

TOWARD A REINSCRIPTION OF NATIONALIST FEMINISM*

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Let me begin with a narration of two disparate events, divergently located in time and place, as a way of positioning my argument. The first occurred in the early 80s at an FFP (Friends of the Filipino People) annual conference where, the motivating factors (was it a genuinely informed concern with female subordination or merely tokenism?) aside, I was expected as a matter of course to speak on “women’s issues.”

At this particular yearly meeting, six Filipino men known to toe the “ND” mark came as friendly observers. Because I was well aware that feminism was not received favorably by the revolutionary movement at home, I took a theoretical approach emphasizing the deficiency of the productivist orientation that underpins orthodox Marxism. My presentation was followed by the enthusiastic response of the Filipino women who were there, by U.S. women and by U.S. men, in what became a “speak-out” on male chauvinism. Conspicuously silent, my Filipino male compatriots were apparently not at all impressed with my lecture on Marxist feminism (how could a critique of the base/superstructure gulf not have been anything short of heretical?), nor were they particularly pleased by the consensus that sexism is a problem that tends to have a life of its own apart from relations of production. Suffice it to say that the following morning, all six packed their bags without a comment and left the conference.

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The second case is a more recent one, and the setting was St. Scholastica's College in Manila. Several months ago I had the opportunity to facilitate a module in an intercultural women's studies course with 17 Asian/Pacific women as participants. Thirteen countries were represented, 11 of which belong to the Asian/Pacific region: the Philippines, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia, South Korea, and Papua New Guinea, among others. In addition, there was a woman from Zambia and two white U.S. women.

What figured prominently in the sessions I handled was the manner in which most of the women regarded the Philippines as removed from, or without connection to, the rest of the Asian countries. No doubt the presence of the two women from the United States, whose participation in the program was questioned from the very beginning (except for these two who paid for tuition and living arrangements, every one else was on scholarship), served to exacerbate these tensions. Filipinos suffer from "a lack of their own culture," according to the half dozen or so voices raised. For them the symptoms of this deprivation are evidenced as much in the way Filipinas dress and comport themselves (there was a citation of the "domineering" manner of Filipino women, but curiously enough, vulnerability to "Western" feminism was not openly impugned) as in the worldview inscribed in ubiquitous images projecting the good life broadcast by various media. Esther from Pakistan was especially outspoken in this regard, and she made no effort to conceal her disdain: "We are proud of our culture. We do not look up to America as our model."

Two obvious themes arise from the above. One is the progressive movement's refusal or inability to acknowledge the significance of feminist insights in the articulation of transformational politics. Few feminist Filipinas will fail to recognize this as a persistent difficulty despite the fact that the Philippine women's movement is currently considered one of the most vigorous in the developing world (Mitter 1986, 153; Mirkinson 1992, 11).

Very recently, for example, I attended a conference organized for the purpose of “reexamining and reviewing the Philippine progressive vision.” According to some of the women who took part in organizing that meeting, sexism was much in evidence in a variety of ways, not the least of which was the confinement of “gender” as a category by itself separate from the other, ostensibly more weighty topics: democracy, power, and transformation; the crisis of the left; equity, growth, and the environment, to name a few. Clearly, much educational work has yet to be done so that “progressive” male honchos finally grasp the indissociability of gender from “real politics.” Feminism has been described as “the most potentially powerful challenge to the status quo” precisely because it calls for struggle against all forms of oppression (Sen and Grown 1987, 19). If this is so, then feminism is profoundly implicated in any discussion on democracy, power and transformation, and certainly in any conversation about crisis of the left.

Now the other theme, the insinuation that, “lacking a culture of our own” we are little more than unfortunate clones of the West, is one that we cannot take lightly because it not only raises questions about national self-determination but hits at the very core of our sense of ourselves as a people. I believe that it is the inextricable intertwining of these two motifs—feminism and the quest for national identity—that constitutes the imperatives for the women’s movement in our country at the moment. In the rest of this essay, I will try to explain why I hold this view and why, in spite of the enduring ignorance of many of our male colleagues, I would probably address the subordination of women somewhat differently from the talk I gave at that FFP annual gathering over a decade ago.

Today, nine years after the founding of GABRIELA, the women’s movement has both established its presence and attained an autonomy that is rare in “Third World” formations. The proliferation of women’s organizations in the last few years (including the setting up of Women’s Studies programs) has brought to the public consciousness a range of issues heretofore unacknowledged, a primary

one being domestic violence against women. It can no longer be said that the women's movement simply obeys Party dictates, privileging the economic over the cultural or ideological. (In reply to my query in Manila several months ago about the status of GABRIELA, a friend confirmed that while still significant, the federation is not as central to the movement as it used to be since many groups functioning outside its purview now exist.) In fact it is in the realm of cultural production in which women have been most energetic and most passionate. The publication of books and journals, staging of plays, music composition, the visual arts, performances on radio and TV—in these the utilization of women's talent, imagination, creativity and resources has been both remarkable and inspiring.

Several factors can be seen to account for the flourishing of feminism immediately following the Marcos era and thereafter: the "democratic space" opened up by Aquino's restoration of civil liberties and re-establishment of Congress; the weakening of the left due to both tactical and strategic errors; changes in the global arena, particularly the collapse of the Soviet Union. All of these helped legitimate the hard, patient, day-to-day work that feminists undertook to build an autonomous women's movement. Two years ago debates about the place of feminism in the revolutionary agenda as formulated by the Communist Party were still taking place (Lansang 1991). But today with serious divisions wracking the left, there exists the possibility that, released completely from an economist paradigm on the one hand and drawn to the perquisites extended by international feminist networks and foreign funding sources on the other,¹ feminism could make a shift in another direction.

In the meantime, the urgency as well as the types of problems facing the majority of Filipino women prevent a move like this from

¹In recent years, money previously given to the government has been channelled to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), a notable number of which have a women-in-development focus or a mandate toward "gender sensitivity." (de Vera 1992, 16; St. Hilaire 1992). For discussions of the implications of this trend, see Constantino-David 1990 and Council for People's Development 1991.

taking place so suddenly. Insofar as the women's movement retains its charge of advocacy for grass-roots women and for those suffering adversity undeniably shaped by a neocolonial state of affairs, feminism in the Philippines will maintain its "Third World" character. This is evidenced in important feminist work by activists and academics alike which has taken as its subject phenomena like prostitution and migrant labor, telling symptoms of exploitative North/South relations (Palma Beltran and Javate de Dios 1992; Miralao, Carlos and Fulleros Santos 1990). There is little indication that the disintegration of the "Second World," its absorption into a global capitalist system, and the present reshuffling among industrial powers will mean anything other than an intensification of the economic woes of developing countries. Yet how these economic ordeals are handled depends on the initiative of liberation movements whose alternatives have been limited by this historical conjuncture of international events (Petras and Fischer 1990).

In the post-Marcos years, the declining influence of the left as well as the macho stance of the revolutionary movement at its height have ironically functioned to invigorate the feminist enterprise. Up to this point feminist analysis wholly subscribes to the use of grand narratives indispensable to understanding sociopolitical and economic arrangements in developing nations, but which in the past decade or so has become anathema to *de rigueur* intellectuals in the West. Feminist reflection on the tribulations women face has relied on the efforts of political organizers and the empirical findings of university researchers who are also activists. Such a marriage of thought and action, although not always in perfect harmony, informs the work of feminists (Medel-Añonuevo 1990-91). At the very least, it is the vision of that union that has spurred feminist activity.

These conditions as I've described them can best be summed up as highly fluid and volatile, unavoidably situating feminism at the crossroads. So what's in store? In any projections of what could transpire, changes in the world picture have to be factored in, the

status of “peripheral” countries being what it is. Without question, the weakening of the progressive movement as a whole can not but have considerable impact on the women’s movement in the long term, if not in the near future.

What the exact nature of that impact might be is, of course, difficult to predict with any accuracy. At worst, it could spell the erosion of feminist militancy, a watering down of leftist explications of women’s socioeconomic troubles, or the ultimate abandonment of a revolutionary platform and a flight into the less hazardous terrain of cultural struggle and liberal reform. Through conversations during my last visit, I could glean some of this already taking effect. The virtual mushrooming of women’s offices, desks, and committees during the past two years, while boding well, can also take an inauspicious turn—the creation of a feminist bureaucracy dependent on dole-outs from foreign sources, for one. Already, a few women speak of a growing gap between feminists and the grass as roots, and an imminent “democracy” in programs erected on development assistance from foreign governments (de Vera 1992, 16). The spirit of activism, not too long ago infusing the air, has been replaced by an officialism presumably made necessary by grant requirements.²

And how about the feminist frameworks purveyed by the women’s movement, particularly in the context of the aggressive stance it has taken in the building of international feminist networks? From what I can gather, the wish to perceive all women as sisters, a tendency that usually accompanies the initial awakening to gender asymmetry, still occupies feminist thinking. In the women’s studies course at St. Scholastica’s, this push for a universal sisterhood

²As I write, there is talk about these sources drying up due to the loss of geopolitical interest in the Philippines on the part of donor countries. This development, which could spell the demise of NGOs and their “new vanguard” role, may well accelerate a reorganization of the left in the absence of remedial measures to alleviate people’s poverty. Admittedly, this view is baldly economicist.

found expression in a number of ways: in the desire to unite all women, for instance, via the cross-class, cross-cultural experience of rape or battering by men; or in the solidarity-inspired assertion that “a victory for women anywhere is a victory for us.”

Such essentialist inclinations bear examination because their consequences are contingent on who is making the call for unity; that is, the “meaning” or import of feminist essentialism (the belief that there is an immutable essence or unchanging humanity that all women share) is always modified by relations of power. In the 70s and 80s African-American, Latina, and other women of color fought tenaciously to unmask the white, middle-class women masquerading as the “universal woman.” It was the white, middle-class (usually professional) woman who, having the authorial voice, could speak of her own experience of subordination and appear as though she were representing womankind.

That “universal woman,” if now somewhat displaced in the industrial West, is alive and well in international feminist circles. I was told by a friend in Manila that feminists are still called on by foreign visitors to explain how it is that poverty is a feminist issue, and is GABRIELA an organization of feminists or of nationalist women (read, dupes of men)? The wondrous ease with which “First World” feminists take it upon themselves to dispense advice on any number of things (e.g., giving “coming out” workshops for Filipino lesbians, or dismissing as “unproductive” the ascription of women’s lowered status to Spanish and U.S. colonization) is truly astounding. What we as Filipino feminists need to understand is that while alleging sisterhood in a common oppression, women in a superordinate position can at once claim generic status—that is, speak on our behalf and/or question our stand—and preserve their superiority. When we, however, subscribe to the idea of a universal sisterhood, the effect is radically different—we erase ourselves out of the picture! That is why it is hard to imagine a white woman in the U.S. celebrating a victory of, say, women slumdweller in

Metro Manila (assuming that she even has access to this sort of news) and identifying with that triumph as if it were her own.

Perhaps I can illustrate this self-obliteration that we are prone to as colonials, with a more earthy example. In a talk I gave in a graduate women's studies seminar at U.P., I picked out an example of a sexist joke from an essay on male bias in language. It went this way: "Getting married is like finding a toilet seat still warm—it feels good, but you keep wondering who has been there before." My point was that this bit of "humor" was a direct import from a colder climate and had no pertinence whatever to us, in view of our warm weather. I assumed that this was a fairly simple idea to catch, but the responses I got (some of which were rather irate) were unusually strange. Someone eventually made note of the reality that the majority of us don't even have toilets. But reacting to that, another gave a lengthy disquisition challenging why I would deny Filipinos the right to development goals, which would include having comfortable flush toilets!

What I am attempting to stress here is that our colonial mentality makes it almost second nature for us to assume the persona of our colonizer. Consequently, our susceptibility to conceptions of shared sisterhood among all women merely acts to reinforce our neocolonial standing. It would not hurt us to realize that the very phrase "as a woman" has been labelled as the "Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism" (Spelman 1988, x). But as Maria Lugones contends, in the United States, racism is the major source of tension where women of color are concerned; internationally it is cultural imperialism (1991, 19). According to her both are interactive phenomena, but the latter is not as perceptible because it entails no person-to-person mistreatment. This can explain our inability as Filipinos (unless residence in the U.S. and elsewhere has educated us; for this reason, I am hoping that you would be a more receptive audience) to discern racism in the conduct of those whose mission is to uplift and enlighten us.

In the past several years in the West, the notion of a universally shared oppression among women has lost purchase. In fact, one might say that essentialism as a theoretical current has been practically demonized, exclusionary tendencies now being attributed to it. Can we now relax, then? Chilla Bulbeck writes: "Western feminism has become less Eurocentric and, indeed, now discusses the differences among women with a vengeance" (1991, 77-78). It is true that elaborations of "difference," with their theoretical undergirding derived from post modernist constructionism, have come to frame feminist discussions. Because social constructionism argues that "woman" is never a pre-given entity but is created in the social process, it is posed as a corrective to essentialism.

Through the use of post modernist devices, the concept of "universal woman" has been deconstructed and denaturalized (Riley 1988; de Lauretis 1986, 1-19). Put simply, social constructionism declares that woman is made, not born. This sounds sensible enough, but let's go on. Instead of the essential woman, we are confronted by subjectivities that are fragmentary, multiple, contradictory, and in constant flux. To the singular focus on gender has been added a list of other forms of oppression—racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, etc.—all of which are mutually determining and none of which supersedes the others in importance. The meaning of "woman," then, is now constantly deferred and never fully established since this depends on how gender intersects with multiple other axes at any given moment.

With this new scheme called the "politics of difference," our attention is now turned to the local and specific, the focus being on the personal, the subjective, the everyday. One might conclude that, at last, the 60s' challenge to politicize the personal has been met and consummated. Maybe so, but L.A. Kauffman argues that the present vision informing identity politics deviates from that of the 60s. Whereas consciousness raising then stressed the social nature of individual experience and was seen as a prelude to political change, today self-transformation is itself political change (1990,

74, 77). It cannot be otherwise since the earmark of current feminist approaches is the rejection of a cosmic view adopted from post modernism.

So what does all this mean for us Filipino women? To be sure, the emphasis on heterogeneity and pluralism connotes a refreshing acceptance of experiences that are eclipsed by posing women as a unitary group. But the problem is that relations of power are hidden by the stringing together of a series of oppressions (Gordon 1991, 106-107; Carby 1990, 84-85), mutually defining though these may be, in the end insuring the preservation of things as they are. How will this assist us in ridding ourselves of our colonial predisposition toward self-erasure if power relations are concealed?

If the above is true, then maybe it is not too bad that Filipino feminists have not yet discovered the "politics of difference." We're not likely to maintain our innocence, however, for research on Filipino women along these ideological lines is already being conducted. What do these studies look like? I had occasion to read an otherwise interesting dissertation on gender, the military and violence that I believe will soon be published. Among many unusual opportunities the author had access to, one allowed her to closely observe the workings of both the AFP and the NPA. Using the Foucauldian conception of power as capillary, relational, contradictory and heterogeneous, she wound up claiming parallel power for the NPA and the revolutionary forces, discursively diffusing the violence of the AFP, the vigilantes, and other state-backed agencies. She discovered on arrival in the Philippines that all actors were ultimately aligned either for or against the state. Her theoretical perspective, however, compelled her to realign them to fit a predetermined pattern; namely, to flatten out and reduce all contending forces to the same level. We need to ask, who benefits from this point of view?

Another study is by Collete St. Hilaire (1992) who, using Foucault's *dispositif*, examines the impact of development programs

designed to integrate women in the development process. With the spate of foreign funding pouring into the country in the past two years, her inquiry into one specific health and livelihood project is very timely and important, as are her conclusions. She states, for instance, that the project includes a series of control mechanisms designed to manage women's underdevelopment. But St. Hilaire's anti-totalization inhibits her from ever naming the development model that is being upheld in these programs. What can we make of this omission? Further, she disparages as totalizing and symptomatic of a vanguardist mentality the feminist agenda valorizing the poorest women as the recipients of social change. In lieu of a target group, she endorses alliances based on common interests, but alliances that "like our identities... remain precarious, unstable, in constant flux, displacing and being displaced as they come into contact with other differences, whether of class, race, sexual preference, age, nationality...." (1992, 13). Anyone who has ever done any organizing should be able to speak to the unworkability of a guide for action as foggy as this one.

Lest we dismiss these theoretical innovations as farfetched from our concerns, I should mention that at the recent conference I attended, the phrase "totalizing theory" was bandied about like a bugaboo, as though it had caused the crisis of the left in the Philippines. Surely we need to worry about authoritarianism in our progressive movement, but is it grand narratives that are responsible for this? Without an overarching framework, how can we begin to grasp the shape of capitalism or any other social formation? Not knowing the nature of the system we live in, how can we begin to work for social change? Can we afford a retreat from political struggle, which is what this trend of thought ultimately implies?

Little wonder that Alex Callinicos has interpreted postmodernism as "less about the world than the expression of a particular generation's sense of ending" (1989, 171). He assigns postmodernism as an intellectual trend to a specific group's disenchantment with the promise of revolutionary change during the 60s,

since for him the condition of postmodernity does not represent a historical break from the modern period.³ Instead, he agrees with David M. Gordon that what we are witnessing in the West is the decay of the postwar global economy rather than the establishment of a new system of production and exchange. While some intellectuals in the United States might dispute this perspective, that the material conditions in our own country are far different is not exactly debatable. We can hardly even speak of having reached modernity! It is true that the outcome of colonization is precisely a superimposition that creates a collage of cultures prefiguring, on the surface, the condition of postmodernity. But what Nelly Richard remarks of Latin Americans, who “need not feel the weariness of belonging to a sated, over consuming society, since their connection to that culture has invariably been one of dispossession” (1987-88, 11), applies to us. So what are we doing, trifling with new-fangled ideas that for the most part can only be harmful to us?

Let me attempt to sum up my main points. Several factors have contributed to the notable growth of feminism in the Philippines, among which has been the attrition of the progressive movement. As I mentioned at the outset, it seems clear that even progressive men in search of democratic alternatives have failed to reckon with feminist interrogations of Marxism and continue to ghettoize women. This male stubbornness can only aid and abet the women’s movement, not altogether a bad thing. Yet we also must recognize that, with active networking in the now worldwide women’s movement, an unrehabilitated colonial outlook makes us very vulnerable to the influx of ideas (not to say the seductiveness of grant possibilities, travel, hobnobbing with feminist luminaries, and so on) the uncritical acceptance of which could signify nothing more than a feminist replication of neocolonialism. Finally, I would argue that developments in the Philippines as well as in the international arena warrant a feminism that is vehemently anti-colonial and staunchly nationalist. It is time to reinscribe nationalism into the feminist agenda.

³See also David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Ma: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

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