Stepping Out of LINE

Becoming and Being Feminist

CHERYL HERCUS

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Introduction:
"I'm not a feminist . . . or am I?"

A young woman in a university class makes a strong statement about male domination in international politics, but she follows up immediately with "not that I'm a feminist or anything."[1] Why does she say this? Is the answer to be found in a cartoon by feminist cartoonist Judy Horacek: "I'm not a feminist, but . . . that's because I'm a doormat?"[2] This seems unlikely. Here is a young woman, studying for a degree in politics, speaking boldly about the issues under discussion. She does not sound like anybody's doormat, but she rejects or does not see a connection between her views of the world, which could be described as feminist, and her own self identity. In this she is not alone. During the 1990s, the refrain "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." became a cliché for the widespread phenomenon of women expressing support for feminist goals such as equal opportunity and equal pay, access to affordable child care, and freedom from sexual harassment and assault, yet at the same time distancing themselves from any sort of feminist identification. Some commentators noted that even women who had actively fought for women's rights were often reluctant to label themselves feminist.[3]

While in the 1990s feminists pondered the "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." phenomenon, in the 1970s and 1980s they were more commonly writing about the "click" phenomenon: that moment when they first recognized the subordinate status of women, their own oppression, and the possibility of change. The term came from an article titled "Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth" first published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1972.[4] In this article, the click is defined as "A moment of truth. The shock of recognition. Instant sisterhood," and numerous anecdotes of click situations are described. The article suggested that click experiences were "coming faster

and faster" to American women in 1972. In reality, the click was not only occurring for American women; British, European, and Australian women were also recognizing the click. Sensitized by media coverage of the Women's Liberation movement and its issues, women were noticing little things that their husbands did or that their bosses said that confirmed their subordinate status as women. One example from the *Ms.* article was of a woman who had placed a pile of toys on the stairs ready to be put away. Her husband complained in an annoyed voice, asking why they were there. "Click! 'You have two hands,' she said, turning away."[5]

The click was often the result of this type of personal experience and sometimes was quite dramatic in its intensity. Sonia Johnson labeled the experience an epiphany when she finally faced and accepted the reality of women's oppression in society at large, and in particular in the Mormon Church. She had attended a talk given by a Mormon religious leader in the hope of hearing some intelligent justification for the church's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). But the speaker's patronizing tone and trivializing of the issue forced her to confront "[w]hat it means to be female in a male world." She wrote, "I knew instantly what the women's movement was all about; I knew it in my very bones." That night she finally said what she had been resisting saying for a long time. "I am a feminist."[6] For other women, the click was brought about by reading one of the classic works of the Women's Liberation period. For instance, Dale Spender described experiencing it when she read Germaine Greer: "Initially, reading *The Female Eunuch* was like reading a horror story: all those clues I had ignored, all those awful connections I'd never dared make, all that evidence I had not been brave enough to examine; all put together, and pushed at me with great force . . . The world turned on its head!"[7]

For me, the click came in 1977 while on a three-day train trip up the Australian east coast. I traveled with my boyfriend of the time, an education student at the University of Sydney, who brought along a few books to while away the long hours. One of these—presumably assigned by a feminist professor—was Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. We took turns reading and discussing each chapter. He read the chapter on love and predicted I would hate it. Although I had been raised to believe that women and men were equal, that education was just as important for females as males, and that women could do anything as well as men, I was also raised on fairy-tales, dolls, and protestant Christianity. Consequently, at that point in my life I was still in thrall to the romantic myth. I fully expected to find Mr. Right in the next year or two, get married, and settle down to domestic life. Despite this background, I did not hate the chapter. Instead, "the scales fell from my eyes" and I "saw the light." The romantic myth I had

been so well schooled in was shattered. Firestone showed how women had been taught to believe that love was their primary purpose and goal in life, whereas for men it was a facet of their lives, a pleasant diversion from more important goals and accomplishments. Indeed, male-dominated society was parasitic on the emotional labor women performed in the name of love.

Two weeks after the train trip I took a job as a cook and deckhand on a prawn trawler, and there came across my second feminist book. The book had been left behind by the previous cook and inside the front cover was a handwritten message of woman-to-woman solidarity, the exact words of which I cannot remember. In this collection of Women's Liberation essays and manifestos, I read about the "Society for Cutting Up Men," about the oppression of women in the church, and about the myth of the vaginal orgasm. I knew then that I was onto something that would change my life.[8] I returned south and enrolled at university where I studied sociology and women's studies.

By mid-1978 I had adopted feminism as my worldview and started calling myself a feminist. For many years, my commitment to feminism was expressed primarily through academic pursuits and my general approach to life rather than through involvement in feminist activist groups. Although I chose to marry and have children, I no longer saw this as my primary goal in life, and the list of characteristics I sought in a partner expanded to include sensitivity to feminist issues and a commitment to equality. On a personal level, I considered my lifestyle to be consistent with feminist principles. My partner and I shared childcare and domestic labor, attempted to raise our children in a nonsexist manner, and gradually I dropped my religious beliefs. Studying for a Diploma of Education in 1986, I continued my interest in feminism, particularly in relation to education.

Reflecting on my own discovery of feminism, I have often wondered over the years what direction my life would have taken if I had not serendipitously come across the writings of these early Women's Liberationists. On the one hand, I probably would have found my supposed prince and made a valiant attempt at living out the myth of the "lived happily ever after" life of a conventional stay-at-home mother, never quite knowing why I did not feel as satisfied as I was supposed to. Then again, I may have discovered feminism through some other route, maybe through a magazine picked up in a doctor's waiting room. I may have discovered feminism later in life, driven by the experience of an unhappy marriage. Or maybe I would have become one more voice in the "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." chorus. On the other hand, if I had made contact with feminist activists at that time, I may have become far more outwardly active and radical than I did. At a women's peace

camp in 1984 I met a group of women from an alternative community whose lifestyle was very appealing to me. If I had met these women in 1978 before marrying and having children, I may have gone to live with them instead of returning to the university.

These musings on my own experiences of becoming and being feminist, on the lives of other women who experienced the click, and on those who claim not to be feminist while endorsing feminist goals underscore the questions that I explore in this book. What is a feminist? What is feminist identity and how does identity change? What features of the broader social, cultural, and political environment support the process of becoming feminist, and which ones lead women to disclaim feminist identity while supporting feminist goals?

The answers to these questions are more complex than the concept of the click suggests. Even though I have often recounted the story of reading *The Dialectic of Sex* as a classic click experience—"I boarded the train an antifeminist, and three days later got off a feminist"—in reality the process was not that simple. To begin with, the seeds of feminist consciousness and practice were built into my childhood. Although she never would have called herself a feminist, my mother believed in gender equality and enacted this equality in crucial areas of family life. She expected her sons and her daughters both to wash dishes and help with meal preparation and, although I played with dolls, my brothers also had dolls and my sisters and I played with toy cars and trucks. My parents held high expectations of their daughters in relation to education and professional careers, albeit careers that could accommodate the responsibilities of motherhood. Via the media, I was also aware of the Women's Liberation movement and was sympathetic to a number of issues. I could not see why women should be barred from "male" occupations and believed women should receive equal pay. However, I held these views without recognizing the tension that existed between them and the images of marriage and motherhood to which I aspired.

If my life prior to the train trip was not so unambiguously nonfeminist, neither was the transformation to being feminist quite so instantaneous. The two books I read on the train and on the trawler certainly influenced me in profound ways, but feminist consciousness and identity did not operate like a switch being turned on. For several months I was still unsure about whether I wanted to call myself a feminist. I did not personally know any other feminists and so did not know if I was like them. Furthermore, there were some feminist ideas I was not prepared to accept, such as Firestone's suggestion that women would achieve liberation through artificial procreation. As it happens, I was not alone in my reaction against this

idea. Feminists have in fact been some of the strongest critics of reproductive technology as it has developed over recent decades. Thus, it was only after returning to the university and reading much more about feminism that I began to call myself a feminist.

The Research Project: Laughing and Singing at the Revolution

When in 1991 I moved to Townsville and enrolled in a postgraduate research degree, my own personal biography in relation to feminism fed into my developing ideas for a research project.[9] A few months into my candidacy, I became aware of an upcoming feminist weekend workshop and the specific idea for this study arose. The workshop was facilitated by Dale Spender, a well-known Australian feminist researcher and writer, and was entitled *Laughing and Singing at the Revolution*.[10] It was described in the 1991 Winter Institute program as "an opportunity for feminist women to get together to examine the present status of the revolution we call the Women's Movement."

The workshop was held at a church-owned campsite located adjacent to a National Park at Crystal Creek, 70 kilometers north of Townsville. Activities began on the Friday evening with a getting-to-know you session and continued throughout Saturday and Sunday with a variety of activities based on a range of feminist issues. One session dealt with humor as a way of dealing with sexism and another looked at the question of political and ideological differences within feminism. Dale Spender talked about her research and writing, including her work on the historical silencing of women writers and their contributions to literature. On Saturday night everyone joined in for a lively feminist concert that included poetry reading, singing, chanting, and tap dancing.

As a participant at the workshop I talked with others, and with Dale Spender, about my ideas for a research project. During the final group session on Sunday afternoon, I more formally raised the possibility of conducting research based on the experiences of the women present. The suggestion was greeted positively, and following the session a number of women approached me individually to offer their support. The research participants thus came with the topic. However, features of the group made these women particularly suitable for a study exploring the processes and experiences of becoming and being feminist. The 49 women who attended the workshop (including the coordinator of the workshop, the facilitator, and me) came from a wide geographical area and previous involvement in feminist activities ranged from those who could be described as highly committed activists to women who had virtually no prior contact with feminist activism or ideology. Thus, the process and context of becoming

involved, and the variety of factors that might lead to increased or decreased involvement, could be explored through these women.

In the weeks following the workshop I began contacting women for interviews and the positive reception to the proposed project translated into an excellent response rate. Forty-five workshop participants agreed to be interviewed and only one declined. Of these, the majority (60%) lived in Townsville. Another significant group (29%) came from Mackay, a coastal town about four hours drive south of Townsville. Two women traveled up from Brisbane, and three came from towns in central Queensland. Participants also varied in terms of age, lifestyle, and life experience. When the study commenced, 17 were living with a male partner, 13 lived alone, 7 were lone parents, and 8 lived in shared households or with a female partner. In terms of sexual identification, 25% self-identified in the interview as lesbians.[11] Their ages ranged from early twenties to over 60. The majority (82%) fell between the ages of 31 and 50, with a mean age of 41. The sample was highly educated relative to the general population. Fifty-one percent held degrees or equivalent and 13% had completed certificate or diploma qualifications. Eighty-nine percent were in some form of paid employment, with a significant proportion occupying mid- to high-level professional and white-collar positions in the community service sector. The group was not ethnically diverse, however. No Aboriginal women were included and although two women were born outside Australia, both were from European backgrounds. This feature of the sample reflects the ongoing lack of relevance of mainstream feminism for Indigenous and migrant Australian women, which is discussed in Chapter 2.

Qualitative in-depth interviewing was chosen as the primary method of data collection because of its consistency with feminist research principles and because my particular questions about becoming and being feminist could not be answered adequately using quantitative methods.[12]

I initially interviewed each of the participants between September and December 1991. I asked them about their experience attending the workshop, their identification with feminism, their prior involvement in feminist activism, their confrontation with any obstacles in terms of feminist involvement, and their discussions with significant others prior to and following the workshop. Preliminary analysis of these initial interviews indicated that the weekend workshop was a very significant, transforming event in the lives of some participants, particularly those whose previous contact with feminism was limited. I was interested to see whether the enthusiasm generated by the workshop had translated into further involvement for these women in the year that followed as well as the pattern of involvement for the longer-term "feminists" in the group. Consequently,

follow-up interviews were conducted toward the end of 1992.[13] These were more structured than the initial interviews. They explored the extent and nature of feminist involvement and any changes in thoughts and feelings about feminism during the period between interviews.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with the follow-up interviews being generally shorter than the initial interviews. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the aid of a computer-based qualitative data analysis program. In addition to the interviews, I participated in and observed other feminist events held in the region during the study period. I also spoke with Dr. Betty McLellan, who organized the Winter Institute for Women, and with Senator Margaret Reynolds.[14] Both provided valuable background information on feminist activities in the Townsville region during the 1970s and 1980s.

In line with feminist research principles I approached this research with a commitment to build open and ethical relationships with participants. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality was assured through the use of pseudonyms in any reports on the research, including this book. Once analysis was under way, aspects of the study were presented in forums where women from the study were in attendance. On those occasions, feedback was sought and provided. Nonetheless, the research could not be described as participatory in the fullest sense. The account provided in this book reflects my analysis of participants' lives. It goes beyond "giving voice" to participants while, hopefully, doing justice to their understandings and to the rich complexity of their lives.

Outline of the Book

In Chapter 1 I provide a brief review of the feminist and social movement theory, as well as research that fed into the study. I then describe, explain, and illustrate a model of becoming and being feminist, based on a concept of fractal subjectivity, which is elaborated throughout the rest of the book. In combination with Chapter 1, Chapter 2 provides the contextual background that is necessary to fully appreciate the stories I tell in later chapters about the experiences of the women I interviewed. In this chapter, the focus is on the field or environment in which women become feminist. In particular, it considers the historical and geographical dimensions of feminism as a social movement.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 concentrate on the process of becoming feminist. Chapter 3 examines the paths traveled in becoming feminist. Becoming feminist involves intertwined processes of coming to "know" the world and oneself in feminist terms, and of taking up a position within feminist discourse and networks. In this chapter the various routes through which

women gained access to these resources for the development of feminist subjectivity are outlined. Variations in the women's biographical accounts of becoming feminist are analyzed and discussed. The tensions and contradictions faced by interviewees in terms of their involvement in feminism and the processes of becoming and being feminist are addressed in Chapter 4. The issue of personal autonomy versus a sense of collective identity or belonging is a central theme in this chapter. In Chapter 5, the focus is on the opposition women face as feminists. Opposition to feminist identity and involvement was encountered in a range of settings, creating a largely hostile environment for the development of feminist identity and activism.

Chapters 6 and 7 document the range and extent of feminist action engaged in by participants. Chapter 6 describes the broad range of participation in feminist organizations and events reported by women in the study, and discusses the significance of these activities for the women concerned. Broader implications for the study of social movements involvement are drawn out of the themes that emerge from this data. In Chapter 7 the focus shifts from participation in organizations and events to the myriad ways in which women establish a feminist presence in daily life. Various themes, related to the rewards and outcomes of participation discussed in Chapter 6, are picked up in Chapter 7 as strategies for activism in daily life. I argue that a relationship exists between these two arenas of activism, where knowledge, energy, and identity are enhanced through participation in events and organizations, but also deployed in daily life.

In the final chapter I explore what my findings add to our understanding of the feminist women's movement and of the processes of becoming and being involved in feminist collective action. The empirical findings are reviewed in light of a fractal model of feminist subjectivity, and the implications of my findings for existing social movement theory and for feminist theory and practice are discussed.

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