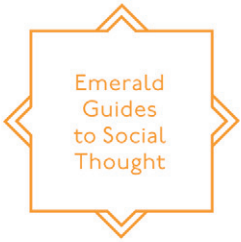

The Emerald Guide to Ann Oakley

Graham Crow

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THE EMERALD GUIDE TO ANN OAKLEY

BY

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'To Joyce, my mother'

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1

ANN OAKLEY'S IDEAS IN CONTEXT

Ann Oakley's career began against the backdrop of 1960s radicalism. This decade saw growing disquiet regarding women's inferior status to men in both the public and private spheres which prompted far-reaching reconsideration of what it meant to be a wife, a mother, a woman and a citizen. Oakley was able to bring newly acquired personal experience to bear on such issues through reaching adulthood, marrying, bearing children and starting out as a researcher during these turbulent years. Questioning the extent to which unequal social, economic and political outcomes for women and men could be explained by sex differences led her to develop the distinction between sex and gender in her path-breaking first book, written at pace while she was still studying for her PhD on the sociology of housework. The policy of the Social Science Research Council (the funding council which supported her doctoral research) of paying a lower stipend to married women on the grounds that their husbands were partially responsible for their upkeep brought home the banality of everyday inequality between women and men, as did the commonplace expression of being 'just' a housewife as an

indication of lower standing. The study of sociology expanded rapidly in the United Kingdom in the 1960s, but its then mainstream view emphasised the powerful forces of socialisation moulding people for distinctive sex roles that were supposedly functional for the wider social system. By contrast, dissident voices portrayed marriage and the family as sites of oppression which people were conditioned (even brainwashed) to accept. Contestation of wider ideas about masculinity and femininity and their related mystiques followed. Feminist investigations revealed how mainstream thinking turned out to be 'malestream' (that is, embedded in a set of assumptions containing systematic biases against women). This opened up avenues of enquiry that continue to reverberate more than half a century later.

Oakley took readily to debating inequalities between the sexes and gender politics more generally and was already cultivating her capacity to approach these issues from surprising angles. The work of her father, the eminent Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics (LSE) Richard Titmuss, included studies of the implications for social policy of the changing position of women. These may have been among those of his writings that she as a teenager helped him to prepare for publication (for example, by checking referencing, about which, she later recalled, he was not always scrupulous). Her father's academic colleagues to whom she was introduced included Barbara Wootton, whose elevation to the House of Lords enabled her to do something about the sex discrimination her research had highlighted, as Oakley observed in the biography of the Baroness that she would later write. As an undergraduate at the University of Oxford, Oakley criticised the sociology of the family that she encountered, considering its male authors complacent. She was, however, enthused by Charles Wright Mills's arguments regarding the sociological imagination and

his way of envisaging how social arrangements could be radically different and, moreover, written about accessibly. Her direct experience of marriage, motherhood and housework confirmed her sense of the discordance between idealised portrayals and mundane realities, and this motivated her to challenge prevailing myths. From the outset, her research deployed the simple but effective technique of directing attention to disconcerting truths, such as pointing out the number of hours spent on housework, or the unsustainable combination of biological and social constructionist elements in the concept of sex roles. Feminism has the capacity to shock people who hold common sense points of view, and Oakley used this to challenge women's subordinate position and to make the case against sexism, furthering the broader endeavour of taking women seriously in a man's world.

Second wave feminism's revitalisation of the women's movement emphasised the collective, sisterly nature of contesting male domination and masculine norms. Much would have remained hidden without the myriad contributions to the common cause of questioning and seeking to replace hidebound social arrangements which defined women through their relationship to men. An important first step was to identify the issues that confronted women. Betty Friedan's best-selling 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* described women's sense of unease at their situation, designating it a problem that had no name. This opened the way to the discovery, sometimes via rediscovery, of the reasons for women's lack of recognition or appreciation in social life and for the disproportionate attention paid to men in supposedly scientific accounts of how society operates. Women's invisibility was exemplified by housework and its treatment as something other than work, something secondary to the main event of employment and thus a trivial concern. Earlier generations of women writers (including Wootton) had reflected on the

conundrum of housework being unpaid when undertaken by a family member but paid when performed as a service, and contesting this double standard was central to the 1970s campaign for wages for housework. On a more theoretical level, participants in the domestic labour debate sought to grasp the relationship between housework and capitalism, although not all feminists shared this preoccupation. The different visions of socialist, radical and other strands of feminist thinking reflected the wide range of perspectives available between whose adherents vigorous dialogues took place, including with regard to who or what constituted 'the main enemy' of the Women's Liberation Movement. These debates were sometimes conducted more brusquely than was Oakley's preference, mirroring rather than escaping the combative academic conventions from which she also felt alienated.

Feminist perspectives directed attention to a host of previously-neglected topics besides housework that were central to women's lives including everyday harassment, domestic violence, household budgeting, food, emotions, and childbirth. Childbirth and motherhood provided the subject matter for Oakley's next major project and followed her housework study's use of interview material to allow women's voices more of a hearing. These accounts of becoming a mother contradicted the prevailing viewpoints and practices of the medical professionals who controlled the process of human reproduction, thereby challenging their professional expertise. Oakley's own experience while pregnant of service provision being male-dominated was consistent with not only the numerical preponderance of male obstetricians but also their practice of treating women's bodies as machines that had developed a fault and needed repair. By contrast, midwives were predominantly women who approached maternity as a normal occurrence and whose history of practice was less

medicalised. The reassertion of the case for female control of childbirth had both direct practical implications and consequences for theoretical analyses about the nature and purpose of knowledge and its production, dissemination and contestation in patriarchal societies. Ensuing debates extended to consideration of the methodological foundations of knowledge claims and counter claims about such issues. These encounters could be abrasive, as the use of the term 'paradigm wars' to describe them indicates. To many in the anti-positivist camp Oakley's qualitative research appeared to provide support for their position in this long-running conflict, but her endorsement of quantitative methods (and, in particular, randomised controlled trials) reduced her partisan appeal. Opinions vary on how long the paradigm wars lasted, but when eventually they were succeeded by a more tolerant and pluralistic détente Oakley could feel vindicated regarding the positions she had adopted.

Oakley's work is characterised by preparedness to experiment with various presentational formats. Mindful of the need of the growing numbers of students on women's studies courses for an accessible textbook she wrote one that she considered might also profitably be read by men. Her commitment to put into practice the ambition of reaching general as well as academic audiences for her research led to appearances on popular radio and television programmes, to writing for mass-circulation magazines and to weaving her ideas into further literary forms, such as novels, poetry and autobiography. Deploying means of revealing the nature of the world other than those associated with conventional scientific modes of publication has a long history that was reinvigorated by the intellectual trend known as post-modernism. The demolition of the much-vaunted Pruitt-Igoe public housing scheme in the USA in 1972 represented a key moment of disenchantment with modernist

thinking that extended beyond the failure of architectural projects into numerous practical fields from penal policy to economic development strategies. The critique of professional expertise that post-modernists advanced along with their objections to the deployment of binary oppositions and their openness to being playful with form bore points of connection to Oakley's work. She was, however, unconvinced by post-modernists' relativism and their scepticism regarding attempts to influence policy-makers in the pursuit of securing improvements in people's lives, that is, to academics making a practical difference. Moreover, post-modernist thinking posed a fundamental challenge to many feminists by problematising the core category of women. Although not everyone agreed with Oakley's description of post-modernism as delusional or suicidal, she was far from alone in doubting post-modernists' capacity to confront political challenges effectively. This issue's importance was crystallised by a sustained backlash against feminism, with various forces seeking to prevent further progress, if not to reverse altogether the gains made by the women's movement.

Oakley did criticise science and scientists on several grounds, such as their predisposition to treat hysteria as a condition to which women were uniquely vulnerable, and related gender biases embodied in their starting assumptions. She was, however, also keen to acknowledge and promote the value of rigorous scientific endeavour. In the context of the backlash against feminism, and of welfare state retrenchment and social polarisation, she highlighted the need for systematic evidence concerning the extent to which moves towards greater gender equality had been achieved or frustrated. The direction of travel of Oakley's career in the 1980s was towards policy-relevant research, and the establishment in 1990 of the Social Science Research Unit with her as Director (followed shortly after by being made Professor of Sociology

and Social Policy) facilitated her pursuit of practical feminism in other fields besides health such as education, social work and relationships within families. Systematic reviewing of evidence was central to this agenda because without it the elementary goal of knowledge being cumulative is much harder to achieve. In particular, systematic reviews allow proper assessments to be made of policy interventions; initiatives do not always have the impact intended, and on occasion they have the opposite effect. Systematic reviewing represented for Oakley the opportunity for sociologists to move beyond finding what they hoped or expected to find. It required them to think more rigorously about research design and data analysis, although treating it as a giant leap for the discipline may yet turn out to have been premature. In terms of her own trajectory it was less of a revolutionary change than a natural progression from her earlier work, although some people were surprised by it. In her view, methodological choices should be determined by the appropriateness of the tools to the task in hand, not by the slavish adherence to only one approach which Alvin Gouldner termed methodolatry.

The significance of research context was highlighted when Oakley returned to investigating the process of becoming a mother as both a re-study and a follow-up study more than three decades on from her original project. This required paying attention to changes in the circumstances in which women became mothers but also to continuities. Mothers in the new century came from a more diverse set of households and were typically older than their 1970s counterparts; they were also much more likely to have Caesarean births and to be discharged from hospital more rapidly. Despite these changes, and the need to update some questions' wording, many of the original study's findings about motherhood, including its travails, continued to apply. Similar opportunities for taking stock of developments had presented themselves when writing introductions to new

editions of books and other published material. Fresh generations of readers needed to be provided with background information about the intellectual, political and personal contexts in which the original outputs had been produced, and the things that Oakley needed to explain expanded as the time distance from the originals' publication dates grew. Her earlier work may have been open to criticism from her later self as at times naïve or suffering from other shortcomings, but it deserved to be judged as a product of its time. Some of the positions and language adopted several decades previously have, unsurprisingly, come to seem anachronistic, or alternatively commonplace and unremarkable for those ideas that have permeated mainstream thinking. Reflections on earlier work understandably prompt researchers to consider the nature and direction of their career trajectories. In Oakley's case this extended to considering the seriousness of the obstacles encountered that made it difficult to plan ahead, especially around combining motherhood and paid work, even more so where that paid work took the form of a succession of short-term contracts. She reflected on how this and the serendipity involved in moving from one project to another make it inappropriate to treat her achievements as constituting a career, at least in the conventional sense of that term. Other people's accounts of apparently effortless career progression may be plausible, but in many cases the suspicion remains of sanitisation of the record to support a comforting fable, or a hagiographic legend.

The obstacles to women's career opportunities and ways of overcoming them represent long-standing concerns for feminists. Oakley has engaged with this important issue at various points. Her study of housework led to critical reflections on women's invisibility to (or at least inadequate representation by) the mainstream sociologists of the time who took their lead from the so-called founding fathers of the discipline. Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and others stood charged not only with