

FEMINISM OF COLOR CHALLENGES WHITE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND COLOR-BLIND ECO-FEMINISM

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INTRODUCTION

In this work I am offering a theoretical contribution meant to enhance our comprehension of the relationship between sociology and feminism – looking for some answers and proposing to add, in our discussion of the subject matter, an important viewpoint by using the race/ethnicity prism. In the first part, I am going to proceed from question to question – not necessarily trying to answer all of them – by looking to both sociological contemporary literature and the classics.

In the second part, addressing questions four and five, I will look at the eco-feminist milieu, its dichotomies and contradictions.

Engendered thinking, after decades of struggle is today a recognized – at times well established – type of *located knowledge* (Braidotti, 1996; Haraway, 1997). My contribution goes in the direction of highlighting the many different ways in which a similar struggle is still going on: for recognition and inclusions of women of color feminist theory – especially from the margins (hooks, 2000) – in the academic milieu. By margins I mean what is usually referred to as peripheral, both geographically and conceptually: so called Third World countries; former colonies; rural areas in industrialized countries; indigenous areas of resistance and permanence of domestic modes of production. We can find margins also far away

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from the borders – numerous intersection points between race and gender with other categories (such as class and sexual preferences) within the ‘center’ itself of capitalistically advanced countries (Corradi, 1997, 1993).

The first question I want to focus on is the following: *when doesn’t feminist theory look like feminist theory?* I am puzzled by the subversive impact of feminist theory that does not wear those ‘admission clothes’ requested to be published or to be enabled of speaking in social sciences scholarly meetings. What does it happen when the elite jargon and its format are missing, or when the style is considered to be ‘unacceptable’ – among those who are charged with being abstract, and deciding who is going to be given the right of a word in the academic environment (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984).

Gatekeepers are legitimated not just by sincere white theory enthusiasts: many do not see other theory than the one they have always known – in so strengthening the whole Eurocentric (located) knowledge, and its criteria, as universal. Feminist theory is not exempt from such short-sightedness. Teresa de Lauretis (1996) strongly criticizes what she defines as a redefinition of ‘feminist theory’ so expanded and flexible that it includes virtually any writing, visualization or performance that bears witness to women’s oppression.

While many feminist sociologists are aware of the trend toward authoritarian forms of globalization and the ‘new world order’ most of us didn’t envision (yet) how such processes could impact the women’s movement. In particular, we didn’t take into consideration a possible tension in favor of what is called *pensiero unico*¹ (see Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984) even within the feminist area – which has nothing to do with ‘the dream of a common language’ desired by Adrienne Rich (1996). If our common language is still dictated by dominant values and self-referential systems of legitimation, no theory will be produced about what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) called ‘interlocking categories of oppression’ referring to the many connections between class, race, gender and sexual preferences, and the unified experience within each individual.

Given these premises, the second question I wish to address is the following: *to what extent is **white** feminism challenging the heritage of sociology?* Most of white feminism is not committed to challenging the logic and the language of white male theory in our discipline: white feminism’s limits are marked by the attempt to negotiate space, visibility, and recognition *with respect to some given rules* – a highly defensive and unchallenging way of dealing with power – for a critical thinker! Concretely, white feminism *did* actually change – in the last decades – with respect to categories of analysis and directions of research. It changed the sociology of the family, sociology of work, and political sociology; and it affected most fields in social sciences, by impacting a discipline with new theory, methodology and empirical research.

What feminism still doesn't dare to challenge relates first to the foundations themselves of white sociology, i.e. classical theory; and, second, *to the location of those who produce contemporary theory today*. The latter poses new questions of democratization and inclusion from a class/race/gender and sexual preferences perspective—and raises the old sociological question: *knowledge for whom, knowledge for what*, as still worthy of reflection.

The third question – which logically follows – is: *how feminism of color is challenging both the heritage of sociology and white feminist theory (not necessarily in this order)*. Far away from the academic environment, since the Combahee River Collective statement (1977) – a major document in the United States – black feminism taught a lesson on simultaneity of different forms of oppressions, and contributed to opening a discourse of embodied knowledge and the necessity of self-location in theory and in practice.

This is skillfully recognized by white feminist and lesbian theoretician Adrienne Rich (1996) who points out that while white women have been marginalized as women, their lived experience as white has led them to see feminist theory as something made only by white women and to marginalize others.

Rich also questions the very foundations of white male theory in the United States. She ends by wondering about issues many of us ponder: why do we study Marx and Durkheim? I would add: why do most sociologists ignore W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, C. R. L. James? Why has white-centered classical theory in the United States and in European countries not yet adequately engaged with these texts?

The fourth question is an interlocutory one: *where are we going to, in terms of both, feminist theory and sociological theory?* I am especially interested in the appealing area of interface among the two, that is in the inbetweenness of a 'double belonging' that makes some of us define ourselves, subversively, as a 'feminist sociologist', instead of accepting the label of 'a feminist and a sociologist' – a quite comfortable separation, well established, almost a guarantee of business as usual.

As in gendered language the use of male "neutrals" has rendered invisible women, in political and sociological theory "feminism" – without any race/ethnicity characterization – has rendered women of color invisible.

For this reason, a distinction is necessary today: we refer to white feminist theory as the production of (mostly) white women versus women of color feminist theory produced by (mostly) non-white women.

Let us examine, for instance, the relationships between nature and culture. Here, I wish to address the fourth question in the context of a specific branch

of feminism: Western eco-feminism (Shiva, 1998). By saying that mainstream eco-feminism is part of white feminism, I do not ignore or dismiss the contribution of women of color in the eco-feminist debate, and the existence of a non-Western eco-feminist theory (Shiva, 1998). Rather, I wish to point out that most categories and concepts of eco-feminism come thoughtlessly from a Western perspective, even when these concepts are (more or less) successfully used or adapted to explain non-Western situations.

The same process happened in science: white male science is still white and male (even when those who operate in this field may be female and/or non-white) *precisely because science embodies the values of those who created it*. As a social construct, it tends to reflect scientists' class, race and gender, their interests and priorities, their shared *Weltanschauungen*.

Such a matter can be easily proven by considering (white) eco-feminism: While challenging patriarchal heritage, most eco-feminists still refer to dichotomous concepts – such as essentialism and constructionism – which are at the base of both feminist and sociological analysis and theory. Yet, some are trying to overcome what I believe are false boundaries between nature and culture. Among them, eco-marxist Nancy Hartsock (1987, p. 45) argues that “As embodied humans we are . . . inextricably both natural and social.”

Likewise, the socialist eco-feminist Mary Mellor (1997) engages in a brilliant polemic against both romantic essentialism and cultural-historical materialism, by posing a simple question: “Is it a relationship of affinity, of a unity of spirit/biology between women and nature, or the sharing of a socially constructed relationship of exploitation?” Her answer is radical: such a dichotomy should be considered a contradiction itself.

It appears as a dichotomy if viewed through male defined reality; when viewed from the perspective of women's lives the dichotomy can clearly be seen as a contradiction. The male construction of a social world presupposes its material base in women's time and work. When women try to articulate a perspective that reflects their social condition, they are accused of essentialism, or at least detracting from the 'primary' economic struggle (p. 45).

Such a dichotomous way of theorizing affects the social sciences in general, with many consequences and either/or dilemmas in research and analysis. These concepts are well developed by Native American feminist Lee Maracle (1996) in her critical work, *I am woman. A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*. Maracle analyses the dualism between what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘normal’, i.e. what is socially constructed as acceptable behavior. At times, what is natural is not normal from the point of view of white culture, social values and behaviors – and vice versa.

Maracle (1996, p. 136) also argues that “. . . what is abnormal is very often natural. Internalized racism (for example) is the natural response to the unnatural

condition of racism.” Her conclusion about the dualism between may sound as an accusation to intellectual whites: it is bread for our reflections.

If you really want to know the difference between white male perception and everyone else's, it can best be summed up as the difference between normal and natural. One is based on a mathematical formula and is completely divorced from any sense of humanity. The other is born of the natural world and is dependent on humanity for its definition. Nothing more on white man need to be said (p. 136).

Much more, I believe, needs to be said about white women, their relationships with the natural world, with their own body, and with environmental changes increasingly leading to illness.

The fifth question I want to posit is the following: *what is white women's theory about the body and health, identity politics and social movements?* Since divisions within feminist theory are very often reflections of existing social division, looking at the empirical world is a must. In the following paragraphs I will highlight a specific contended arena – where issues related to body, health, ethnic and sexual identity are well connected in a social movement: breast cancer activism.

Breast cancer activism, because of its roots in the women's movement, seems to have inherited these features of insensitivity toward uneducated women – women who ask for mammography instead of being critical of intrusive means of detection; poor women who have ‘backward attitudes’ about safe sex; minority women who have less time for meetings and too many children to take care of. At times, the word ‘racist’ has been used to define the agenda of (mostly white) breast cancer activists – not because of behaviours willingly meant to exclude somebody a priori, but because of the systematic failure in addressing issues that are important among non-whites (Corradi, 1995).

The same issue is well reflected in the environmental movement. As breast cancer activist and writer Judy Brady (1994, p. 189) explains,

The environmental movement at this point is in two camps: first there is the white movement which hugs trees and worries about dolphins. They are not wrong but in a sense they stay at the periphery of other issues. And then there is a movement that is still ‘underground’ in the sense that it doesn't get coverage in any of the press: the environmental justice movement that is fighting against lead poisoning in their kids and toxic waste dumps, and against Chevron . . . Most of these groups are mad up of people of color because in this country those people are usually poor – and we are a racist culture – and I don't see these white women making any kind of alliances with those people of color. They may have representatives of people of color in their movement, but when it comes to the political agenda, a real alliance is not going to happen in any near future for sure.

Starting with the axiom that the body is a place of resistance (Corradi, 1995), one of the issues I considered during the nineties is concerned with how women

perceive the illness and its causes – after a cancer diagnosis. Why each woman activist interviewed decided to personally join the cancer movement? Even though my research on the subject is qualitative and cannot be in any way generalized, white activists seem to feel dispossessed as individuals, after a cancer diagnosis: something has been taken away from them – the individual right to be healthy. Women of color tend to feel the problem in terms of a collective threat: if women get cancer, the whole community is under attack.

There are probably many different reasons to explain this. Some may be found in women of color feminist discourse, whereas body is conceptualized as “what we are”, instead of something we own. Another relies upon the centrality of body as interface between nature and culture, in a dialectical unity – without promoting separations between body, mind and soul. As Italian sociologist Renato Stella (1996, p. 48) argues,

“the principle that distinguish Nature and Culture is the same principle that separates the Individual from Society and Body from Soul.”

In Marx, Durkheim and Weber, body is absent or implicit mainly because of the dichotomy body/mind – or body/soul. Body “does not produce meaning” nor social action in Weber. It is mostly ‘labor force’ in Marx; and it is considered to be ‘organically irrelevant’ in Durkheim – who believes Body and Soul are both to be submitted to the Reason, since Body is trivial and Soul is superstition – i.e. absence of knowledge. In fact, he observes, animals do not commit suicide because they are made just of body. And women commit less suicide since they are given less intellect.

In Weber body is the conjunction of Nature and Culture, yet sociologically is analyzed only as object/subject of power and strength – from which descend the physical and mental inferiority of women. The risk of naturalizing women, pregnancy, mothering is obviously present in most of (unchallenged) classical sociological theory. Consequently, such a risk is not absent in feminist writings. On reproduction and child-rearing, I agree with Mary Mellor (1997), who observes that not all woman are or wish to be mothers and that the tasks associated with mothering are not related to biology and can be performed by either men or women.²

Surprisingly enough, indigenous theory – especially that in which subversive subjects are engaged in resistance to annihilation – from the very beginning has included women’s visions of a different society, starting from roles and power relationship between genders – instead of procrastinating the solution of ‘women’s issues’ to some later “post-revolutionary” phase. This is the case of Mayan women in the Mexican southeast tribal area of Chiapas – at the border with Guatemala. Many indigenous communities – about three million persons,

belonging to seven different ethnic Mayan groups – have decided to resist land expropriation. This has created low-intensity war zone.³ Given the gravity of the situation for the rebellious Zapatista communities and their most vulnerable members, it is noteworthy that the mistake of considering women's claims as a secondary issue was avoided. This contrasts sharply with typical revolutions in which gender problems have been seen as "something we can deal with later on" – a not so urgent issue (Corradi, 1997).

From the margins, indigenous women have been able to negotiate veto power as well as the strategy and the political direction of rapidly changing processes.

For Mexicans, who were accustomed to associating politics strictly with men, the appearance of the Zapatista women on television, in newspapers and in their own towns was a shocking and inspirational departure from political tradition (Davis and Capozza, 1999, p. 2).

In a 'globalized' Mexico, whose ruling class signed NAFTA agreements, winds of gender struggle rose from its margins: more precisely, from 'the other half of the jungle.' The Zapatista rebels had to approve – upon the organized female pressure – a Revolutionary Women's Law.⁴ This was the first coded law the uprising indigenous community processed and applauded. Indigenous women are those who face the risk of extinction to a greater extent. When their ecosystem is under attack, their health and their survival itself is threatened. This un-deniable fact may contain some explanation of why illiterate women are able to negotiate a gendered political space, without going through processes of masculinization of their identities and needs.

CONCLUSION

Body presents a physical limit to capitalism also and in subjective terms: *the awareness of untimely and avoidable deaths does stimulate political growth* among those who are hit – or at risk – of life-threatening illness. Body should be central in any theory of social action. This is true, as we have seen in cancer activism and indigenous movements – both characteristics of strong women's leadership.

The body is an environment (Corradi, in press). As Vandana Shiva (1998) pointed out, ecology which we commonly refer to nature comes from the Greek word *oikos* (household). The home as cultural matter – the home as natural matter. Just westerners can do distinctions . . .

Nira Yuval-Davis (1998), goes further in the analysis:

For western feminists, as members of a hegemonic collectivity, their membership in the collectivity and its implications for their positioning was often rendered invisible, while Third World Women acutely experience their being part of a subjugated collectivity and

often did not see autonomous space for themselves to organize as feminists . . . In this non-dialogue, Third World women would feel that Western women were constructing them solely in terms of what seemed to them to be barbaric customs and subjugation, without taking into account the social and economic context in which they existed. Third World women would thus be defined in terms of their 'problems' or their 'achievements' in relation to an imagined free white liberal democracy. This had the effect of removing them (and the 'liberal' democracy) from history, freezing them in time and space, and eternally constructing them as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of western feminism . . . differences, rather than being acknowledged, have been interpreted by those holding the hegemonic power within the movement as mainly reflections of different stages of consciousness.

I would like to put forward Native American feminist sociologist Lee Maracle's provoking question, with which she gives closure to her discussion. And I would also like to turn such a question to all of us feminist sociologists, since we are part – as committed intellectuals – of the more general women's social movement.

A good number of non-white women have addressed the women's movement and decried the fact that we are outside the women's movement (. . .). That white women of North America are racist and that they define the movement in accordance with their own narrow perspective should not surprise us. White people define everything in terms of their own people, and then very magnanimously open the door as we prove ourselves to be civilized. Such is the nature of racism. If we don't escape learning it, can we expect that they should? We are part of a global movement in the world, struggling for emancipation. Women worldwide will define the movement and we are among them. Until white women can come to us on our own terms, we ought to leave the door closed. *Do we really want to be part of a movement that sees the majority as the periphery and the minority as the center?*

NOTES

1. One market – one thought. *Pensiero unico* – in a globalized neo-liberal market economy refers to something more than a dominant (or hegemonic) way of thinking. As in mathematics, the 'one and only one solution' may shape the logics – the 'one and only one' theoretical code may shape the consciousness of the theoretician. *Pensiero unico* is difficult to translate: it became a common expression in the Italian debate around the New World Order in the last few years. It is a totalitarian way of thinking, which tends to obliterate all different forms of thinking.

2. As I would like to add, mothering has not the same social meaning everywhere – and in different cultures it tends to include different tasks. A comparison I made in Tamil between a matriarchal and a patriarchal societies, located few miles away from each other, shows how childrearing may vary considerably, according to the place women occupy and their status.

3. Since 1994, more than 70,000 troops (roughly one-third of the Mexican Army) have been stationed in Chiapas. 'Women fear they will be raped or accosted by the soldiers if they leave their homes to do their laundry or work in the fields. In some

cases, the soldiers have introduced prostitution and drug use in villages, according to indigenous organizations' (Capozza, November 1999, p. 4).

4. What follows is my working translation of the Women's Revolutionary Law:
 1. Women – with no exception due to race, beliefs, color, political ideas – have the same rights in participating to the revolutionary struggle with the role and degree their own will and capacities determine.
 2. Women have the right to work and receive fair compensation.
 3. Women have the right to decide the number of children they can give birth to and take care of.
 4. Women have the right to participate to community issues and be in charge, if elected in a free and democratic way.
 5. Women and their children have the right to a primary attention when it comes to health and nutrition.
 6. Women have the right to education.
 7. Women have the right to choose their companion and should not be forced to agree to a marriage.
 8. No woman will be hit or physically mistreated neither by family member nor by others. The crimes of attempted rape or rape will be punished severely.
 9. Women will be in charge of leading the organization and the revolutionary armed forces.
 10. Women will have all rights and dues included in revolutionary laws and regulations.'

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