

CHALLENGING BOUNDARIES: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Nancy F. Cott[†]

I'd like to begin the conference by making a few remarks on its theme, "Challenging Boundaries." Thematizing boundaries is a way to be both inclusive and critical: this has been an important agenda in much feminist criticism and scholarship for twenty-five years. Why? Most simply, I would say, both the radical and the reformist sensibilities of the women's movement have been aimed at changing the world as we have received it, at removing limits and constraints and oppressions that hamper human possibilities; and one inclusive way of naming such hindrances has been to see them as implicit or explicit boundaries, lines that are not supposed to be crossed. A good part of the burden of early feminist critiques was first to make implicit boundaries visible, and to show the way they operated not only to impose material constraints but also to shape perception of the world so as to engender self-policing.

First and foremost in the feminist projects of the past twenty-five years has been effort to make visible, and to refute, the socially-constructed boundaries between manhood and womanhood—between men's jobs and women's jobs—between so-called masculine and feminine capabilities. That project, however, is actually of much longer standing, its origins going back at least to the early 19th century. In 1845 Margaret Fuller wrote, "I would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down." What has been more characteristic of late 20th-century feminism is the extension of such insights to a broader critique of social categories implicitly tied to a gender boundary and binary. I refer here to the way in which feminist thought has challenged the placement of a boundary between, for instance, the private and public, between reproductive and productive labor, between the sphere of home and the sphere of work, between biological and sociological sex attributes, between legitimate and so-called illegitimate birth, between the natural and the political. The thrust of this challenge has most often been to dissolve boundaries or differentiations, on the reasoning that such boundaries have been socially constructed mainly to differentiate the feminine from the generically human, to marginalize women as social actors and creators of economic value, to naturalize lines of authority that are socially and politically maintained, and in sum to maintain gender hierarchy.

On further look, though, feminist perspectives on boundaries have been directed at more than refutation or dissolution. The feminist project can also be

[†] Nancy F. Cott is Woodward Professor of History and American Studies at Yale, where she has taught since 1975. She is the author of *THE BONDS OF WOMANHOOD: "WOMAN'S SPHERE" IN NEW ENGLAND, 1780-1835*; *THE GROUNDING OF MODERN FEMINISM*; *A WOMAN MAKING HISTORY: MARY RITTER BEARD THROUGH HER LETTERS*, and other works in women's history.

seen as expanding the bounds of categories—therefore moving or re-placing boundaries. I'm thinking here, for example, of the category of "the political." The feminist slogan "the personal is political"—which has been subject to a number of iterations and interpretations—can be seen as collapsing the boundaries between these two categories or as expanding the one or the other. Certainly a great deal of the feminist scholarship in my field (history) can be seen as working in the latter mode—that is, as insisting that a broad panoply of interactions between human individuals and groups in various settings have to be included in the category of the political.

Yet there is another sense in which feminist projects have been less about dissolving boundaries than about articulating them—this could also be seen as re-placing boundaries: or, in perhaps the common parlance, about articulating differences. As much as feminist social aims have been to remove arbitrary boundaries between what it is possible for women to do and for men to do, feminist critiques have made visible and clarified differentiations between women's and men's socialization, horizons, values, needs, and so on. In counterpoint, the demand has arisen to articulate differences between and among women, as feminists of color have especially emphasized; and to comprehend that differences are more than binary divisions, as lesbian and bisexual theorists have recently stressed. If not the placement of boundaries, this is certainly the construction of categories of analysis.

Today, near the end of a millennium, the point of a feminist conference purporting to challenge boundaries would ideally be not only to challenge those imposed boundaries that make arbitrary hierarchies appear natural, but also to be self-critical: to think critically about what kinds of boundaries and categories feminist criticism has employed and invented. It is easier, actually, I think, to challenge boundaries than to establish new ones wisely. In many respects, transgressing established boundaries has great psychological appeal. It has the appeal of justice, if established boundaries appear to maintain oppression. It has the appeal of rebellion to those restive with the status quo. It has the appeal of originality and innovation.

But challenge to or transgression of boundaries cannot be said to be a "good" in and of itself. When one nation transgresses another's borders—when white supremacists transgress human dignity, for instance—the appeal of transgression fades. In fact, I think, challenging boundaries and setting boundaries have to be paired as feminist projects. I want some boundaries—both material and intellectual. I want boundaries on what the state can intervene in; I want boundaries placed on the exercise of violence. If the notion of simply erasing boundaries has a utopian appeal, conceptually, nonetheless it leaves us with nothing to think with, I would argue. The setting of bounds—which is the construction of categories—is a basic tool of human reasoning. We can't do without it. So I put before you this question—in challenging existing boundaries, which ones shall be erased, which ones moved or expanded, which ones re-

placed? What kinds of boundaries should be established to make this a world we want to live in, in the next century, the next millennium?

