle it with liberal