WHY GENDER DOES NOT MATTER IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLITICS: TOWARDS A FEMINIST RETELLING OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN HIS/HERSTORIES

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"Considering the spate of feminist writing over the last twenty years or so, one would have expected to find these ideas making some impact on political science in general." Instead, as Susan Blackburn discovered in her review of some central country-based political texts on Southeast Asia, feminist challenges appear to have distressingly little effect on political thought, particularly that of Southeast Asia.

"The world is gendered, but there is not much recognition of that in Southeast Asian politics," Blackburn asserts in her article in "Why Gender Matters in Southeast Asian Politics," a Monash University compilation of papers edited by Maila Stivens (1991). "It seems strange," Blackburn continues, "that although political scientists cannot agree on how to define class, they are quite happy to discuss its political importance in Southeast Asia and are also most emphatic about the political division of Southeast Asian societies according to religion and ethnicity (p. 41)." For example, David Brown's *The State and Ethnic Politics of Southeast Asia* (1994) and James Scott's groundbreaking study on *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1986) focus on the interrelationship of class and ethnicity as a source of contradiction. However, there is hardly any mention of gender rela-

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tions as another important site of tension, except for a token five-page account of a group of women resisters in Scott.

By exposing the exclusion of gender as a category for inquiry in political thought, however, this paper is not arguing for the mechanical insertion of women or gender in this pre-existing discourse. Rather, this paper suggests a rethinking of the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings of political science—a feminist interventionist strategy, which seeks to transform and stretch the boundaries of the discipline. The question therefore is not why gender does matter, but why gender does not matter in the politics of Southeast Asia.

Stivens alerts us to the heart of the problem by pointing to a key ordering construct in both traditional Eurocentric political thought and Eurocentric feminism: the dichotomy between private and public spheres. Going all the way back to the Greeks who contrasted the household and economy with the superior "polis", and continuing up to the present, this conceptualization relegated women to the domain of the private, the irrational, the intuitive, the reproductive, and following Derrida's critique of logocentrism—the inferior, the Other. The public sphere, on the other hand, was the domain of the rational, the bureaucratic, the formal—a "naturally" male and therefore, more superior enclave. Thus, mainstream discussions of politics would generally center on the institutions of government, the state and the ruling elite—all assumed to be unproblematically male.

At the most naive level, women's invisibility in the political/public sphere is consistent with Aristotle's ancient, though still pervasive delineation of the "free adult male (roughly equivalent to the Athenian citizen) as the paradigm of human nature" (Cavarero 1992: 32). Sexual difference became the basis for the power of men over women. At a more sophisticated level, however, modern theory renews and relocates this

power by "a homologizing logic founded on the repression of female sexual difference" (*Ibid.*: 39). Still cleaving tightly to the ancient "twofold valency of the male, on the one hand male, and on the other, neutral or universal," the invisibility of femaleness and the repression of sexual difference does not take the form of exclusion, but of assimilative inclusion premised on equality. "Modern law has in fact included women as equal to men, as if women, despite female sexual difference, were men." Women, in other words, are not a separate subject, but are a sort of empirical specification of the male subject—the negative to the positive, the Other to the One, universal male subject.

Cavarero states that modern political theory oscillates between these two poles of exclusion and the positing of a hierarchical sexual difference, on the one hand, and homologization and the erasure of sexual difference, on the other. In varying degrees of complexity these two poles are overlaid with the untouched dichotomous distinctions between the private and public spheres. Women are either relegated to a private space, and, therefore, excluded in the public domain, or assimilated into the public/political sphere becoming apparently less invisible, but still absorbed into the paradigm of the productive male.

This binarist logic has become so naturalized that it has become a common sense premise that permeates, not only our everyday lives, but almost all the traditional disciplines of the humanities, sociology, anthropology, and political science. However, as my examination of the materials under study will show, even oppositional movements that seek to challenge the constructs of mainstream disciplines have not completely freed themselves from this dualistic legacy.

Whose Political Economy? Feminist Epistemology and Methodology

Elizabeth Uy Eviota's *Political Economy of Gender* (1992), for instance, mobilizes political economic categories to demonstrate her central thesis: that Filipina women—specifically lowland Christian women—have been marginalized many times over according to their position in the sexual division of labor. As this study demonstrates, the merits of the political economic approach lie in its strong commitment to history and the stress on the dynamic interaction of internal and external forces, particularly colonization, capitalist penetration, and modernization. Though she traces the origin of inequality from ground level—in pre-colonial times—she nonetheless situates her analysis into the framework of a larger global system, a school that takes its inspiration primarily from world-systems and underdevelopment theories in political sociology expounded by Gunder Frank (1978) and—though he is not cited in the bibliography—Wallerstein. While she takes great pains to show that inequality between the sexes was present even before colonization, her main concern is to show how women's subordination was exacerbated by "the accelerated pace of economic change along capitalist lines." Filipino men and women are, after all, part of the Philippine nation-state and are involved in a wider system of unequal exchange within nations, and between underdeveloped nations in the periphery and developed nations in the metropolitan centers. Thus, she brings into play Filipinas, as well as Third World Women's common contexts of struggle, and the differences that equally divide men and women by class, race and ethnicity. Instead of basing her study on women's individuality and personal liberation, she situates it firmly within the context of class inequality and the uneven development of capitalism worldwide.

Second, while Eviota is situated within political economy, the question is "Whose political economy?" This is a feminist question, and though Eviota did not pose this problem explicitly, it was apparent in her critique of the discipline's male-dominated biases, on the one hand, and the supposedly "gender-neutral" research methods and instruments "fashioned by Western colonial powers (primarily male)," on the other hand. The first part is an epistemological question, pertaining to the way political economy, sociology, and history have been written, and how they have become legitimated as knowledge, thus defining what can be known and not be known; while at the same time unintentionally or intentionally and systematically excluding the possibility of women as "knowers" or as agents of knowledge. The second part is methodological, or the theory and analysis of what research does or how it should proceed, thus implicating research methods or the ways by which we gather "data" through the usual sociological instruments and standardized techniques.[1]

From the question "whose political economy?", Eviota's inquiry moves on—though again this is not explicit—to the question: "and what about women? (stress on the plural)"—thus recognizing how women's experiences could impact, not only on political economy as a discipline, but in the way society's institutions and social relations are currently structured. This is inseparable to the question: "And what about women's needs?" Eviota's answer is clear: What they need are not palliatives—as can be seen in Women in Development strategies or insertion of women into bureaucracies, among others. "The task," she says, "is to structure both personal relations and social, economic, and political structures and institutions—the economy, the family, the state, religion, the educational system, and the mass media—in a non-dominating way." In short, no less than an overhaul of the social formation

in all its economic, political, and ideological aspects. Thus, Eviota's study manifests the two key concepts central—and shall I say, unique—to feminist epistemology and methodology: the focus on *women's experiences and women's perspective,* and the generation of *new purposes for inquiry.* The results are at once theoretical and political.

However—and this is where I begin to enumerate the debit side of the equation—while Eviota is empowered by the political-economic framework, she is also limited by its orthodoxies. Running from page one to the last is a very strong functionalist strain. Though she explicitly brought forward, at the outset, the intricate connections between political economy, ideology, and cultural phenomena, economics remains as the overwhelming determining category. Culture and power are mere handmaidens for the perpetuation of the unequal sexual division of labor. Ideology exists as a mere epiphenomenon or reflection of the economic base, whose purpose is to keep the asymmetrical gender relations in place. She was not able to pursue more vigilantly the intricate connection between power, domination, and conflict, constrained as she was in explaining the ways by which society derives stability and consensus, through unequal gender roles. Her political economy, in other words, is much too economic and not political enough.

Second, Eviota keeps intact the division between the private and public spheres—a key ordering construct in both traditional Eurocentric political thought and Eurocentric feminism (Stivens 1991). Despite a token rethinking of the family, marriage, and the household as institutions that structure the private sphere, Eviota's discussion centers on the key players of mainstream political thought: the state, government, and the market. Because she is unable to dismantle this dichotomy, her proposals for change do not go beyond the

liberal agenda premised on equality in the public sphere, i.e., the elimination of "the most *overt* (my emphasis) forms of gender inequality, that is, the sexual division of labor, occupational segregation, job market segmentation, unequal work burdens, income and resource inequality, social and political discrimination restrictions on the biological reproductive rights of women and of the expression of their sexuality, and legal supports for women's subordinate status."

Though premising the struggle on equality in the job market, legal structures, and political economic relations is an important step, it also has to be rethought. Not only does it fail to take into account the invisible, less overt sources of power, exploitation, manipulation, and resistance; the single-minded pursuit of equality could also result, as Cavarero points out, in women's continued invisibility.

Third, by remaining invisible, anonymous, seemingly objective, and neutral, Eviota firmly remains entrenched—imprisoned—within traditional political economic rhetoric. She has already made the first step towards a rethinking of seemingly "scientific" and "positivist" research methodologies and methods by zeroing in on gender and women's experiences, yet she sabotaged the possibilities of her study by refusing to locate herself firmly, overtly, and explicitly within feminist discourse. No wonder she remained locked in the liberal agenda, and that she is unable to move on to the more substantial debates within feminism, and therefore unable to propel the project towards higher theoretical and political grounds.

Fourth, though she is aware—theoretically—that people are active participants who are both shaped and are shaping structures in their everyday lives, I do not see this concretely all throughout the book. Constrained as it is by the functionalist tendency, the book neglects to take into account the

meaning that individuals give to their action by concentrating simply on the consequences of these actions. In other words, there is too much political-economic structures and too little account of real people doing real actions.

Perhaps this is beyond the scope of the book, especially since Eviota's material was limited to secondary historical accounts, government reports, censuses, sectoral studies, and surveys. The scope of her study—four hundred years of history—also confines her to an analysis of broad structural shifts, and overall patterns of change. And third, the intellectual climate in women's studies in 70s to the 80s—was centered on breaking grounds, preliminary empirical spadework and filling historical gaps. In other words, the principal question during that time and even up to the present was and still is: "And what about women?"—a question that paved the way for studies which are not only sharply focused on women, but also firmly and aggressively linked with the feminist agenda.

Recent Studies: More Nuanced Theorizing

Recent studies have become more specific in scope, more sensitive to multiple casualties, thus casting serious doubt on the traditional and eurocentric social science research methodologies. "Male" and "Female" in *Developing Southeast Asia* edited by Wazir Jahan Karim (1995) pursued this agenda. Explicitly arguing for a dismantling of the binary opposites of public/private, communal/personal, formal/informal, among others, Karim, *et al.* brought under siege the methodological and theoretical anomalies of applying wholesale the western paradigms of gender relations into the Southeast Asian context. Among those brought into question is the paradigm of universal oppression and patriarchy, as constructed according to Western models of (a) the opposition between culture and nature of Levi Straussian structuralism

and to a certain extent, symbolic anthropology; (b) the constructs of individuality and autonomy, hegemony, and domination of Marxist structuralism, and (c) the binarist conceptions of power as exemplified in Foucault's theory of sexuality.

Since male and female relations in Southeast Asia—especially those where external capitalist impingements have hardly penetrated—are premised on a more egalitarian, complementary structures of kinship, assignment of roles, prestige systems, and religious activities, among others, the above models do not capture the complexities and the nuances peculiar to Southeast Asian societies. Because of the binarist logic underlying these models they lose sight of the more informal, less bureaucratized sources of power for women. By foregrounding, as Scott does, the forms of resistance based on non-cooperation, apparent submissiveness, among others, the authors—in particular—are launching their "appeal for the anthropology of informality," by emphasizing the fluid, day-to-day activities and struggles of daily life, thereby going beyond the confines of heavily bureaucratized, ritualized, male-dominated apparatuses of the State.

Laudable as their efforts may seem, this appeal to informality does not dismantle the dichotomous underpinnings of Eurocentric disciplines—in this case anthropology. Although apparently repudiating and exposing the limitations of the legacies of both Eurocentric, malecentric, and radical feminist discourse, the authors are themselves guilty of another dichotomy—the formal/informal spheres, with the formal remaining the domain of the modern State, and the informal as the domain of the pre-modern agrarian society. Like the second wave and radical feminists who celebrate the private/domestic sphere, not as a source of oppression, but

the "locus of the essentially good, nurturant, essential feminine" (Stivens 1991: 13), Karim, *et al.* privilege the informal sphere, thus further relegating, as radical feminists do, the "feminine essence" in a "room of one's own," distinct and separate from the males. As the current postfeminist backlash in EuroAmerica shows, this logic has dangerous implications, one of which is the reinforced ghettoization/exclusion of feminist struggles in Southeast Asia. Feminism's vigilant challenges and women's political agency would continue to exert minimal impact—if at all—on both the revolutions in knowledge and everyday existence.

Other studies are similarly limited by traditional boundaries, although they have been relatively successful in challenging the most tenacious dichotomies of their disciplines. *Women of a Lesser Cost* by Sylvia Chant and Cathy McIlwaine (1995) explored the links between women's employment, migration, and household composition and organization in the context of export-oriented strategies in Cebu, Boracay, and Lapu-Lapu City. Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo's dissertation (Ph.D. Philippine Studies, UP, 1994) on the life stories of subcontractual household workers in Bulacan brought to center stage the methodological problems related to research among women in the peripheries.

Through interviews and surveys using political economic categories, Chant and McIlwaine's study challenged the private/public dichotomy by showing how women's changing migratory behaviors, and their incorporation into export manufacturing, international tourism, and, to a certain extent, sex work are contributing to the changes of attitudes towards marriage and changing the structure of households. Women's earning capacities have become a source of power and freedom from immediate male domination; but at the same time, they remain a source of continued exploitation and subordination,

not only in the workplace, but even in personal relationships (single women for example, bear the brunt of responsibility of supporting natal kins). The study shows that improvement of earning capacities does not by itself constitute emancipation. What must be taken into account are the ideological and cultural underpinnings of women's subordination and their rootedness in social and material relations.

The authors' multidimensional approach demonstrates the need to grapple with the complexities, tensions, and contradictions that public/private binarisms fail to capture. Moreover, this approach suggests that relations of power are not reducible to economics, or to oppressor/oppressed dichotomies. Instead, it puts forward the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination, collaboration, and resistance which locate women, not only in distinct historical conjunctures but also in spaces where oppositional agency is possible in their daily lives and as part of their communities.

Women's Words/Women's Lives

However, the authors are still locked within orthodox political economy, in their use of such categories as "household," "family," "marriage," "migration," "worker, employer profile," "employment circumstances," "income," as "objective" indicators that by no means exhaust the fluid and dynamic nature of women's lives. While such descriptive information is useful and necessary, they provide inadequate interpretations on the politics of the daily exercise of power and survival. In short, similar to Eviota, I do not see real women, only abstract, nameless people here collapsed into a few frozen social and demographic indicators.

Perhaps it is because the authors were still largely tied to the traditional interview schedules and survey questionnaires, with only 30 respondents for "semi-structured" interviews,

which attempted to reconstruct women's life histories. But the qualitative nature of the life histories was a secondary concern, still central is the establishment of macro-processual patterns and broad correlations between "their demographic, household and employment circumstances" over time and space. Like Eviota, they were preoccupied with broad structural shifts and patterns instead of the thinking and feeling women of their studies, and the messy details that would not necessarily fit into their overall schema. By deploying fairly traditional strategies, they did not search for the stories that lie beyond the constraints of what is acceptable, and, therefore, missed their chance to document the complex web of women's experiences, thus robbing women of their more honest and potentially powerful voices. The authors remained safely ensconced within the cold, relentlessly empirical limits of political economy.

Pineda-Ofreneo's dissertation, on the other hand, dares to read against the grain of her discipline. At the outset, she self-reflexively critiqued the conventions of academic research by problematizing the power relations between researcher and respondent. Through what she calls as *"kuwentong buhay,"* she sought to shift the locus of power and control from the researcher to the narrator, thus decentering the researcher's privileged position in the research context. The narration becomes a process of negotiation, dialogue, interaction and interpretation based on rapport and mutual trust.

Fielded in the two-year fieldwork are her students and research assistants, who conversed with ten respondents who were shortlisted from among the women of PATAMABA, a women's cooperative. Focus group discussions were also conducted before and after the conversations with individual narrators. To give the narrators more control of the interpretive process, the fieldworkers returned again and again to the women involved after the transcriptions of the tapes, and

together they edited, revised, and reconstructed their various histories.

The conversations moved away from the linear question-and-answer interview schedule, giving way to the cyclical, the non-chronological and the "messy" process of storytelling to strike at the core of subjective experiences, the actions, events, and the various ways by which women give meaning to their lives—in their own terms. The study sought to cross the boundaries of what is acceptable "data," and moved away from surface assertions, hopefully bringing to light the ambiguities, the complexities of women's lives, oftentimes muted in conventional social and academic discourse.

While the project looked initially promising—and I have learned many lessons for my own research on women artists —the results are disappointing and perplexing. There is very little of the complexity and ambiguity in the life histories that finally found their way to Pineda-Ofreneo's dissertation. The (re)presentation of the life histories followed the chronological interview checklist, which guided the researchers in their conversations. The stories were retold according to a linear narration of life's phases, activities and facts, centering on what happened and how it happened, but so little of the web of feelings, attitudes, and values that give meaning to these activities and events. If the women got to the point of mutual disclosures and emotional outpourings, and if the researchers and narrators found the experience mutually enriching and liberating, how could the narrative texts be so boring, superficial, and sterile? If the narrators were given control over their materials, why don't I hear them? Why is the research process incompatible with their life histories, as they are presented in their final form?

Perhaps Pineda-Ofreneo was ultimately constrained by the conventions and power structures of the academic enter-

prise and its modes of writing and narrating. Perhaps the women-narrators themselves edited out the most significant portions of their stories, or the ones that they felt may be damaging—thus succumbing to conventions themselves. Still another reason may be the limits of the life history genre itself. On one hand, the researchers sought to challenge the extremely linear, cut and dried storytelling method of conventional autobiography by encouraging a cyclical, self-reflexive, perhaps "natural" orality. But when it came down to re-presenting the stories, they nonetheless fell back on the very conventions of autobiography. At the end of the day, the life trajectories coincided with the linearity of the latter genre.

The lessons to be learned are complex, each giving rise to another set of problems. How do we, for instance, refunction the life history/autobiography, in a way that will give justice to the complexity of women's lives? How do we intervene meaningfully, both in the "gathering" of stories, and the writing of the women's worlds/words? Pineda-Ofreneo's study seemed to have pointed the way. However, like the above studies, she stopped short, she hesitated—just at the moment when she was almost there. She promised, but did not deliver.

Political Agency Through Organized Movements

While the above studies centered on women's lives and words in their various and specific worlds, other studies focus on their political agency in the public sphere. Writers like Lenore Manderson (1991) would insist on the retention of the distinction between public and private spheres and proceed to situate this resistance within the framework of organized and bureaucratized movements. Instead of being ghetto-ized into a separate Women's Studies area, Manderson would opt for the incorporation of studies on women in the public life into pre-existing mainstream studies

—a recuperative strategy which aims to rescue these "lost women" from their theoretical backwaters.

However, the goal would not be recuperation for its own sake, with its emphasis on women's under-representation in organized structures, but on the analysis of the roles women play in these institutions, as Manderson demonstrates in her study of gender and politics in Malaysia. In her view, the involvement of women in political institutions and the extent and the ways by which this involvement precipitates a re-ordering of gender relations in politics remains largely unexplored, and there is a demonstrable need to confront this challenge in feminist writing in Southeast Asia.

One of the recent studies that seem to rise to this challenge is an account of women's non-government organizations in Thailand by Darunee Tantiwiramanond and Shashi Ranjan Pandey. By tracing the historical progression of women's groups in Thailand, *By Women, for Women: A Study of Women's Organizations in Thailand* (1991) is an important contribution to the growing literature on women's potentials as active agents of change in Southeast Asia. Written by women, for women—from the perspective of women's experiences—this book redresses the imbalance brought about by the dominance of researches written by men, for men.

Although leaving intact the private/public sphere by focusing on women's participation in more formal and organized political activities, the study is valuable since it goes against the grain of victim-oriented accounts of women's experiences, thus challenging the dominant image of women as helpless and passive recipients of male oppression. Considering that there is just too much focus on women as victims but very little material on Southeast Asian women's active agency, this book is indeed a welcome addition to a still-marginalized and relatively dormant area of feminist intellectual production.

Framing their methodology within the rubric of "resource mobilization theory" and "new social movements" popular in Europe and Latin America, the authors illustrated that a psychological explanation is inadequate to account for the emergence of women's movements in industrializing Thailand. Women may have felt oppressed, but the awareness does not necessarily translate into action; rather, it is brought about by a combination of historical, political, and social forces such as the availability of political and educational opportunities, the emergence of new social values, and social movements around the world, among others.

Seen in this light, the book offers useful empirical insights into the complexities of political feminist praxis, and is a good reference for studies on the political and economic situation of women in Thailand. By tracing the genealogy of the "radicalization" of women's groups in Thailand, the authors brought forward the correlation between class, social position, educational status and gender, on the one hand; and the goals, philosophy, strengths, and structure of each organization, on the other. The dynamics between the multiple and intersecting links of these various categories were also brought to bear on the specificities of Thailand as an industrializing nation.

This active engagement with the complex interaction of historically specific locations of organized women's movements could have prepared the ground for more vigorous theorization. Instead, the authors failed to tease out the more productive practical and theoretical steps which Thai as well as SEA women could employ towards ultimate empowerment. Take for example the authors' discussion of projects undertaken by the government, government organizations' emphasis on income-generating projects such as food processing and handicrafts, the authors, nonetheless, lamely conclude that it

is high time that the government, GOs, and progressive NGOs collaborated: the government and GOs could learn from the more productive strategies of NGOs, while the NGOs could benefit from the bureaucratic and funding machinery of the former. The immediate task, therefore, is to make the government fully realize and recognize the role of women in development.

Despite the pragmatic value of this plan of action, it is symptomatic of the constraints posed by empirical descriptions and methodologies. Since the authors were already searching for the ways by which the "seclusion of women from politics can be lessened," they could have moved on from there and could have proceeded to set a more productive agenda—at least for future researches. They could have proposed an analysis, *in gender terms,* of the state's norms of accountability, sources of power, and real constituency. It would have been helpful, as MacKinnon proposed, to lock horns with the following problematiques: "Is the state to some degree autonomous of interests of men or an integral expression of them? Does the state embody and serve male interests in its form, dynamics, relation to society, and specific policies? Is the state constructed upon the subordination of women? If so, how does male power become state power? Can such a state be made to serve the interests of those upon whose powerlessness its power is erected? What, in other words, is the state *from women's point of view?*

In the absence of such forceful interrogations, the authors left intact the state/civil society dichotomy and were consequently unable to widen the range of possibilities from which women could launch more empowering strategies. Women and women's organizations have become just another interest group within a pluralist civil society. The state, on the other hand, remains in a public sphere of rationality, and appre-

hended as a neutral arbiter of conflicting interests, which can be persuaded, by pushing the right buttons, to intervene on behalf of women. More power is then given to a supposedly gender-neutral state, in an attempt to claim it for women, leaving unchecked and untouched men's power and supremacy (MacKinnon 1987: 137).

This only demonstrates that while the inclusion of women and gender issues in the public sphere could be useful as a transitional stage, there is a clear and present danger that women's potential for agency can, in the long run, be muted, neutralized, and, even more dangerously, appropriated and tamed. Without a more competent theory of the state and the asymmetrical power relations that permeate the totality of relationships within a society, women will continue to oscillate between exclusion and ghetto-ization, and assimilation and homologization—two sides of a coin minted on the premise of women's continued repression.

To illustrate, Manderson's study of gender and politics in Malaysia (in Stivens 1991) showed that while women have limited access as it is to high office in Malaysia, the few who do "make it" to political parties, government branches, and even trade unions operate within the parameters that reinforce and maintain their subordination. Manderson demonstrated this by describing how Wanita UMNO, the UMNO Women's section, is victimized by the parent party's formalization of a sexually asymmetrical relationship that exists in the larger society.

Norma Sullivan (in *op. cit.*, 1991), in her study of gender and politics in Indonesia showed how the state has arrogated for itself women's potential as agents of change by highlighting the contradictions in the relationship between gender and politics, and by examining the links between scholarly and state planning discourses about the relations between women

and men and their proper roles in development. In the 1970s, the Indonesian state launched initiatives promoting women's participation in development through what is called non-political women's movements. However, this ostensible inclusion of women in public life conceals a largely conservative and welfarist ideology premised on women's location in the domestic sphere. To women were assigned five major roles as loyal backstops and supporters of their families; as caretakers of the household, as producers and nurturers of future generations, as the family socializers, and as Indonesian citizens.

Clearly, the sexual division of labor inscribed along public / private dichotomies correlates with a functionalist/consensus perspective, which masks and smoothes over women's continued homologization into the parameters of a male-centered state. By assimilating the private sphere into the framework of the nation-state, these initiatives only serve to perpetuate women's continued subordination. In the Indonesian case, at least, gender *does* matter, as long as it is advantageous for the state.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that gender does *not* matter in Southeast Asian politics because it can easily be either ghetto-ized and excluded from mainstream politics; or more dangerously, be homologized and rendered invisible, both within the framework of decolonizing and industrializing nation-states, and within the boundaries of Eurocentric political theoretical constructs. Thus effaced, gender and gender difference can readily be assimilated and absorbed into the apparently more "generic" and more "neutral" categories of class, race, and ethnicity—both in the private sphere of domestic life, and in the public sphere of bureaucratized structures.

Redrawing the Parameters of Feminist Interventions

Women's continued invisibility in the face of, and despite feminism's vigorous interventions suggests that there are no simple ways of representing the complexity of various SEA contexts. This requires, as Mohanty (1991) asserts, a more nuanced and more complex mode of posing questions and analyzing histories, based on a more rigorous understanding of the multiple, fluid, fundamentally historical lives of Southeast Asian men and women. It is an intricate web of overlapping structures of domination and resistance, which intersect to locate women, as well as men, in conjunctural spaces that permit a wide range of possibilities for alliances, subversions, and collaborations. This complex of overdetermined relations resists dichotomous explanations, for they can only simplify SEA women's particular and diverse histories and struggles and their various possibilities as agents of change.

Attempts to capture this complex oppositional agency is evident in more recent feminist critiques exemplified by Karim's attempt to dissolve the public/private dichotomies by stressing the fluidity of male and female relations in developing Southeast Asia. It is equally manifest in Darunee and Pandey's complex description of the multiple connections between the specificities of nation, race, gender, and social position, and the dynamics of organized movements. However, the limitations of these studies did not predispose them to break away from the dangers of ghetto-ization and homologization and the consequent neutralization of women's radical potential. Failing to grasp the simultaneity of oppressions and dominations and the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles, they were unable to transcend the dualistic mentality that separate powerful histories of resistance and

revolution in daily life and those within the framework of organized movements.

The studies by Eviota, Chant and McIlwaine, and Pineda-Ofreneo point the way for future directions, particularly in confronting the tension, not only between the feminist agenda and the paternal disciplines from which we originate, but also the tensions within feminism itself. However, the studies were stuck in the first tension, finally becoming recontained by the stronger surge of the father discipline. Still firmly working within the bounds of empiricism, functionalism, and positivism, the women merely conformed but did not transform the boundaries of political economy. As their studies show, they did not go beyond the question of "What about women?" and merely added women to the overall disciplinal templates. Gender became a mere subset of the discipline—not an area of feminist inquiry on its own right, with its own set of problematics and theoretical and methodological concerns that nonetheless continue to permeate and challenge the basic principles of traditional disciplines.

This is not to suggest a radical overhauling of political economy, anthropology and the rest of the social sciences; neither do I suggest that we demolish all that has gone before and start from scratch and begin our quest for an essential feminist theoretical and political method. What is urgently needed now is a feminist standpoint that will attack the two tensions on all fronts by simultaneously rethinking and reformulating the tools that we borrow, not only from our specific disciplines, but from other fields as well.

This suggests that we could seriously explore alternative strategies in retelling the histories of Southeast Asian women. Following Mohantly, researches could, for instance, lock horns with the following thematic configurations: (1)colonialism, class, gender; (2) the state, citizenship, and racial forma-

tions; (3) multinational production and social agency; (4) anthropology and the Southeast Asian woman as native; and (5) consciousness, identity, and writing.

The first three items relate to questions of definitions and the last two, with questions of the context of feminist theorizing in Southeast Asia. Questions of definition refer to a confrontation with such problems as: "Who/What is Southeast Asia? Do Southeast Asian women make up any kind of constituency? On what basis? Can we assume that Southeast Asian women's political struggles are necessarily "feminist"? These questions could strike at the core of political and historical intersections, including the moments of decolonization and national liberation movements; the consolidation of white, liberal, capitalist patriarchies and Eurocentric feminisms in Southeast Asian intellectual and cultural contexts; the operation of multinational economy within the regional peripheries of Southeast Asia, and its participation in global economy, among others.

Questions of discursive contexts vigilantly pose such questions as which/whose history do we draw on to chart this map of Southeast Asian women's engagement with feminism? How do questions of gender, race, and nation intersect in determining feminisms in Southeast Asia? Like the writers in *Why Gender Matters. . .* and *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* (1991), we could launch interrogations on who produces knowledge about colonized peoples and from what space/location? What are the politics of the production of this particular knowledge? What are the disciplinary parameters of this knowledge? What are the methods used to locate and chart Southeast Asian women's self and agency?

These questions suggest that problems of definition and context oftentimes intersect and intercept each other and these overlaps suggest the inextricable interrelationship of colo-

nialism, capitalism, race, and gender. Thus, another productive discursive step could urge us to question the ways by which we conceive definitions and contexts, on what basis do we foreground certain contexts over others, and how do we understand the ongoing shifts in our conceptual cartographies. In the process, we focus on our common contexts of struggle—a context that delineates our antiracist and nationalist struggles from most traditional feminists' almost singular focus on gender and equality as the basis for struggle.

It is in this theoretical context that we could participate in filling the historical gaps in feminist herstories, not to smooth over the contradictions and tensions festering between race, gender, ethnicity, nation, region, and class formations, but to illuminate the fissures from which we could harness our other possibilities. Kumari Jayawardena (1994) asserts for instance, that "a comprehensive history of the participation of poverty-stricken masses of women in various forms of agitation in Asia has yet to be attempted." While material is available on movements involving elite and middle class women she says, (e.g., *By Women, for Women*), an intensive search is still necessary to unearth detailed information on the participation of the working-class women and peasantry in anti-imperialist and other struggles. More often, too, as in most researches involving overseas migration and international divisions of labor, working class men and women are often imaged as victims, on whose behalf middle class women intercede, thereby failing to bring to light the possibilities for active agency from and within their own ranks and their daily existences.

Another area that could benefit from more intensive research is the role of women in precapitalist societies before the impact of colonialism. Although studies such as those by Karim's

explore the effects of external capitalist impingements on agrarian societies, the impact of capitalist ideology on women and the level at which it affects their daily lives remain in the abstract.

Finally, Jayawardena suggests that although women's movements in many countries in Asia achieved political and legal equality at the juridical level, they failed to exert a considerable impact on women's subordination within the patriarchal structures of family and society. This is evident in the moderate and cautious movement for equality of women's groups in Thailand, as I have pointed out in my critique of *By Women, for Women*. This emancipatory and homologizing strategy, if untheorized, could not develop into a more advanced stage of feminist consciousness, to the point where it questions and dismantles traditional patriarchal structures. Perhaps we should really take the cue from Mohanty's assertion that feminist struggles cannot be understood within the context of organized emancipatory movements. Instead, we should buckle down to a serious remapping of private/public, state/family cartographies, and move on to a redrawing of conceptual boundaries, thereby shedding light, in a very provisional way, on the various spaces where we could launch our resistances as Southeast Asian women and men.

All these recommendations suggest that feminist interventions, especially in the social and political sciences, necessarily partakes of a hybrid, reflexive negotiation of slippery, ever changing grounds. Feminist epistemology is necessarily an epistemology in transition, and it is to the above studies' credit that they are able to chart some possibilities, not only for confronting and addressing the issues revolving around why gender does not matter in the politics of Southeast Asia. More importantly, they provide the initial impetus for remapping the parameters of Southeast Asian his/herstories,

so that gender can and will matter in these last bastions of male-centric dominance and domination.

Endnotes

[1]These definitions are drawn from Sandra Harding, in her introduction of the anthology on *Feminism and Methodology* (1987).

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