8 Feminism and Basic Income

8.1 THE GENDERED CITIZEN

The task we face in this chapter and the next is slightly different from that of the previous three. There is no such thing as a feminist BI, although we shall see in section 8.5 that Participation Income fulfils some of the objectives of a feminist social policy. Instead, the task is to relate BI to other pro-feminist and pro-ecologist reform proposals in order to gauge its significance to these two sets of political ideas. We begin with feminism, the definition of which is our first problem: to what extent does it interact with other ideologies across the political spectrum? At the risk of oversimplification I am going to proceed on the following assumption: that feminism should be treated partly as a distinct set of ideas and partly as something which interfaces most productively with left-wing political ideas, including some aspects of welfare collectivism. I appreciate that this risks upsetting conservatives and those on the radical right who insist that the free market and/or the traditional family is the best means of promoting women’s interests. Space does not allow us to consider here the many varieties of feminisms, e.g. black; disabled; lesbian.

As we enter the next century feminism occupies a curious position in Western societies. In some respects it has become an orthodoxy of the age whose influence on the twentieth century, although perhaps more in evidence culturally than politically, has been extensive. In other respects it resembles the unwanted but tolerated guest at a club whose chief members are still predominantly male. In other words, feminism is somehow both an insider and an outsider, an exile from the very society which it has done a great deal to shape. This dual location is partly due to feminists’ own recognition that the distance they have gone in successfully reforming society is still modest when compared to the distance yet to travel; that, therefore, it is best to keep a critical distance. It is also due to the subtle and not-so-subtle victories scored by the anti-feminist backlash which periodically manifests itself in various guises.
Feminism’s ambivalence *vis-à-vis* existing society is paralleled by its ambivalence towards social policies. The gender bias of the welfare state has been considerable and yet significant improvements have been made in recent years, partly due to the critiques and recommendations which pro-feminist commentators themselves have brought to bear. At the same time, there is obviously so much that remains to be done. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the attractions, or otherwise, of BI to feminists and to examine how a BI could relate to the various reform proposals which feminists make regarding the welfare state.

To begin with, what does feminism have to say about the concept of citizenship?¹ The most extensive recent treatment of citizenship from a feminist point of view has been provided by Ruth Lister (1997; cf. Vogel, 1991; Pascall, 1993; Lister, 1996; Walby, 1997: 166–79) who discusses citizenship according to categories and distinctions that are adaptable to the working definition which we have been returning to throughout Part II: the equal status of all members of a political community.

Should women’s citizenship rest upon their *equality* with men or their *difference from* men (Bryson, 1992; cf. Phillips, 1992)? This question is a crucial one since equality would seem to imply divesting citizenship of its gendered dimensions (feminine as well as masculine), whereas difference would seem to imply that citizenship has to be, and should be, thought of in gender-specific ways – although even if citizenship is an inherently gendered concept it does not necessarily have to imply hierarchies of domination and subordination. The problem with an approach based upon the notion of ‘equal citizenship’ is that, despite the appeal to gender-neutrality, it might actually require women to become more like men if they are to be thought of as equals: adopting their values, traits and discourses (Flax, 1992). The problem with an approach based upon ‘differential citizenship’ is that those differences might be allowed to ossify so that women become defined purely as ‘other’: for instance, as ‘emotive care-givers’ (Dietz, 1985). Lister (1997: 91–100), therefore, is one of a growing band who would prefer a ‘critical synthesis’ of equality and difference (cf. Pateman, 1989; Young, 1989; Phillips, 1991; Bock and James, 1992; Mouffe, 1993). This, she observes, is entirely possible so long as we remember that equality and difference need not be treated as binary opposites but can, in fact, be mutually inclusive: equality only has meaning by reference to difference and vice versa. Therefore, the kind of either/or question with which this paragraph started is misleading