ABSTRACT

THIRD WAVE GRAND THEORY?
OLD PROBLEMS, CURRENT PERSPECTIVES AND THE MACRO APPROACH

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When hit by the third wave, feminism first trembled and then changed greatly. First, the collective subject Woman/Women was severely criticized. As a result, feminist theory went into introspection. Doing so, it was almost absorbed by inner-feminist debate and by solving internal conflict for a while. In this process, the former questions concerning patriarchal power and dominance nearly slipped out of focus.

But this was by far not the only effect of third wave critique and innovation. At the same time, recent and more complex power concepts than the ones that had been formerly used have been introduced into feminist theory and explored in terms of their benefits and limits. The former quasi-natural category of Woman/Women has been replaced by the category of gender. Furthermore, the construction of genders has been stressed and any innocent take on identity categories has been discharged.

While it has undoubtedly not only been necessary, but also very exciting to conduct this critical inventory of key concepts and instruments of feminist theory, it now seems to be time to revisit the problems that had been discussed before the third wave. Do they persist? And how do they look in the light of the new paradigm, of third wave feminism and deconstructivist/(post)structuralist categories of gender?

Recent feminist approaches often criticize so called grand theories or metanarratives which claim to explain complex social phenomena by drawing on singular, comprehensive principles. While we agree that social phenomena cannot be reduced to a single cause, the danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, of loosing track of formerly well known power relations remains. Our panel will start out at exactly this point. What does the rejection of reductionism imply? And how far can we abstain from a grand or macro perspective when we attempt to understand problems of power and hierarchies?

In our panel we would like to approach this admittedly complex question from two different perspectives, both addressing the question of hierarchies implied in gender relations. Hanna Meißner will focus on revisiting the theme of capitalism when asking where gender hierarchies come from and in which ways they are socially engrained. Ina Kerner, looking at ways of explaining the functioning of the power relations structuring gender as well as ethnically defined hierarchies, will focus on revisiting the themes of sexisms and racism. Both presentations will be linked by opening as well as concluding remarks addressing the overall question and suggesting what the claims of possible “third wave grand theories” could be.

In detail, Hanna Meißner will argue that a theoretical concept of “capitalism” is necessary in order to understand the constitution of hierarchies and the mechanisms of power in contemporary Western societies. She will explore the possibilities of relating empirical phenomena to capitalist structures without deducing them in a reductionist or determinist manner.

In her paper “Differences and Power”, Ina Kerner will suggest a way of looking at (the intersections of) racism and sexism from a perspective which is led by theories of power. In the first part of her paper, she will point out ways in which the relation between racism and sexism can be seen. In the
second part of her presentation, she will look at theories of power, assessing how useful they are to explore the individual, the cultural as well as the institutional dimensions of both racism and sexism.