

On Feminism & Consciousness: Theory at the Operational Level

This exam is unlike most others I have written, in that I must follow the constructs of two different sections without a grand narrative to tie the paper together. What I hope to achieve, though, is an analysis of the following theory and theorists in terms of the localities and individuals that compose our larger society, so that we might work towards a more sustainable future for women and men alike.

The first of the 'piles' that I found is what I would term SEX & SOCIETY: OPPRESSION AS DESERVED. Grouped together in this pile, Angela Davis, Catharine MacKinnon, and Adrienne Rich each speak to a distinct voice in terms of the sexual oppression that women in culture face every day, an oppression that is seen as justified by a patriarchy that wants women to fulfill the 'traditional' role of mother, wife, and object.

Rich, in *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience*, details the eight ways in which male power is exercised in society today; the exhaustive list of means by which to control sexuality and relationships that men use against women is stunning in both its sheer length and in its viciousness. It demonstrates the terms of the battle, the lengths that men will go to enforce heterosexuality (of the male kind) on women and deny the proper existence of lesbian relationships and interests. "I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly female experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences."¹ Rich talks of both the lesbian existence and the lesbian continuum in her article, so that we may further understand the context for the lives of women and the vitality and autonomy of their bodies. "Women identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality."²

MacKinnon talks of the oppressive, even violent nature of male sexuality in a culture that celebrates the objectification of women because it knows no other framework by which to consider sex. The hierarchy of male dominance happens on account of sex to the point that it is not just allowed, but preferred; it envelops our society so that even pornography and rape are reconsidered and perhaps even to some extent excused, instead of being seen as the extensions and products of male dominant sexuality. "To say that rape is violence not sex

¹ Rich, 349.

² Rich, 352.

preserves the 'sex is good' norm by simply distinguishing forced sex as 'not sex,' whether it means sex to the perpetrator or even, later, to the victim, who has difficulty experiencing sex without reexperiencing the rape."³ Men perceive women to always 'wanting it', a perception that can only be reinforced and expanded through pornography, about which MacKinnon notes "such formal data as exist on the relationship between pornography and male sexual arousal tend to substantiate this connection between gender hierarchy and male sexuality."⁴

Davis speaks to the problems faced by women in a society that seeks to govern reproduction without first addressing technology, racism, and socio-economic policies. Maternity and pregnancy seem to be controlled by everybody but women, a historical construction that continues to the present day. "It is not difficult to envision this contemporary ideological mystification of motherhood as central to the efforts to deny all women the legal rights that would shift the politics of reproduction toward a recognition of our autonomy with respect to the biological functions of our bodies."⁵ Simply addressing reproduction as an act cannot help women today; "the social/economic/political circumstances that oppress and marginalize women ... cannot be ignored without affirming the same structures of domination...."⁶

My second pile is THEORY & KNOWLEDGE: OPPRESSION AS CONSTRUCTED. This consists of Patricia Hill Collins, Norma Alarcón, and Heidi Hartmann, each of whom addresses different aspects of modern (and postmodern) theory and the creation of knowledge in the academy and in political organization. The discourse that they are struggling against is one that all women must struggle against, for it embodies the barriers to a true discussion of patriarchy and female autonomy. In their analysis of the methods how women are oppressed (both consciously and unwittingly), we see both the threats and corrections to modern feminist scholarship.

Hartmann examines the deficiencies in Marxism that does not allow for a true accounting of the feminist question; the framework of analysis found in Marxism, based on historical materialism and focused on the economic forms of oppression, has little room for a radical feminist analysis of male hierarchy and patriarchy

³ MacKinnon, 479.

⁴ MacKinnon, 483.

⁵ Davis, 509.

⁶ Davis, 514.

as major player, if not the main player, in women's oppression. Hartmann says that "feminist analysis by itself is inadequate because it has been blind to history and insufficiently materialist. Both Marxist analysis ... and feminist analysis ... must be drawn upon if we are to understand the development of western capitalist societies and the predicament of women within them."⁷ Hartmann wants a clearer discussion and distinction to be made between the goals and means of both movements/systems, that women must fight for themselves and for a society of interdependency.

Alarcón addresses the current state of postmodern theory in its relation to the book *This Bridge Called My Back*. The discourse of postmodernity is based on rules and conventions that serves to hide relationships and differences, which is inconsistent with feminism. "It is clear, however, that even as *Bridge* becomes a resource for the Anglo-American feminist theory classroom and syllabus, there's a tendency to deny differences if those differences pose a threat to the 'common denominator category.'"⁸ The issue of difference threatens the coherence of feminist theory in the viewpoint of those who control the discussion; the unifying paradigm of gender may be split asunder by various standpoints seeking to correct distortions about women's conditions. This becomes important later on with the discussion of the third-world feminists; indeed, Alarcón states that "With gender as the central concept in feminist thinking, epistemology is flattened out in such a way that we lose sight of the complex and multiple ways in which the subject and object of possible experience can be constituted."⁹

Collins wants to reframe the current path of black feminism in the academy; her analysis of the epistemology that dominates the discussion in scholarly circles—Eurocentric masculinity—illustrates the need on the part of African-American women to take back their theory. She describes the three groups that Afrocentric feminist thought must address and confront, noting that the dilemma is to satisfy each; "For Black women who are agents of knowledge, the marginality that accompanies outsider-within status can be the source of both frustration and creativity."¹⁰ The idea of absolute truths and objectivity is a construct of "elite white men"; the approach of relativism says that truth is all a matter of interpretation. Collins wants Black

⁷ Hartmann, 356.

⁸ Alarcón, 490.

⁹ Alarcón, 491.

¹⁰ Collins, 506.

feminist thought to be an alternative to these forms of producing knowledge, as a way to counter the systems created by Eurocentric masculinist epistemology and help alleviate the oppression of women's knowledge.

The third pile is allied with the previous one, in that the knowledge created by a society needs to be interpreted by individuals. Judith Butler, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Carol Gilligan form *IDENTITY & BOUNDARY: OPPRESSION AS DEFINED*. Theorizing on the systems that categorize women not just among themselves through groups and cultures, but also within themselves by way of taboos and morality, these three address the greater dialogue that exists outside of academia.

Gilligan argues that when women make decisions, they are forced to do so between thoughts of the self and the greater system that envelops them, such as the concept of femininity. This manifests itself in various issues, but most notably is reproduction rights. "However, while society may affirm publicly the woman's right to choose for herself, the exercise of such choice brings her privately into conflict with the conventions of femininity, particularly the moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice."¹¹ This balance between the self and morality, between maturity and responsibility, highlights a problem faced by women who seek to personalize conflicts in order to alleviate injustice; "The consequence of women's moral judgment proceeds from an initial concern with survival to a focus on goodness and finally to a reflective understanding of care as the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflicts in human relationships."¹²

Butler wants to address questions of categorization in regards to women and gender, the generalization of bodies as distinct from the mind within or from the culture outside. Order is maintained in society through the use of boundaries, social taboos institute and maintain those boundaries with respect to the body and its surface. "If the body is synecdochal for the social system *per se* or a site on which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment."¹³ The construction of 'inner' and 'outer', of 'body' and 'soul' as separate and in need of boundaries signifies a society that wants to have the ability to exclude and punish that which is subversive. "If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting

¹¹ Gilligan, 369.

¹² Gilligan, 372.

¹³ Butler, 498.

identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction."¹⁴

Crenshaw focuses not so much on the theoretical concepts of these divisions, but instead on the policy and movement side of feminist politics. Identity-based politics categorizes people and groups which can allow for empowerment within, but can lead to unworkable division outside. "And so, when those theories and practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling."¹⁵ Race, gender, and class shape our identities and the policies predicated on those identities, such as with regards to women who face abusive relationships and the perceptions of communities in which such abuse occurs. Furthermore, if we believe differences to be real, then they are real; "But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that the category has no significance in our world."¹⁶

The idea of interesectionality forms the basis of the fourth pile, CULTURE & THE WEST: OPPRESSION AS LEARNED. In this group are Winona LaDuke, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chandra Mohanty, and Uma Narayan. Their articles are perhaps more similar to each other in content than in the other piles, but that must not detract from the content itself; theirs is a response to both the West and to the Third World, each of which seeks at various intervals to deny these women and their experiences. Their existence, however, cannot be repudiated; the dichotomy they see and attack, on the other hand, can be brought down.

Anzaldúa writes beautifully of raising consciousness of the Chicana/*mestiza* race that seeks to create an inclusive class of women that transcends culture, society, and nations all at once. "The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. ... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned."¹⁷ As *mestizas*, they are among the ultimate in intersectional feminists: "yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my

¹⁴ Butler, 503.

¹⁵ Crenshaw, 533.

¹⁶ Crenshaw, 539.

¹⁷ Anzaldúa, 421.

own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.)”¹⁸ We can join them, but only if we unlearn the *puta/virgen* dichotomy, and listen to the *jotería*.

Mohanty attacks the monoliths that dominate feminist theory in the forms of ‘third world’ and ‘Western’ feminisms. The ambiguity and overarching distortions of these terms can only be harmful to the greater dialogue and effectiveness of feminism. “Thus, feminist scholarly practices ... are inscribed in relations of power–relations which they counter, resists, or even perhaps implicitly support. There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship.”¹⁹ These terms should be broken down and in their place multiple separate and autonomous feminisms constructed. Gender identities may take precedence over everything else, such as geography, religion, and economic conditions; such universal declarations can serve to not advance the cause of feminism, and may even hinder it.

LaDuke brings the connection of motherhood to the fore in her article that emphasizes the existence and plight of indigenous peoples. Those peoples are not represented as autonomous populations or nations by the international community; thus, they are at the whim of a world system that is controlled by political nation-states and multi-national corporations. From this comes a question: “What gives corporations ... the right which supercedes or is superior to my human right to live on my land, or that of my family, my community, my nation, our nations, and to us as women?” Women as mothers have a connection the Earth and to their respective nations, but that connection has been pulled apart by the predator/prey relationship spurred by increasing industrialization and hyper-consumption.

Narayan finds herself on an ever-shifting ground with respect to her feminism and her roots in the third world, in which she and other feminists are derided as ‘Westernized.’ Speaking of the voices of that characterize feminist criticism as a ‘lack of respect’ for the home culture of those feminists: “These voices emanate from disparate sources, from family members, and, ironically enough, from other intellectuals whose own political perspectives are indebted to political theories such as Marxism and liberalism that have ‘Western’ origins.”²⁰ Some progress for women was made before Westernization, which debunks many claims of intervention in third

¹⁸ Anzaldúa, 422.

¹⁹ Mohanty, 373.

²⁰ Narayan, 544.

world culture. Indeed, traditional culture is itself a myth; it constantly changes and mixes with others, not least because of a privileged few who monopolize the meaning of culture and can pick and choose what is allowed.

The last pile is one close to my own heart in its role in a larger context for all of us. In *SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT: OPPRESSION AS NATURAL*, I've included the remaining authors Sandra Harding, Ynestra King, Evelyn Keller, and Cynthia Enloe. Their articles examine the connection between women and nature, and find that oppression has been constructed just as much there as in the other sectors of human society. From the conception of hierarchies to the role of technology in the continuing militarization of the world, science is being used in non-objective ways to further oppress the natural world and the women who may protect it.

Harding finds that science and its processes of examination are gendered, such as in the inequalities of access by women to the top levels of research, the impact of science on women and minorities, and in the very idea of objective, value-neutral analysis. "One problem may be that we have been so preoccupied with responding to the sins of contemporary science in the same terms our culture uses to justify these sins that we have not yet given adequate attention to envisioning truly emancipatory knowledge-seeking."²¹ In response, Harding explains feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism to help address the question of women & feminism in science; though they themselves don't readily answer the problem, their presence indicates a new front in the fight against the epistemology of the status quo.

King wants us, and ecologists in particular, to realize that ecology and feminism cannot be separated: "[Ecologists] do not understand that a central reason for women's oppression is her association with the despised nature they are so concerned about. The hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing."²² The same dichotomy and hierarchy that applies to one applies to the other. Hierarchies are unnatural, though; they are social constructs, and are used to subdue or change connections that already exist. Men, knowing that they are dependent on both nature and women, oppress both to reassert their dominance over the world at large.

²¹ Harding, 407.

²² King, 470.

Keller sees science transforming into a weapon of sorts that seeks to rip nature of its secrets in order to illuminate everything in the Earth by the question of 'how does it work?' "The story of the transformation of biology from a science in which the language of mystery had a place not only legitimate but highly functional, to a science that tolerated no secrets, a science more like physics, predicated on the conviction that the mysteries of life were there to be unraveled."²³ Where science once respected nature and sought not to dig too deep, it now pushes ever forward.

While Enloe is not speaking directly to concerns of science, her subject matter is very much connected to nature and the impact on women. Militarization of society (across the globe, not just in the U.S.) holds enormous sway over our relationship to women and to the environment. "Thus a pair of sneakers is militarized to the extent that the women who are sewing those sneakers ... have their wages kept low because major brand corporations and their factory contractors hire former military men as managers, call on local militarized security forces to suppress workers' organizing...."²⁴ What Enloe doesn't elaborate, but is fully implicit, are the working conditions of those women, and the many other women (and their children) across the globe who live in war zones or in regions depleted by imperialism or neoliberalism.

For the question of how to make a feminist future more likely, it is important to first consider the goals of such a future. Many commentators of the conservative persuasion in America today have sought to distort the means and ends of feminism in terms of changing the culture and political nature of the country, if not the globe. The paramount aim of feminism is of course to establish equality between the sexes by ending the capacity for the oppression of women in society; this should not be so controversial. But as we have seen in the fight over reproductive rights and the ERA, political measures are a very contentious and tricky battlefield. They are also, but for monumental measures like the civil rights act or women's suffrage, rather ineffectual in the short term.

So what is a conscientious feminist or pro-feminist man to do? Can small scale actions at the individual or operational group level make a difference? I believe they can, if only through the creation of one thing: consciousness.

²³ Keller, 517.

²⁴ Enloe, 563.

We live in a society that is fixated on consumption, with a time-span measured in the minutes and days instead of years and centuries. The message from politicians is to 'buy, buy, buy', to be a consumer first and a citizen later. Educational systems are stuck teaching children how to take standardized tests instead of learning about history and social studies; teenagers are denied essential knowledge about their own bodies by conservative administrators who likely have investments in the same economy that bombards those teens with magazines and movies saturated with sex. And in an economy increasingly under the gun from globalization and neoliberalism, job security becomes so unstable and crucial that it is still deemed acceptable for women to make some 77¢ on the dollar to men.

I am optimistic, though, because I do not believe that our society is this way by choice; it is this way precisely because it has been denied choice. Our modern society has been pushed down a path to the point that it no longer knows of any alternative; it is in this environment that we must operate to bring consciousness of ideals of feminism and social justice to light, one person, classroom, and town at a time.

The aforementioned battle over abortion is perhaps the most widely known issue in women's rights, but we should consider the possibility that it has been a battle because it has been out of the hands of the electorate for three decades. New generations of citizens are caught up in a culture war that is taking place above their heads because the issues are being decided in the courts instead of through referendums and legislation. Is there a chance that electorate of various states or that Congress might move to ban abortion? Perhaps, but if abortion were a matter for the legislative and executive branch, and not judicial, with this one issue the voting age population of the United States would be electrified to vote and with a new found political consciousness, could take back the forms and terms of the debate from the professional commentariat that dominates the current discussions in our culture. In a country that prides itself on having democracy as a birthright, we must not shrink from these battles, especially when they can and should be fought.

In contrast, a vastly overlooked realm of social justice is in the environment. As demonstrated in our readings this semester, the continued subjugation of nature goes hand in hand with the continued efforts to subdue women and prevent them from achieving even the same level of productivity or standard of living as men, let alone raising those levels to one that is better for all of us. Our continued, shared future lies only in the development of sustainability in our ecology and economy. The expansion of organic agriculture is a crucial

step in addressing a whole host of environmental issues: the absurdity of massive farm subsidies which affect our trade practices and prevent farmers in Africa and Latin America from making a living wage; the poisoning of our land and water supplies by pesticides and toxic runoff; and the very mindset of 'perpetual consumption' that inhibits nations and peoples from seeking new answers. Environmentalism is intrinsically tied to women's rights and social justice; it demands respect for culture and nature, and commands the attention of our brightest thinkers.

The most important step, however, is to try to reverse the 'dumbing down' of American society, and that goes hand in hand with feminist theory in that our political culture nowadays revolves around making the arguments simpler, and winning the swing voters with talk about 'values' and tax cuts because those are things that anybody can understand. It seems as if voters are being treated as if they either cannot grasp the things being talked about, or cannot be bothered to grasp them. Either way, it is a disturbing trend that will not let up until some bold group or movement actually does start speaking to adults as if they can and indeed should comprehend theory and the impact of that theory on their lives by affecting everybody else in society. Feminist theory has a big role to play in alleviating oppression for all women, children and men, and I did not think I would ever say this (especially when I got the handout for this exam), but we don't have nearly enough of it yet.