

SUBJECT WOMEN**Ann Oakley**

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'Women's studies? It isn't even semantically correct!' These were the recent irritated sentiments of a director of a large Polytechnic. The idea that grammatical rules are eternal rather than changed by usage, is a long time dying! The difficulties women face in using male-stream language to try to make sense of our experiences are only just beginning to be studied so perhaps Ann Oakley can be excused for omitting any discussion of this in her book *Subject Women*; this omission is my major criticism of her work. *Subject Women* is a gathering together of recent thought on the main strands in women's lives: the struggle for participation in government through the vote and parliament, education and socialisation, work, both paid and domestic, and relationships. Oakley quotes research and study in all these areas and gives useful statistics. Unfortunately,



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not all the tables are as clear as one could have hoped.

Increasingly, a woman's work outside the home is necessary to take the two-adult household out of poverty. The 'family wage' has become a myth, for a substantial number

of male wage earners cannot support a dependent wife and children on the money they earn. A woman who is the only breadwinner is even less able to support the household. Oakley summarises this: 'The low pay of women can thus be seen as the lever that takes women and children out of poverty and as the anchor that keeps them there.'

In examining women's domestic labour within the home, Oakley points out that domestic work varies between different cultures, and different points in history. One of the rich aspects of Oakley's book is the way she constantly compares the experience of women in Western, twentieth century industrial society with women's situation in other times and places. Housework, she says, used to be much less of a service industry, more a productive one, producing clothes, food and implements. Today, the elimination of dirt and disorder, noticeable only when they are around and not in their absence, forms a large part of housework. Oakley includes a brief examination of the Marxist view of domestic labour, and whether or not it can be regarded as productive labour in the classical sense, and concludes that this is an unproductive way of considering the issue. If domestic labour doesn't fit neatly into the theories, then this is evidence of the insufficiency of the theories. Similarly she discusses theories of social class, and argues that the struggle between workers and capital is not the only struggle in society, and unity of interest within the household cannot automatically be assumed. Even classifying women by their occupation is insufficient, since this may not reflect their social position if this is mediated by the husband's position.

The most interesting parts of the book are those on relationships and power. In her discussion of relationships between the sexes, it is the men's role that Oakley sees as problematic, at a time when slowly but surely, women are achieving some economic independence. Women have their role as child bearers, and rearers of young children. If a father is not economically necessary, what is his role? 'What', Oakley asks, 'are husbands for?' Their function is not obvious, but 'wrestled out of a strictly cultural mould.'

Sisterhood, or the relation of woman to woman, has been well hidden, as demanded by the emphasis on the nuclear family and women's supposed immersion in it. Recent studies which 'discovered' the existence of lively and continuing mother-daughter and other co-operative contacts between women have been received with surprise in some quarters. They have supported, says Oakley, those psychological theories which suggest

the 'emotional secondariness' that men play in women's lives, the primacy being the relations between daughter and mother, woman friend and woman friend, 'the magnetic focus of attachment for all women throughout their adult careers of allying with men.' She does not discuss the uncomfortable side of these relationships between women, though she suggests that, contrary to accepted ideas, there is a separation in women's experience between emotional closeness and heterosexual expression.

Oakley makes a clear distinction between power, and authority, the second being the recognised and validated version of the first, and asserts that women do have some power but little authority. One view she reports is that the oppression of women may be due to a lack of understanding, by women, of the power they possess and an unwillingness or inability to use it. She also raises the question of whether women should seek to develop and legitimise the power they have in the private sphere, rather than attempting to attain authority by climbing through the public hierarchies, to the 'top' of trade unions, political parties and organs of the state. These are fundamental questions for the women's liberation movement, but they

must be tackled without forgetting the immense power the public sphere possesses to intervene in the private sphere.

Oakley concludes her work with a section on studying women, and the making of women's studies into an academic area in its own right. She suggests that there are two starting points in such studies. One is to look at measurements of women's participation in those areas previously regarded as 'men's business.' The other is to 'begin with the view of culture and gender identity generated by women', which implies an ideological difference between the sexes. It is in that difference that the crux of the matter lies, for the two ideologies are valued differently. Should women aim to be the same as men, or be pleased to be different?

Oakley's task, in a book like this, is not to answer questions, but to pose them. For those of us intensely interested in solving these questions, this work is unsatisfactory. But as a book written as a text for women's studies courses, to inform, to provide references for more detailed study, and to identify those issues which are as yet unresolved and the subject of current debate, it is extremely successful.

Vicky Seddon