Book reviews

*Gender on Planet Earth*

By Ann Oakley (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 304pp., £15.99 (pbk), ISBN 0-7456-2964-4, also available cloth bound.

The purpose of this book is to argue that many contemporary social and environmental problems are linked to the continuing marginalization of women and the continuing power of men. It is, in short, a defence of the relevance of feminism in the twenty-first Century CE.

The chapters cover a wide range of topics: transport, in which women and bicycles are presented as equally marginalized; men’s violence and toxicity; debates about women, including the recent history of feminism; the gender division of labour in the home; the ‘family values’ ideology; the rape of Mother Earth, including the meat industry, surgery and genital mutilation; the ideas of psychoanalysis, economics, sociobiology and postmodernism; cross-gender experiences and feminist science fiction; the concept of patriarchy and the need for revolutionary change.

Oakley’s approach to gender is categorical. There are two groups, men and women; one oppresses the other. As a professor of sociology, Oakley is well aware that there are many differences among women (and presumably among men). Most of the time she ignores such differences, which leads to strong polemics but rough-and-ready analysis.

Indeed, analysis is not central to Oakley’s purpose. She offers a lot of detail about some topics—e.g., the slaughtering of animals in the meat industry, or women’s wage rates compared with men’s in the UK and USA. These details are provided in order to support categorical arguments, for example the institutionalized violence of male-dominated industries, the economic marginalization of women. Oakley does not use them to explore the dynamics of gender relations, for example to develop an account of the unevennesses or contradictions of the patriarchal system or the possibilities of change.

I found some parts of the book thoroughly engaging. These include the discussion of the Anglo-American women’s liberation movement—Oakley was there—and her vigorous defence of the unfashionable concept of ‘patriarchy’. Her chapter on ‘world-travelling’, perhaps the high point of the book, nicely combines an account of feminist utopias in the form of science fiction with a sympathetic discussion of some male-to-female transsexual experiences, to explore what gender change might mean. Oakley is also brave enough to combine in one text the generalized argument with fragments of personal experience, ranging from childcare to being intimidated by a flasher. She has a sense of humour, also a sense of outrage at oppression and privilege—and both come through vividly in her writing.

However, the book is very uneven. Oakley criticizes the ‘family values’ people for playing fast and loose with evidence but proceeds to do the same thing—excusing herself from careful treatment of evidence on the grounds of age (p. 5). Oakley’s treatment of detail is indeed unreliable, ranging from her tendentious presentation of fellow-feminists’ reflections (p. 73) to her caricature of the men’s movement (pp. 76–79), selectively presented as a clutch of misogynists.
In Chapter 8, Oakley’s anger and less than careful treatment of evidence come together in hostile accounts of psychoanalysis and economics as ‘delusional systems’, the former generated from cocaine and misogyny, the latter a pseudo-religion providing business with an ideology of greed and indifference. Dark sides of both enterprises there certainly are; but this wholesale denunciation is hardly the way to fix them. Almost as hostile is Oakley’s dismissal of postmodernism, which she rejects as little more than pretentious nonsense. She ignores post-structuralism entirely. By these gestures, Oakley dismisses much of the creative work in English-speaking feminism in the last two decades.

As an account of ‘gender on planet Earth’ the book has some noteworthy absences. Lesbians and gay men are among them: the picture of ‘gender’ is heteronormative throughout. There is little discussion of sexuality, except in the form of sexual violence. There is little discussion of education, one of the fields where global gender changes really have occurred. (The massive growth of literacy and educational access among girls and women in developing countries is one of the greatest social changes of our time). But, economic and educational change are not in Oakley’s focus. The entry for ‘development’ in the book’s Index reads in its entirety: ‘development, Third World: damaging to women, 149–50’.

Consistent with this, Oakley has little interest in gender systems outside the UK/USA except when they instance her model of patriarchy. She therefore has little sense of the complex encounters between the women and men from colonized cultures and the world-spanning capitalist patriarchy she so vividly criticizes. The dilemmas for feminist thought that result from global diversity and inequality (brilliantly presented in Chilla Bulbeck’s Re-Orienting Western Feminisms) do not register in Oakley’s thinking.

As an account of the violence and destructiveness in which patriarchal gender relations are implicated, this book is impressive, weaving the author’s personal experiences together with details of the toxicity of modern Western gender arrangements. As an account of ‘gender on planet Earth’, how gender is changing globally, and how gender arrangements might change for the better, it is, in my view, a good deal less successful.

R.W. Connell
University of Sydney, Australia

The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality and other Fantasies in Interwar France

By Carolyn J. Dean (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2000) 263 pp., US$35 Hardcover. ISBN D-520-21995-3.

What is a figural history of a cultural formation? What is the role of the figure in the writing of a social and a cultural history? Such questions have been amply discussed in journals such as History and Theory, Yale French Studies and New Literary History. A number of writers at the forefront of these considerations themselves appear in the footnotes and references of Carolyn Dean’s book, yet the enticing ambivalence of her title is little more than a promise, a prefix to a rather conventional and linear historical account of critical and literary texts in inter-war France that concern the construction and self-construction of the gay body and the gay subject. The play between the frailty of the social body—a national body in the Hobbesian sense—that contains and regulates the bodies that it socially produces, but makes them too frail for its own
sustaining, emerges here as the teleology of a history that knows too clearly where it wants to go. A history in which the tensions of the Foucauldian dispositif, for example, are not to be realised as affecting the ways in which the historian knows and attempts—in all frailty—to constitute the integuments between her world and a past.

This is a pity, as the book is articulated with two truly interesting ideas that interact with each other as something like a possible dispositif. These are, first, that the association between the gay body and pornography in France in this period is made in such a way as both to exclude them from the health of a heterosexual norm and, at the same time, render it essential to the very figuration of such a norm. Second, that the status or definition of pornography is only achieved through expanding the field of the non-pornographic so that pornography itself will eventually be situated rather more as a sexual state of mind, in part induced by the effects of the violence of the First World War than as a definable genre of writing. It will be seen as a failure to distinguish between violence and pleasure, between ‘dancing and combat’, as Dean so cleverly glosses Georges Anquetil.

Yet, even as she does this, the suggestive relation between the pornography of suffering and flagellation with its attendant critical phantasies on the one hand, and Freud’s essay ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ on the other, is raised without regard to the texture of writing, its innervations and suspenses. I suspect that the author is uninvolved in the unconscious life of texts, nor for that matter its corollary, that is the figural character of historical writing itself. That is to say, that if Freud in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ as in ‘Civilisation and its Discontents’ was awakened to a rethinking of his fundamental paradigms by the archaeology of the traumatic remnants of the War, what might it be to think through such a relation—one between Freud, pornography and moralising texts like Anquetil’s as a more general symptomatology of both continuities and survivals in a complex of co-existing anxieties, ideologies, consumer pleasures and so forth?

Equally, in her chapters discussing the formation of the male and female gay subject, Dean’s explications—though often interesting and richly documented—proceed at the expense of a deeper understanding of the all-important poetics of becoming. The textual or writerly living-out of a subject-hood through the complex, uneven pressures and contradictions that force it into visibility deserve a different order of attention than that of treating them as fodder for an argument. There is nothing here to enable the reader to understand how a memoir by a Daniel Guerin, an André du Dognon, or an Édouard Roditi produces a gay subject in all its dense historicity; nor to engage with the intensity of Colette’s ‘lesbianism’, in Le pur et l’impur, which is mechanistically dismissed as inadequate to gay theory.

Further, how might the political literatures of the war, Henri Barbusse’s Under Fire or Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front, for instance, articulate with the erotics of destruction and with the neo-Malthusian anxieties concerning the depletion of the race—anxieties that themselves overlap so partially yet so imperatively with other kinds of moral discourse, whether liberal or reactionary. And again, it is quite hard to think of the gay body as a sexually non-reproducing body, whether male or female, and not at the same time think of the ‘surplus’ of young women and widows generated by the murderous destruction of the war and who were, therefore, both sexually active and outside reproduction. It was at anything the fear of their presence that overdetermined the negative reaction to Victor Margueritte’s novel La Garçonne in 1922, as they were imagined both as protagonists and consumers of such literature. But fears concerning the young female reader of mass culture were also long-running, from the nineteenth century into the 1930s. They intensified as it became clear, if almost unspeakable, that much of what the moralists called pornography was addressed to ‘her’—a realisation that fed back into fears of a weakened masculinity. What Dean misses in her narrative is how such strange
continuities eat into the singularity of new phenomena, and so how the disruption of signification, its recompositions and its transformations endlessly elide each other.

So, while I do find Dean’s ideas interesting, I am not convinced that they add up to a thesis of the historical dimensions that she claims for them. Despite her invocation of sophisticated theoretical models and heavy, argumentative footnoting, her writing remains strangely literal; an assemblage of references from an admirably wide range of sources, but hermeneutically limited. The more so as her archival work is inaccurate, both in its empirical detail and in her textual understanding of historical documents.

In Chapter 1, ‘Pornography and Perversion’, her brief accounts of the legal control of gay sexualities is deeply vitiated by what appears to be her ignorance of the both differences and relations between the police and the judicial system in France or, for that matter, of the nature of censorship, laws concerning public morality and their application through either tribunals and prosecution. In effect, this is methodologically crucial regarding such materials. For it was through the complexities of the legal system and its social structures that different and conflicting interests engaged each other over the making and execution of laws and regulations that were themselves already figures of the sexual. A moralist like the Senator Bérénger and a worldly prosecutor or tribunal judge strangely stood on opposite sides of the law, the latter often being less interested in its implementation than the former. In this uncanny space of what I might call ‘social textuality’ gayness found a part of its visibility, invisibility and a perverse means of its survival. The historiographical stake here is one articulating the role of the figural in historical process, in its unfolding as in its writing.

Dean might have done better on all counts had she consulted at least three of the principal works on gayness and France that appeared in the last decade or more. One is G. Barbedette and F. Carassou’s pathbreaking archival and critical work Paris Gay 1925 (1987), which deals especially well with the 1920s journal Inversions, about which Dean is less informed than they. Another is Anthony Copley’s Sexual Moralities in Modern France, 1780–1980, New Ideas on the Family, Divorce and Homosexuality, an Essay on Moral Change (1989), which sets out the legal histories governing sexuality with clarity and detail. The third is my own Street Noises—Parisian Pleasure 1900–1940 (1993), which certainly gives one possible form to the relation between pornography, gayness, the law, and the trope of darkness and shadow, for example, within a framework of literary and visual culture. The visual is indeed a striking absence from Dean’s book.

If I conclude by declaring an interest in Dean’s subject matter, let me now give the last word to (the straight?) Francis Carco, a couple of sentences from his famous novel Jésus la caille, a master-text of Parisian homosexuality and precursor of Genet. It is one of those cases of the ‘source’ putting it better than the historian, of the figure triumphing over the commentary; and if you read the 1929 Hazan edition, illustrated by Dignimont, you will see something of the densities and intensities that Dean’s book so lacks. The eponymous hero of the novel, La Caille, has seen his man entrapped and imprisoned; an underworld friend warns him not to go after the traitors; a prostitute, Mina, listens:

[M]èfie-toi, la Caille, les mecs font le jeu des bourres.
Mais les bourres font le jeu des mecs, riposta Mina.

([C]areful, la Caille, real men make a game of buggers.
But the buggers make a game of real men, Mina shot back)

Adrian Rifkin

Visual Culture and Media, Middlesex University, UK