

THE WOMAN QUESTION : PROBLEMS IN FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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The terms "feminism" and "feminist", until today, evoke emotional and sometimes uncomfortable, if not hostile, reactions in all parts of the globe. For those in the developing countries, feminism is generally viewed as a western phenomenon which was later exported abroad. Indeed, the concept of feminism has caused a great deal of confusion; its "obvious" meaning has become an obstacle to understanding feminism, "in its diversity and its differences, and in its specificity as well" (Delmar, 1986). In recent years there has been an increasing recognition that feminism is not a unitary discourse or a unitary practice. Many variants exist today, be they liberal, radical, marxist, socialist, cultural, postmodernist or eco-feminists. At the same time depending on who or where you are, one could be a Black, Asian or Third World feminist.

This paper proposes to review the main types of feminist analysis as depicted in the West, although it will be argued that feminism is not a recent, western phenomenon. The first part will touch on four main feminist positions viz liberal, radical, marxist and socialist. Where relevant, reference will be made to the women's movement and/or situation in Malaysia. By presenting the problems associated with these different theories, the second part of the paper will attempt to address a current problem and debate in feminist analysis - that of universalism vs difference.

Feminism : Origins

Originally a French word, "feminism" became widely used in Europe, the United States and the colonised countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It initially referred to the "women's movement" which

was a combination of different groups aimed at advancing the position of women. In early 20th-century United States, feminism was used to mean a particular group of women who asserted the "uniqueness of women, the mystical experience of motherhood and women's special purity" (Jaggar, 1983: 5).

Discussions on women's issues were also taking place in the East. According to Kumari Jayawardena, (1986) feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West. In her book entitled *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), she argues very eloquently that debates on women's rights and education were held in 18th century China and that there were already feminist struggles in India, Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Japan in the 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, she quotes one of the male reformers of the Young Turks, Ziya Gokalp, who wrote, "In the future, Turkish ethics must be founded upon democracy and feminism, as well as nationalism, patriotism, work and the strength of the family" (Jayawardena, 1986: 12).

Similar rumblings were heard in Malaya in the 1930s when Muslim intellectuals, educated and influenced by the reform movements in the Middle East, made demands for women's rights to education. For example, a famous article on the emancipation of women by the Egyptian reformer Kassim Amin Bey appeared in a local journal in 1930 (Roff, 1974: 79-85). Within the Malay community, the Malay Women Teacher's Union founded in 1929, encouraged formal schooling for Malay women (Ng and Maznah, 1986).

Today, feminism has gone beyond its original meaning of agitating on issues concerning women, such as rights and access to education, property rights and suffrage. The meaning of the word has expanded to mean an awareness and analysis of women's subordination and exploitation in the family, at work and in society, and conscious action by all those who seek to end this subordination. Feminism is also viewed as a social movement for change in the position of women i.e. the self-organization of women's politics. It has become both a theoretical and political project (Chai, 1992). Underlying this notion, which was very potent in the 1960s second-wave feminism, was the

assumption of shared identity and experiences among women. However, it became clear that by the late seventies, the idea of sisterhood became problematic as the western feminist movement became fragmented. As Delmar (1986) puts it,

The fragmentation of contemporary feminism bears ample witness to the impossibility of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism. Such differing explanations, such a variety of emphases in practical campaigns, such widely varying interpretations of their results have emerged, that it now makes more sense to speak of a plurality of feminisms than of one. (Delmar, 1986).

This plurality of feminisms can be seen in briefly summarising four main theories of feminism which are found in the West today. I shall adopt Jaggar's typology which distinguishes these positions based on their political traditions and their conceptions of human nature (Jaggar, 1983). They are liberal feminism, radical feminism, marxist feminism and socialist feminism.² I will also discuss the problems associated with these positions. However, in differentiating these positions, it is important to note that in reality, the distinctions are not so clear-cut, and might even overlap in some areas. Particularly at the present time when feminist analysis is experiencing tremendous challenges and changes, no one person might identify completely with one position. In fact, as is often the case, one could align with different theories or different aspects of these theories. Alternatively, one might come out with her or his own understanding of "the woman question".

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism has its roots in the rise of liberalism which emerged with the growth of capitalism. The main tenets of liberalism are that all human beings are potentially rational possessing this individual capacity in equal measure. In addition liberalism views that all

individuals seek to maximise their own self interests. Liberals also believe that society (i.e. the state) should create the conditions that allow individual autonomy, protect the rights of individuals to a share of available resources on the basis of their merit and should allow all individuals to maximise their self interest, and thus their self-fulfilment (Young, 1988).

According to Jaggar (1983), the overriding goal of liberal feminism has always been the application of liberal principles to women as well as men. Although men and women were essentially equal, women had been discriminated in the laws which needed to be changed. Liberal feminists in the 18th and 19th century fought for basic liberties such as women's right to own property, to education and to the vote.³ In the 20th century, they fought for equal rights in employment, credit, training and educational opportunities. This was in line with the liberal position that self interest and rationality will prevail. Later on when they realised that legislation alone did not eliminate discrimination, they campaigned for laws that prohibited discrimination as well as those that affirmed positive action in favour of women (e.g. a gender quota system). Today liberal feminist arguments can be seen quite clearly in current Women in Development (WID) programmes which view the lack of education, illiteracy, unequal employment opportunities and discriminatory laws as barriers to women's "integration into development". In Malaysia, this position finds expression in government policies which state that as women constitute a vital economic resource, the government's goal is "to integrate them as equal partners in nation building" (National Policy on Women, 1989; Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991: 427)

Ultimately, the liberal feminist vision of the future is the androgynous society whereby differences between men and women who have actualised their full potentiality for rationality, will diminish and possibly disappear. Boys and girls would receive the same educational opportunities and there would be no attempt to impose traditional masculine or feminine traits on anyone. Every individual would be free to develop regardless of their sex, and gendered psychological differences would decrease and possibly disappear.

Liberal feminism has been criticised for various reasons. Theoretically the liberal notion that the individual is a self-sufficient, neutral and abstract entity, that essential human characteristics are a given independent of any particular social context, has been criticised for ignoring the structures in society. In fact, human beings are not abstract individuals, but people who belong to a particular ethnicity, sex or age who have different histories, participate in different social relations and have different capacities and needs.

Liberal feminism cannot explain then why many women are predominantly in low-paid jobs as they do not question the particular system which has given rise to such inequalities in the first place. Even in Malaysia whose present booming economy is the envy of developing countries, one needs to explain why the majority of women workers are still in low-paid, low-skilled jobs with little opportunity for promotion (Ng and Yong, 1990). Indeed, over time the problems in achieving the objectives of the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States have led liberal feminists to question the adequacies of legislation and the limitations of state intervention, as well as to realize class differences among women.

Because liberal feminists want to be equal to men, they are sometimes termed as egalitarian feminists. However, it has been pointed out that this project of sexual equality takes male values, standards and achievements to be the norms which women should aspire for. Hence in actual fact, women would only be striving to be the same as men. Moreover, this struggle only takes place at the public level where formal equality can be sought. It still leaves untouched unequal gender relations at the level of sexuality and reproduction (Grosz, 1990).

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is a relatively recent phenomenon that grew out of the U.S. women's liberation movement in the late 1960s. Those who

were involved were mainly white, middle-class, college-educated women. Some of them had been involved in various New Left Groups at that time and were shocked and disillusioned by male dominance in organisations that supposedly preached peace and justice. As such these women came together in consciousness-raising groups to discuss their experiences and later discovered the systematic and widespread nature of their oppression. Radical feminists have changed through the years. Presently, they are actively involved in evolving a "women's culture" (mainly in the western industrialised countries), providing feminist alternatives in literature, music, spirituality, health services and sexuality (Jaggar, 1983).⁴

Radical feminists point out that women's experiences and interests are at the centre of their theory and practice.

It is the only theory by and for women....The first and fundamental theme is that women as a social group are oppressed by men as a social group and that this oppression is the primary oppression of women. Patriarchy is the oppressing structure of male domination. Radical feminism makes visible male control as it is exercised in every sphere of women's lives, both public and private. So reproduction, marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and motherhood are primary sites of attack and envisaged positive change (Rowland and Klein, 1990).

Radical feminists argue that the primary motivating force of history has been the oppression of women as a social class by men as a social class. The basis of this male oppressive system - patriarchy - has gone through various developments. The early phase of radical feminism (for e.g. in the writings of Shulamith Firestone such as *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1974) points out that women were trapped because of their biology, that is their reproductive ability. However, in recent years, patriarchy is seen as having a material base at two levels. Firstly, at the economic level in which women's oppression through unpaid domestic service in the home is primary in the patriarchal system of support; secondly that a woman's body itself forms the second material

base, through which marriage, sexual slavery, pornography, reproduction and rape occur.

While radical feminism acknowledges diversity among women, they place more emphasis on the similarities among women and the differences between men and women. One of the basic tenets in their concept of "sisterhood is global", is that any woman in the world has more in common with any other woman - regardless of class, race, age, ethnic group, nationality - than any woman has with any man. Another recent tendency of radical feminists is the shift towards a more essentialist position whereby differences between men and women are no longer attributed to socialisation but to genetic endowment and psychological attributes.

For radical feminists, the way to combat patriarchy is the creation of a women's culture through which women can recreate their own selves and their way of being in the world outside of patriarchal definition. Women should only relate to other women as the concept of separatism is seen as an empowering base to establish and transmit traditions, histories, practices and ideologies which are women-centred. New forms of language and communication are seen as essential in redefining this world. In terms of sexuality, some claim that heterosexual women consort with the enemy in helping to reproduce the basis of male power. Thus lesbian feminism was argued to be a political act, a political perspective on "the ideological and institutional domination of heterosexuality".⁶

Another form of resistance is the withdrawal of services to men e.g. reproductive services, emotional and physical labour, domestic labour, sexual labour and the refusal to be defined as powerless, that is the power of disbelief. In terms of concrete actions, radical feminists have been active in setting up women's centres, places of refuge for women, rape crisis and women's health centres. At the global level they have been instrumental in collective action and networking on international sexual slavery and resistance to reproductive engineering.

In Malaysia, women's groups which sprung up in the 1980s, focussed on the issue of violence against women, particularly in relation to rape and domestic violence. Since then two women's shelters have been set up and various hot lines have been established for women in crisis. However, the inspiration to set up these women's centres has more to do with the increasing awareness of the pervasive crimes of violence against women rather than from any clear-cut ideological feminist position. Nonetheless it would not be wrong to say that the international feminist agenda has influenced local campaigns against violence perpetuated on women.

Recently the movement called eco-feminism has come into being, partly in response to the crisis of development, and as an alternative to capitalist and socialist development. As a convergence of environmental, feminist and spiritual concerns, eco-feminism bases itself on the new view of women and nature whereby "it recognises the value of the feminine principle, that is, caring, nurturing and sustaining", thus making women the natural saviours of the environment. Women are seen as being closer to nature than men and hence are better in analysing and finding solutions to the environmental crisis.

While radical feminism has been applauded for forcing us to acknowledge that "the personal is political" it has also been criticised on various grounds. The main criticism of radical feminism is their universalistic and essentialist positions, which tend towards biological determinism. Given their argument that in all places and at all times men, because of their essential nature and biology are aggressive and dominating, radical feminism is not concerned about the impact of different forms of social organisation on the gendering process (Young, 1988). As radical feminism does not refer to any historical context, implying that biology is unchanging and a fixed given, it has been heavily criticised as constantly falling into biological determinism.

Radical feminism has also been criticised for being "class blind" as well as not being sensitive to race and ethnicity. A woman's personal experience is as much conditioned by her class and ethnicity as by her

sex. Moreover, an ahistorical perspective of patriarchy is inadequate in an analysis of racism. For example, it is clear that a definition of patriarchy which views all men as having power over all women cannot account for the inequitable relations between men of colour and white women.

Marxist Feminism and Socialist Feminism

If radical feminism views gender relations as the primary oppression, Marxist feminism presents class relations, and specifically the capitalist system as the context within which the "woman question" is situated. Marxist feminists highlight women's relationship to capital and modes of production by trying to understand the kinds of labour they perform and the ways in which labour is organised. Because of their concern with the overthrow of the capitalist system, Marxist feminists focus particularly on the situation of women under capitalism, specifically on the lot of working-class women and the conditions for her emancipation (Maquire, 1984).

Marxists feminists initially drew their analysis and inspiration from the influential work of Engels, written in 1884, entitled *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1975). Indeed, his writings provided the starting point for a materialist analysis of gender inequality and its relationship to the development of private property and class society. It was also used to set the agenda for political activists to emancipate women (Johnson, 1990).⁸ Engels traced the historical development of society in which women were transformed from equal and free members in primitive, communal society to subordinate beings and wives in capitalist societies. The root of this transformation lay, according to Engels, in the emergence of male-dominated private property and the concomitant development of the patriarchal monogamian family which led to the overthrow of mother right and the "world historic defeat" of the female sex.

The absence of private property made it possible for men's productive work and women's household work (a natural division of labour) to

be accorded equal social significance. However, with the emergence of private property, men controlled the surplus while women could only partake of it. Private property transformed intra-household relations only because it also radically changed the political and economic relations in society. As Engels (1972: 221), puts it:

This division of labour in the family remain unchanged, and yet it now made the former domestic relationship topsy-turvy simply because the division of labour outside the family had changed. The very cause that had made the woman supreme in the house, namely her being confined to domestic work, now assured supremacy in the house for the man: the women's housework lost its significance compared to men's work in obtaining a livelihood; the latter was everything, the former an insignificant contribution.

Following this argument, the Marxist feminist prescription for female emancipation lay in the call for women to take part in large-scale industrial social production since women would be unequal as long as they were restricted to housework which was private, unrecognised and without any exchange value. Domestic activities should also be socialised to allow women to come out to work. Underlying this strategy is the hope that working class women would be more aware of the exploitation of labour by capital and would therefore ally with working class men in their struggles. Marxist feminism views capitalism and not the relations between men and women as oppressing and exploiting women.

In the 70s there was a theoretical debate as to the nature and relationship of women's domestic labour to capital as it was argued that the early Marxists did not adequately theorise this aspect of the "woman question". An argument ensued whereby it was asserted that women produce labour power (in bearing children and maintaining and caring for adult labour) which contributes to the reproduction of the family and thus to the functioning of the economic system. Precisely because this housework is not paid and not valued as "work" as such, it reduces the labour costs of capitalists who do not have to be

responsible for the maintenance of the physical and psychological reproduction of their workers. In this way the work of women as housewives and mothers is exploited indirectly for the benefit of capital. The wages-for-housework campaign in the 1970s was centred on this capital-housewife relation.⁹

The Marxist feminist position that capitalism (and class society) has to be overthrown and then gender inequality will disappear or at least dealt with, has also raised various problems. Marxist theory has been criticised as being quite essentialist - it does not question the sexual division of labour which was seen (at least at the early stage) as a natural division (Young, 1988).¹⁰ By focussing on women's and men's relation to the means of production (i.e. it is productivist in emphasis), Marxist feminism ignores the power relationship between men and women at home and at work.

Moreover it does not adequately explain the different experiences of men and women under capitalism (and even under socialism). Why are women placed in subordinate positions both inside and outside the home? The defect in Marxist functionalism is that it does not really explain why women do "women's work". Moreover the central assumption that women's emancipation lies largely in obtaining economic independence has been challenged. At the present moment women are participating in public production, yet it is far from clear that women's oppression is diminishing. Studies of women's position in socialist societies in the 70s and 80s pointed out that women's reproductive and domestic work remained underpaid and undervalued (Molyneux, 1981). To sum up, Marxist feminism fails to explain the persistence and pervasiveness of male oppression of women as women (Macquire, 1984). It has been accused of being gender blind, if not gender biased.

Attempts to deal with the "unhappy marriage" between Marxism and feminism led to the birth of socialist feminism whose "central project was the development of a political theory and practice that will synthesize the best insights of radical feminism and of the Marxist tradition and that simultaneously will escape the problems associated

with both" (Jaggar, 1983). Socialist feminism recognises class as an important factor in women's subordination and the importance of imperialism in oppressing women in the Third World. It also emphasises the importance of gender relations as relations of power which have to be analysed together with other relations of power (e.g. class and race) to understand society. No one social relation is privileged. Socialist feminists use the conceptual tool of the sexual division of labour to investigate the relations between women's subordination, specific economic systems and specific ways of bringing up and organising the family. They also point to the centrality of ideology in reinforcing the sexual division of labour e.g. the premise (or myth) of man the breadwinner and woman the secondary worker, which situates women in low-paid jobs (Mckintosh, 1981).

The struggle of socialist feminists works on two fronts simultaneously - against capitalism and against social relations of male dominance. They point out that men too must be brought into body-work on the same basis as women, so that once it is both the province of both men and women, socialised caring will not be the least paid (as it will be differently valued) and politically weakest sector of the economy.

As the inheritors of two political traditions, socialist feminist analysis still tends to tread an uneasy path between radical feminism and traditional Marxism. Dualistic categories appear in socialist feminist literature that tries to understand the capitalist system and the patriarchal or domestic "mode of production". Are there two systems operating in society, a mode of production and a sex/gender system? This type of dualism conceals as much as it reveals, critics point out, as class and gender relations coincide as well as cut across each other. Accordingly, other critics highlight the existence of a single system structured by male dominance - capitalist patriarchy (Eisenstein, 1979).

Indeed the concept of patriarchy is still controversial as there is no one agreement as to the meaning of its basis, structures, processes, values and representations, and in its relationship to other social relations and structures (Beechey, 1979, Walby, 1986, Dahlerup, 1987). Radical feminists analyse patriarchy as the control over biological reproduction

and sexuality, Marxist feminists as the control over women's labour power, while some socialist feminists equate patriarchy with ideology (Mitchell, 1974). Others, like Whitehead and Young (1979) reject that concept of patriarchy which tends to be universalistic and hence ahistorical. According to them, patriarchy refers to a particular historical epoch in which "the father ruled" in the true sense of the word, i.e. over his wives, children and property. In order to get out of this impasse, it has been argued that comparative studies of women's strategies and coping mechanisms - the patriarchal bargain - will lead to a more culturally and temporarily grounded understanding of patriarchy as opposed to abstract theorising (Kandiyoti, 1988). Socialist feminists themselves admit that their analysis is still incomplete in trying to come up with an alternative feminist political economy which will interpret the complex reality in society within a unified conceptual framework (Jaggar, 1983).

Perhaps it is precisely in the project of trying to understand the world in a unified way that postmodernism becomes of interest to the feminist project. One of the key issues lies in postmodernism's critique of universalism and its articulation of difference, which forms one of the ongoing debates in the feminist critique of knowledge.¹¹

Women - Universal, Different or Multiple Subject?

In a sense, the feminist critique of white, bourgeois "malestream" social science found its nemesis in the postmodernist critique which accused feminism of the same sin - "that they have replaced one universal, rational, male subject perspective with another universal idea of 'woman', 'gender' or 'sex'... that (feminist analysis) is/are subject to space, time, class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation..." (Chai, 1992). This critique exists at various levels, from,

...the ethnographic relationship of Western, female anthropologists and Third World women, and trenchant critiques of the representation of Third World women in Western feminist scholarship; to the way Western

feminists are part of the masculinist colonial legacies which structure knowledge around dominant perceptions and voices; and the examination of concepts of difference (as expression of alienation, or of a creative challenge to the levelling of cultural diversity) (Jaschok, 1991).¹²

As mentioned earlier second-wave feminism emerged among the most privileged women, being produced within a particular (white) western culture with its own values and its own definitions of oppression, rights and liberties etc. It was a movement of solidarity among women based on a common, universal oppression of women in a male-dominated world, thus transcending divisive factors such as class, clan, race, caste, ethnicity and age. By the late 70s and 80s this sisterhood, which inclines women, if only given a chance, "naturally" to each other was questioned. The contradictions in feminism reflected contradictions in women's lives (Ramazanoglu, 1989).

Black women and women of colour in the West rose up against what they viewed as racism in Anglophone feminism.¹³ The concept of difference emerged and was debated (Barret, 1989, Grosz, 1990). In an article entitled "White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood", Hazel Carby (1982) challenged central categories in mainstream feminist thought, and sought to explain the "triple" oppression of gender, race and class, in their specificity, and in the ways they determine the lives of black women. She pointed out that "the fact that black women are subject to the simultaneous oppression of patriarchy, class and 'race' is the prime reason for not employing parallels that render their position and experience not only marginal but also invisible" (Carby, 1982: 213). In contributing to the debate, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) introduced the concept of ethnicity (since race does not distinguish differentiation within the ethnic or migrant category) and argued that every feminist struggle has a specific ethnic and class content and that all three divisions have an organisational, experiential and representational form, and are historically produced.

Analysing racism, Carby argues that black men do not have the same relations to patriarchal/capitalist hierarchies as white men. She quotes the Combahee River Collective, a feminist lesbian collective, as saying that "we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalisation that white women who are separatists demand...we struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism" (Carby, 1982: 213). Carby also questions the central concepts of "family", "patriarchy" and "reproduction" which become problematic when applied to the lives of black women. For example, contemporary feminism points out that the family (under capitalism) is the source of women's oppression. Carby, however, points out that the black family can also be a prime source of resistance against oppression, as was the black family under slavery and colonialism. Moreover, in many countries in the Third World, women, as heads of households, have been the ones responsible for familial reproduction, rather than being "dependent" on men, as analysed in the male wage-earner:housewife relationship of western nuclear family types. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the lack of relevance of this kind of feminist analysis accounts for the failure of feminism to take root in South Africa (Hansson, 1991). In terms of patriarchy, Carby discloses that feminism does not explain why black males have not enjoyed the benefits of white patriarchy. She also questions the concept of "reproduction" in a situation where black women do domestic work outside of their own homes in the service of white families. Thus she points out that in a society "which is both racially and sexually imperialistic, the woman who is seen as inferior because of her sex can also be seen as superior because of her race, even in relationship to men of another race" (Carby, 1982: 221).

In response to the above, Barret and McIntosh (1985) admitted that their work had been written "from an unacknowledged but ethnically specific position; that its apparently universal applicability has been specious". In addition they argue that socialist feminism offers a better understanding of patriarchy, although they have problems in attempting to have a more concise understanding of the complex inter-relations of class, race and gender power structures.¹⁴ They conclude that their aim would be to develop feminist knowledge of different

family forms, and while "resisting ethnocentric or culturally relativist extremes of opinion, try to work on bases for some solidarity".

The question then is, how does one develop feminist theory and build solidarity based on differences? These two goals of feminism are ambiguous and problematic as feminist theory has to be both intellectually rigorous and still be politically committed. In other words, how does one deal with the specificity of women as a group and yet deny their "essence"? Indeed how does one deal with the contradiction of the desire to create feminist knowledge (which is privileged) and the claim that there is no uniform women's reality to be privileged? (Zarkov, 1991)

At the simplest level, one can talk about pluralism which recognises the differences among women and between men and women - a "live and let live philosophy" (Barret, 1985).¹⁵ Pluralism has emerged as the lowest common denominator of feminism. This, however, may be translated as relativism and subsequently, make for weak politics. However, in order for feminism to not disintegrate into localised struggles, it is noted that feminism cannot afford "the dissolution of the subject", since it is strategically important that some form of universalism/essentialism is maintained. As raised by Grosz, "If women cannot be characterised in any general way, then how can feminism be taken seriously? If we are not justified in taking women as a category, then what political grounding does feminism have?" (Grosz, 1990: 341)

Perhaps the direction will be i) a deconstruction of theoretical frameworks which rest on untenable universalisms or essentialisms ii) a reconstruction of a feminist theorising on multiple subject positions affirming at the same time differences and "differance" and iii) rethinking the politics of alliance and democratisation as a feminist project (Harding, 1991).

According to Harding (1991), gender analysis must start from the perspective of women's lives. There is no typical "woman's life" as women lead different lives from each other but they are nonetheless valuable starting points for generating feminist knowledge. Thus,

"there is not just one unitary and coherent "speech" that is feminist thought or knowledge, but instead, these multiple and frequently contradictory knowings....one starts one's thoughts from multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with each other, and each of which itself has multiple and contradictory commitments" (Harding, 1991:11 - 12).¹⁶

Feminist theorising has to reconstruct both the theoretical and political project of understanding power relations in society. Moreover, this process needs to be grounded in the experiences of men and women and in the women's movement. The Latin American experience and practice of the politics of culture and diversity may afford us a glimpse of where we should head. This experience is documented by Vargas (1991) who provides an interesting and insightful discussion of the growth of the feminist movement in Latin America. She analyses the feminist encounters which began in 1981 with 230 women to the most recent meeting in 1990, attended by 3,000 women.

The initial meeting which affirmed sisterhood later unfolded into many "knots". One was a confrontation between class and gender, another was a discomfort with difference until there was an open confrontation with diversity in the fourth encounter in Mexico. Vargas states that in the future there will be many more women expressing multi-culture, multi-ethnicity and all other complex differences, who will demand their own space. The challenge would be how to produce a collective democratic order that is based on all the multiple identities and differences among them.¹⁷

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Michael Chai for his helpful comments, particularly for the final parts of this paper.

- 2 Admittedly, there has been more theorising undertaken in the West than in the Third World, which is just beginning to assess theories critically. Criticisms by black feminists and women of colour will be discussed under the section on universalism.
- 3 One of the most well-known women's rights activists in the 18th century was Mary Wollstonecraft who in 1792, wrote the famous article "A Vindication of the Rights of Women". This was in response to Rousseau and other male liberals who doubted that women were fully rational. She forcefully argued that women had the potential for full rationality and were as capable as men of complete moral responsibility. However they were not able to do so because they were deprived of education.
- 4 Some feminists in line with this political practice would prefer to call themselves cultural feminists, eco-feminists or lesbian feminists.
- 5 This was the campaign slogan of Sonia Johnson who ran for the U.S. Presidency in 1984 on a radical feminist platform (Rowland and Klein, 1990).
- 6 This was a position taken by Charlotte Bunch in 1976. Recently, Adrienne Rich talks of the lesbian continuum which includes a range of woman-identified experience, not necessarily through a genital sexual experience. The lesbian continuum can then reunite lesbian and heterosexual feminists (Rowland and Klein, 1990).
- 7 It should be noted that radical feminists, in defence of this criticism, have denied that their theory can be reduced into a simplistic biological deterministic argument. They point out that critics use this argument as a political ploy to limit the effectiveness of their analysis.
- 8 The influence of Engels' work on feminism can be seen in the number of writings on his book which continues to be a starting

point or foil in current analyses of the historically changing role of women in society. See, among others, Sacks (1975), Gough (1975) and Zeitlin (1990).

- 9 This domestic labour debate finally in culminated in a deadlock. See Himmelweit and Mohun (1977) and Molyneux (1979).
- 10 Engels' book, although seminal in our understanding of women's position in history and society, has also received many criticisms, some in terms of ethnographic details and others in relation to his concepts. For more details, see Zeitlin (1990).
- 11 See Nicholson (ed.) (1990), Gunew (ed), 1990, and various writings by Sandra Harding (1987, 1991).
- 12 To that list I would add scholars, feminist or otherwise in the "Third World", just like most if not all of us here who "do" Feminist Studies, Women's Studies, or studies on women, who study the Other. In other words, "for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do..." (Barbara Christian as cited in Jaschok, 1991).
- 13 I emphasize the Black feminist critique in this discussion of differences simply because of the prolific writings on the subject. This, however, does not discount the other differences less written about e.g. lesbian feminism and Third World subaltern feminism (Spivak, 1989).
- 14 The problem of analysing whether ethnicity and/or racism is autonomous of class, reducible to class, or has different historical origins but yet articulates with class relations is still far from being resolved.
- 15 A note about "difference" and "differance". The former refers to the pluralism among women which for instance, Harding (1991) speaks of. There is also the "difference" between men and women

advocated by radical feminists, a position criticised for veering towards biological determinism. "Differance", however, suggests that the "woman subject" has an autonomous position and a difference which is not in reference to the masculine, neither is it based on biology (Grosz, 1990).

- ¹⁶ She further adds that every other liberatory movement must also learn how gender, race, class and sexuality are used to construct each other in order to accomplish their goals (Harding, 1991:13). In this sense, women are not the only unique generators of knowledge as men, too, must contribute toward feminist knowledge from their particular social situation.
- ¹⁷ The crisis in Mexico led to a document discussing certain myths in women's experiences and politics. Among others, they are 1)feminists are not interested in power; 2) feminists do politics in a different way; 3) all feminists are equal; 4) there is a natural unity just in being women; 5) feminism only exists as the politics of women towards women; 6) because I as a woman feel something it's valid; and 7) the personal is automatically political.

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