

## INCLUDING RACE IN FEMINIST THEORY

From Agnew, Vijay (1996): *Resisting Discrimination: Women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean and the Women's Movement in Canada*. Reprinted with permission.

In the 1970s feminist theory was criticized for ignoring racism and treating gender as a universal and a historical category that encompassed the experiences of all women. Feminist slogans of the 1970s that identified all men as 'the enemy' and all women as suffering 'common oppression' were initially adopted by women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. But after the initial enthusiasm for articulating the common experiences of gender, some feminists began to critically examine these slogans and their assumption that gender represents the primary source of women's oppression. This re-examination spawned a vigorous and far-ranging critique of feminist theories. Women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean used historical data to demonstrate that class and race were as powerful as gender in oppressing and exploiting women (Rollins 1985, Glenn 1986; Carby 1986; Parmar 1986).

In the United States the concept of gender as the universal oppressor of all women was attacked by Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class* (1983). Through careful documentation of black slavery, she demonstrated that, contrary to the white feminist view of the family's role in oppressing women, for the female slave the family was meaningful and emotionally supportive. Davis questioned the commitment of white women to black emancipation and portrayed them as racists. The role of the family in oppressing women was probably the concept first identified by feminists from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean as one that excluded their experiences. White feminists had identified the patriarchal family as the locus of women's subordination and inequality, but women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean argued that the family also served as an emotional buffer in a race-biased society and created solidarity between men and women. This contradiction was initially ignored by white, middle-class feminists, who criticized the family on behalf of all women, but eventually white feminists admitted that they had shown ethnocentric bias in describing the experiences of their own class and race as the norm while disregarding the experiences of

other women (hooks 1984; Collins 1990; Carby 1986; Barrett and McIntosh 1985; Kline 1989b; Spelman 1988).

In Britain racism in feminism was exposed by Jenny Bourne in "Towards An Anti-racist Feminism"(1984). There were no similar publications in Canada, but Canadian feminists responded to the critiques published elsewhere. These works stimulated a much broader discussion of discrimination and bias within feminist theories and practices. But at the same time they created a crisis of conscience within the feminist community that threatened to undermine feminist positions on male bias, the social construction of women, and the treatment of women as 'objects' in male discourse. Feminists from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean revealed biases in feminist theories and practices and attacked the assumption of privilege by white feminists in the community of women (hooks 1988; Lorde 1984).

In 1985 Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh were among the first few feminists who identified biases in socialist-feminist analysis, which supplemented gender theory with class analysis. Their own previous analyses of forms of household organizations and wage labour, they said, had 'spoken from an unacknowledged but ethnically specific position; its apparently universal applicability has been specious' (1985, 25). They further acknowledged that race and ethnicity had effects on working classwomen's wages and their relations within the family that were quite different from those on white, middle-class women's. Patriarchy, they admitted, could not explain how white women exercise power, based on race, over black men.

Barrett and McIntosh tried integrating race, class, and gender within a Marxist framework, but they could not resolve these problems and concluded by asking:

"[S]hould we regard race as easier to incorporate into a classic Marxist analysis than feminism proved to be? Or should we concentrate on the relations between race and gender and ignore for the moment the consequences of this for a class analysis? Or should we back down from these academic debates and adopt a more pragmatic approach by identifying areas of common and progressive struggle? Can we argue that racism, like women's

oppression, has independent origins but is now irretrievably embedded in capitalist social relations?" (41)

Kum Kum Bhavnani, a South Asian feminist, complained that, by turning to questions of theory, Barrett and McIntosh were avoiding the real issue – the differences of power relations between white and black women and between different classes of white women. She argued that the real test for the authenticity of white women's commitment to antiracism was whether their analysis generated 'an adequate political practice for women against the complexities of their oppression' (Bhavnani and Coulson 1986, 85).

Barrett and McIntosh's article generated several other responses that pointed out additional problems - for example, Barrett and McIntosh tended to diminish the importance of racism by describing their biases as ethnocentric rather than racist. Caroline Ramazanoglu, a white feminist, noted: 'The recognition of ethnocentrism in our work does not in itself render black women's experiences visible. It is only when we try to take black women's experiences into account that the extremely problematic relationship between general ideas of oppression and women's experiences of oppression becomes [understandable]' (1986, 84).

Some feminists have responded to the charge of racism in mainstream feminism by acknowledging that women are oppressed by race, class, and gender. Women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean experience one kind of oppression because of their gender (shared with white women), another because of their race (shared with men from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean), and a third because of their class (shared with working-class women and men) (Thornhill 1989, 27). But this formulation may suggest that race, class, and gender oppressions are experienced in discrete segments and can be isolated from one another. Women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean experience the three oppressions together (Smith 1989, 47; Romany 1991; Amos and Parmar 1984). Emily Woo Yamasaki observes: 'I cannot be an Asian American on Monday, a woman on Tuesday, a lesbian on Wednesday, a worker/student on Thursday, and a political radical on Friday. I am all these things everyday. We are discriminated against as workers on the economic plane, as racial minorities on the economic and social planes, and as women on all three planes - economic, social, and

domestic/ family' (quoted in Wong 1991, 293).

Black feminists emphasize the interlocking nature of oppression:

"This viewpoint shifts the entire focus of investigation from one aimed at explicating elements of race or gender or class oppression to one whose goal is to determine what the links are among these systems. The first approach typically prioritizes one form of oppression as being primary, then handles remaining types of oppression as variables within what is seen as the most important system. For example, the efforts to insert race and gender into Marxist theory exemplify this effort. In contrast, the more holistic approach implied in Black feminist thought treats the interactions among multiple systems as objects of study." (Collins 1991, 41-2)

Biases emerge in attempts to reformulate Marxist categories to incorporate the experience of race and gender discrimination. An example of this approach is Nancy Hartsock's 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism.' Hartsock says that women's experience of the 'sexual division of labour' constitutes them as a social group and forms the basis of a feminist standpoint common to all women. Hartsock proposes that feminists lay aside the differences among women across race and class boundaries and instead search for 'central commonalities' (1987, 163-4). She treats gender as a separate category that can be isolated from the experience of race and class, and she does not consider the differences of power between women. Hartsock emphasizes the importance of the individual's material experience; she does not consider the role of white women in subordinating and exploiting women from different classes and races. White, middle-class feminists may theoretically recognize the interconnections of race, class, and gender, but their different location in society makes them less conscious of the privilege of race and thus leads them to emphasize gender. In privileging gender as the basis of a feminist standpoint, Hartsock reproduces familiar biases of the 1970s, which are encoded in concepts of 'sisterhood' and 'women as victims.'

Theoretical proposals by a variety of white feminists about the integrated nature of gender,

race, and class analysis have not always displaced the centrality of gender in feminist analysis. Identifying the different sources of women's oppression has not dislodged the hierarchy of race within feminism; it reappears in more subtle and indirect ways. Postmodern literary interpretations of the significance of experience, the provisional nature of 'identity,' the subjectivity of all discourses, and the meanings that can be assigned to the word 'difference' have broadened the categories of oppression. Deconstruction exposes the biases hidden in many categories and definitions, and this has had the effect of depoliticizing the issue of race within feminism (Nicholson 1990; Alcoff 1988; Bulkin, Pratt, and Smith 1985). In addition, these interpretations raise a problem: if discourses reflect political and social structures of gender, race, and class, and these enclose women's identities in specific ways, how can women exercise agency?

Identities can change. Race, class, and gender are not eternal essences or biological constants; they are socially constructed. The perception of who one is and of one's location vis-a-vis other social groups can change in different contexts. Postmodern feminists view the subject as provisional, located in specific historical situations, and constantly changing. Differences among women are not fixed. A woman's identity as Chinese is different in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Canada. In Canada she becomes Chinese in relation to white, Anglo-Saxon women, that is, on the basis of difference. Difference then becomes a way of establishing 'otherness' and does not dislodge the norm (Minh-ha 1989; Barrett 1987; Parmar 1990). A white woman may experience some race privilege in relation to a Chinese woman, but she may be disadvantaged in relation to another white woman of a different class. The fragmented and provisional nature of subjects highlights the problems of agency, of initiating, mobilizing, and sustaining political struggles over a period of time.

The debate initiated by the discussion of racism in feminism has led to a recognition of different kinds of oppressions: age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and culture, among others. But this recognition has begun to diffuse the issues of race, power and privilege. bell hooks observes that 'the new cool words of feminism are "hegemony" and "pluralism." Race is out' (1989). Some feminists despair over the fragmentation of the feminist movement through an overemphasis on 'identity politics.' Many feminists are now concerned that the personal will

take precedence over the political and undermine the political goals of the movement. Kathryn Harris and Pratibha Parmar, among others, have noted that a consciousness of identity has the advantage of revealing the important ways in which women's experiences differ. But emphasizing the different experiences of women may fragment the movement (Harris 1989; Parmar 1989).

Recognition of the gender and racial identities of the individual does not by itself generate a political consciousness or a common politics among women. June Jordan says that 'much organizational grief could be avoided if people understood that partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change: when we get the monsters off our backs all of us may want to run in very different directions' (quoted in Parmar 1989, 62). But Chandra Mohanty notes that a common political commitment to oppose different kinds of domination can generate solidarity among women with diverse identities (1991, 4). Socialist feminists envisage their struggles as taking place within the community and around specific issues. This view enables different groups to come together to oppose and resist domination but does not tie them together on a broad range of issues. The boundaries of these groups and communities are fluid and change over a period of time 'since the operation of power is always fluid and changing' (Mohanty 1991, 4).

A political strategy of coalitions between different feminist organizations is widely supported among white women and women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean (Albrecht and Brewer 1990). The recognition of the diversity of feminist organizations, their issues, and political strategies generates support for feminism as a political movement for social change. But it also raises questions about structures of power and relations of domination and subordination within feminism.

The concerns of white feminists continue to dominate feminist theories and practices. Despite discussions of the influence of class, ethnicity, or race, feminist theories still emphasize gender - see, for example, Nancy Chodorow's analysis of motherhood as a common oppressor of all women or Carol Gilligan's distinction between the moral

development experiences of males and females (Chodorow 1978; Spelman 1988; Gilligan 1982; Hartsock 1987). Barbara Christian, a black feminist, finds that white, middle-class feminist theorists have made only a halfhearted effort to take into account the different experience of women of other races and classes: 'Often as a way of clearing themselves they do acknowledge that women of colour, for example, do exist, then go on to do what they were going to do anyway, which is to invent a theory that has little relevance for us' (1987, 59-60).

Black women in the United States are now engaged in producing a black feminist theory which attempts to place women's multiple oppressions at the centre of its inquiry (Smith 1989, Christian 1989). White feminists still only rarely challenge the central categories of gender analysis of the unequal power of white women and women from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean (Kline 1989, 121; Rhode 1991; Romany 1991; Childers and hooks 1990; Open Letters to Catharine MacKinnon 1991; Thornhill 1989; Wong 1991; Russo 1991). Their discourse embodies, even if unconsciously and unintentionally, the race and class biases of the larger society.

In the 1980s a consensus developed that recognized the race and class bias of white feminist theories and practices. But the process of 'inclusion' has further exposed schisms between feminists. The differences in power between women, which are supported and embedded in institutional structures, make it difficult for feminists to come together in support of common theories or practices. The feminist concept of experience as a guide to theory has enabled many groups of women to identify the forms of oppression they suffer. White feminists and feminists from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean have taken up the challenge to find some 'unity in diversity' in feminist theories and practices. Feminist theory supports local struggles which call upon a network of other feminist organizations for support. But disputes occur and they reflect the power relations among women in these organizations. Challenging one oppression makes women conscious of other oppressions, but the interconnected nature of the oppressions makes them difficult to remove. In the next chapter I examine the difficulties that feminist practice has encountered in staking out a common ground for struggle among women. It shows, within a specific context, how power relations affect feminist struggles.