

## "THE MASTER'S TOOLS WILL NEVER DISMANTLE THE MASTER'S HOUSE":<sup>1</sup> SOME MEDITATIONS ON WOMEN, CULTURE, AND POLITICS

*Lester Edwin J. Ruiz*

### ABSTRACT

Feminist struggles are illustrative of what "becoming a people" entails. As theory and practice, they problematize conventional notions of political identity in the modern world, providing the grounds for challenging the historically-specific, and often invisible, male-centric accounts of political identity. They are cultures of resistance and solidarity, deconstructing, on the one hand, male-centric, technostrategic discourses, militarized and decontextualized rationalities, and on the other hand, articulating compelling alternative visions of possible futures including alternative conceptions of rationality and imagination. Finally, they are practices of cultural transformation that are aimed at eradicating structures and processes of domination, articulating different understandings of community and identity, describing and delineating, the full range of women's experiences—which can shape and transform the male-centric, hierarchical, often misogynist practices in social and political life.

There is no single feminist perspective. The vast discourse that has emerged around contemporary feminism, matched only by the irruption into world historical consciousness of the importance of women's experiences, includes impressive and discriminating systems of classification: socialist, liberal and radical; essentialist and historicist; empiricist standpoint and postmodernist. These classifications are necessary, though undoubtedly insufficient, guides to a complex terrain. At the same time, they are evidence of the profusion of possibilities, as well as of the discursive rituals through which critique—which feminist discourses are—is often domesticated and coopted.

In this context, it is difficult to orient one's self within, let alone understand, the diverse experiences and struggles of women. Most, if not all, contemporary theories and practices of politics, including revolution, systematically render invisible these experiences and struggles—what one might philosophically call "women's time, space, and place." Additionally, they discipline, to borrow Michel Foucault's terminology, these very experiences and struggles. By way of explanation, my choice of the rather ambiguous phrase ("women's time, space, and place") is intentional, though by no means unproblematic. Indeed, one needs to take seriously the differences between sex (women as biological female), the sexual division of labor (women's work), and gender (women as social beings). My goal in these meditations is not to be denotative but referential, i.e., to refer to the broadest range of women's experiences—liberating or otherwise. Thus, when I deploy the term "gendered practice" or the phrase "women's and feminist struggles as

gendered practice," I mean only to specify the terrain of discourse that emphasizes sex, the sexual division of labor, and gender—but which is not exhausted by these categories. My own perspective gravitates toward what might be called, poststructuralist, postempiricist, postpositivist "corporeal feminism."

### Rendering the Invisible Visible

Of course, women's experiences—particularly in a male-centric world—are quite specific: women are patronized, if not excluded, from decision-making processes; women's experiences and consciousness, in contrast to men's, are valued less—often by design, if not by intention, in the shaping of public policy; women are relegated to the so-called private sphere; women are discriminated against in the workplace; women are exploited in the home. *In fact, the world is profoundly dangerous for women.* For example, the 1988 and 1990 "Draft Program of the National Democratic Front," two documents which

are emblematic not only of revolutionary politics in the Philippines, but of politics in general—regardless of their historical limitations, state:

Whether in the workplace, in the fields or at home, women suffer distinct forms of hardship and discrimination. Rural women perform myriad unpaid tasks; or, when hired as field hands, they get lower wages than men. Young peasant girls are sent to work as servants in order to pay off the family debts, denied the right to continue schooling, and married against their will. Many are forced to become prostitutes. Working women, on the other hand, receive lower wages and salaries than men and fall victim to sexual harassment by their male superiors. They are penalized in various ways for bearing and rearing their children. Even when they possess superior capabilities, they are discriminated against in terms of promotion and appointments. On top of this, women are expected to do the household chores and take care of the children. In the political sphere, women are discouraged (if not outrightly excluded) from exercising their right to participate in decision-making, since they are expected merely to echo the views of their

male partners.

Sunny Lansang in an important essay entitled "Gender Issues in Revolutionary Praxis,"<sup>2</sup> has noted the methodological and philosophical obstacles that women *kasamas*, in particular, face in their attempts to get the revolutionary movement in general, and the CPP and the NDF in particular, to be accountable for the way it is "confronting the practical and theoretical challenges posed by the local and international women's movement," despite the fact that women's oppression—gender injustice and inequality—are so pervasive, if not self-evident, in contemporary life. Because the oppression of women "is rooted not just in what has been defined as the public sphere of production, but in the more intimate and personal sphere that has been assigned to reproduction...because women experience oppression in the most intimate spaces of their lives, in areas not traditionally accepted as being part of public concern," the struggle to articulate and theorize

the experience, both within the movement and without, is profoundly difficult. I shall return to this point later.

Whatever may be said about the difficulties of understanding, let alone of accepting, the challenges of "women's time, space, and place," what cannot be evaded is that the many forms of feminism, as theory and practice, are struggles not only to render visible the fact that politics and revolution are *gendered practices*, but that feminist practices are struggles that problematize conventional, i.e., taken for granted, notions of political identity in the modern world. In so doing they not only open the possibility of adding certain excluded voices to revolutionary theory and practice as they are presently understood, but they provide the grounds for challenging the historically specific, and often invisible, accounts of political identity within a spatially bounded community (state sovereignty)—an account that governs the theory and practice of politics and revolution, and indeed, is the constitutive prin-

ciple of modern life.<sup>3</sup> Put somewhat differently, women's and feminist struggles reveal the inadequate, often pretentious and exclusionary claims about production, reproduction, and distribution and/or consumption of the self-proclaimed pundits of modernity and multinational capital: Jeffrey Sachs, Francis Fukuyama, Michael Novak, and George Soros, to name only the most (in)famous. One need only contrast their writings to those authors such as Maria Mies (patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale), Nancy Hartsock (feminist historical materialism), Elisabeth Grosz (corporeal feminism), and Jean Baudrillard (a critique of the political economy of the sign), to realize that production is not limited to its public form, that reproduction does not refer exclusively to procreation (Friedrich Engels notwithstanding), and that distribution is not simply market exchange.

Feminist practices, in fact, are multi-faceted struggles that reflect the breadth and depth of women's experience. Thus, Lansang concludes her

essay by noting that, "through their own experiences in revolutionary struggle against feudalism, imperialism and patriarchy, women have brought to our movement new ways of analysis that imply the need for a change in our theories, our ethics and our praxis." Echoing Lansang's conclusion, bell hooks, the feminist theorist, defines feminism as "a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganize society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."<sup>4</sup> Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith, from another perspective, define feminism as "the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white women, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than

this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement."<sup>5</sup>

### **Cultures of Resistance and Solidarity**

Feminist practices are cultures of resistance and solidarity. As a politics of resistance, they are both deconstructive and reconstructive. The former involves, among many things, the dismantling of male-centric, techno-strategic discourses, e.g., militarized masculinity and decontextualized rationality; the latter involves the articulation of compelling alternative visions of possible futures including alternative conceptions of rationality, and imaginative and diverse voices, particularly those of women. As a politics of solidarity affirming plurality and difference, they "force[s] us to question the categories of experience that order the world and the truths we have come to know, even the truths of our radical politics, by confronting us with the truths of other women and men, differently acculturated, fighting against

specific threats to their particular lands and bodies." It is not surprising that international solidarity plays an especially important role in the women's and feminist movement. Moreover, it is not an accident that women's and feminist discourses draw on a multiplicity of "women's texts" to articulate their theories and practices. For, in the voice of Lee Quinby,

listening to all voices of subjugation and hearing their insurrectionary truths make us better able to question our own political and personal practices.... And if another term and a different politics emerge from this questioning, it will be in the service of new local actions, new creative energies, and new alliances against power.<sup>6</sup>

Such a politics of resistance and solidarity are at once intensely personal and political. As Lansang noted above, women experience oppression in the most intimate spaces of their lives, in areas not traditionally accepted as being part of public concern. Consequently, feminists who struggle to overcome this oppres-

sion, these gendered practices of injustice and inequality, have rallied around the cry "The personal is political!" For most feminists, what is at stake is the reality that because we are not equally oppressed, speaking in the voice of bell hooks, "we must speak from within us, our own experiences, our own oppressions...we should never speak for that which we have not felt."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Emma Goldman, the turn of the century revolutionary and anarchist, points out, "it requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own."<sup>8</sup>

Needless to say, "the personal is political" is more than an affirmation of the importance of the individual. It is true that an emphasis on the "personal" may obscure, if not trivialize, the profound exclusion, marginalization and exploitation of women in the home, in politics and in the

economy. Equally insidious is the practice of rendering invisible, erasing, if you will, women's experience and contributions to political, cultural, economic production, reproduction, and distribution and/or consumption. Feminists have warned, often inveighed against, these exclusionary logics. But, the "personal" in this understanding is not identical to the "individual." In fact, in contrast to the liberal, bourgeois construal of "personal" as "individual" (and a monadic individual at that) the "personal is political" comprehends, i.e., draws into itself, the reality of human community including political integrity, moral agency, and the individual and collective, as well as social status and roles—or, to borrow from Karl Marx, of "concrete sensuous reality." The personal is not, in the first instance, a "thing-in-itself;" it is a *relation*—a gendered practice which embraces what Marx, especially in his early writings, called the "subjective" and "objective." To affirm "the personal is political," or perhaps, more accurately, "the

political is personal," is to undermine the commanding masculinist ideology of liberalism and modernity especially with respect to their claims that the social totality is best understood in terms of such dichotomous categories as: inside vs. outside, public vs. private, base vs. superstructure, freedom vs. necessity, (linearist) progress vs. retrogression.

Thus, resistance and solidarity embrace. Each becomes the constitutive margin of the other that simultaneously limits and affirms social and political transformation.

### Issues of Life and Death

Like no other movement to end oppression, women's and feminist struggles have been successful in articulating the connections between issues of family and economy (and of property), of reproductive rights and violence, of health, political identity, and governance. Women, more than men, have jobs rather than careers in order to be able to manage a household. Not only has the feminization of poverty been

well documented (in the Southern countries, for example, women bear the brunt of unpaid, underpaid or uncounted agricultural and industrial labor), but the subordination of women through the "patriarchal" family has been institutionalized. Infanticide, domestic abuse, sexual abuse and/or harassment, and rape are not only increasing, but women are being forced to sacrifice their reproductive rights in the name of "family" and "faith." While reproductive rights, i.e., individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortions when necessary, are a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women, many cultural norms—in fact, many legal regimes—remain misogynist and male-centric. Women still must struggle for identities and privileges long taken for granted by men; they still have to defend actions or choices which fall outside male-centric social and cultural expectations. Prostitution, not to mention sex trafficking and mail order brides, is still demanded by men, at the same time that they insist that vir-

ginity be a prerequisite for (single) female integrity.

Within the Philippine revolutionary movement, at least through 1992, Lansang has pointed out, feminist claims about sexuality, sexual relations, reproductive rights, women's rights, as well as questions about production and reproduction, of gender and class, armed struggle and child-bearing and rearing, are raising fundamental questions about the nature of the revolution itself and the conduct of the organizations within the revolutionary movement. Even as she establishes herself firmly within the socialist tradition by interpreting, for example, childbearing and sexuality primarily as questions of history (as opposed to "nature"), and therefore, an arena of class struggle, Lansang pushes the boundaries of the national democratic revolution (and its gender bias) from the perspective of socialist feminist liberation by suggesting, correctly in my view, that

the idea of reproductive rights, i.e., the right of a woman to con-

trol her own body must be seen as a strategic call that will extend through the course of the national democratic revolution and the early stages of socialism. Until such time as social relations of reproduction are democratized women will be tasked with the care and rearing of children. Until such time as the individual is gendered as a social construction, then pregnancy will occur within women's bodies. As such, the right to decide if, how many, when, how and with whom to have children regardless of age, disability, sexual orientation, civil status, religious and political affiliation will remain essential to the liberation of women.

What Lansang may be suggesting is that feminist and women's struggles, while part of the struggle for national liberation, a point affirmed even by the NDF, cannot be subsumed under the latter. Indeed, feminist and women's struggles have their own trajectories (both origins and destinations) that often coincide with other struggles though they do not surrender to the logics of these struggles. They often converge, but they are not the same. This is not to be lamented, however.

For what makes "feminist" movements far more compelling alternatives to the present system are their implicit affirmation *in theory if not in practice* of the play of differences, the multiplicity of insurrectionary practices, if you will, articulated by struggles within the larger struggle which challenges the hegemonic pretensions of the present "ruling class." Nina Conception (pseudonym) states this issue somewhat more straightforwardly, though ironically reminiscent of some of the more linearist formulations of the NDF: "The national democratic revolution," she comments, "lays down/initiates the requisites for the *first phase of the emancipation of women*—by confronting class/national oppression *and* providing the opportunity and means by which gender oppression may be addressed" [my emphasis].

It is this insight, I suspect, which allows women in the revolutionary movement to affirm their participation in a movement which has "imbibed [the culture of patriarchy] into our own conscious-

ness...and...our own organizations." As a *Makibaka* statement once reflected with both frustration and hope, "When women assume a decisive and significant part in the struggle to change society, the revolutionary struggle will have reached a qualitative leap...we assert that the revolution has yet to attain that stage...."

Here the analogy with contemporary politics must not be lost. Indeed, despite the fact that many eminent women are in fact involved in the political arena—and have been for a long time now—the fact remains, Philippine politics remains patriarchal and masculinist. Until women assume and maintain decisive and significant roles in the shaping of the fundamental assumptions and practices of Philippine politics—they will remain part of the "decorative"—to which women have historically been relegated by the patriarchal rituals of power. To say this, of course, is not to belittle or ignore the profound ways that women have shaped Philippine life and politics. No doubt, women have. It is only

to remind us that "the revolution has yet to attain that stage of equity, justice, and solidarity where "womens' space, time, and place" are concerned.

Rather than viewing difference as something to be overcome, feminist *kasamas* as well as men *kasamas*, who understand both the world-changing significance, in Martin Heidegger's meaning of "world," of women's experience and of the gendered character of the social totality, argue that difference should be viewed as a theoretical, ethical, and practical challenge to the entire revolutionary movement. Indeed, men and women are not equally oppressed. And while this does not imply that one oppression is more fundamental than another, but rather that all oppressions are "interstructured," to borrow Beverly Harrison's notion of the connections between race, class, and gender, it certainly means that we—men in particular—need to acknowledge at the very least our complicity in the perpetuation of gender injustice and inequality. In somewhat conventional terms,

men need to accept the necessity of "affirmative action" in both the public and private spheres, and to affirm, even defend, the consequences or implications of "affirmative action" which gender justice requires. This includes the fact that "affirmative action" is not, in the first instance, about preferential treatment, but the "leveling of the playing field" to provide a context and opportunity for women to "compete" equally. Of course, as Nina Concepcion correctly warns, "there are attendant dangers to affirmative action whose parameters are designed by men—only certain male-approved 'types' of women get to be 'affirmed.' It should be stressed that all decisions pertinent to women's participation should be made by women." Indeed, it is critical, even necessary, that women decide on all matters affecting their lives. It is also important that the implications of gendered history are uncovered. This requires that we be vigilant about and attentive to what Chandra Mohanty called "relations of ruling," that is, that

power-as-domination is always and already implicated in the structures and processes of political life—even without visible police power.

### Shaping and Transforming Gendered Histories

Women's and feminist struggles, then, far from being adaptive or remedial mechanisms within an otherwise flawed, though generally acceptable polity, are practices of fundamental cultural transformation that are aimed at uprooting and eradicating structures and processes of domination. In the process of moving from a "class in itself" to a "class for itself," to borrow the often quoted idea of *klass an sich* to *klass fur sich*, they embody compelling alternative ways of organizing production, reproduction, and distribution and/or consumption. They articulate different understandings of community and identity; and of accumulation and property relations. They describe and delineate, indeed, celebrate, the full range of women's experiences: mother, sister, theo-

rist, wife, lover, comrade, artist, worker, companion, peasant, warrior—which can shape and transform the male-centric, hierarchical, often misogynist practices in social and political life (in Ernesto Laclau's meaning of the terms "social" and "political"). Feminist struggles problematize the full range of commanding (often dominating) gendered ways of thinking, feeling, and acting: from the exploitation of women in the home to the feminization of poverty worldwide, from the inequality between the sexes to the subordination of women through male-defined social roles, from the marginalization and/or exclusion of women to their being rendered invisible or dispensable ("standing reserve" in Martin Heidegger's terminology).

For those men who accept the claims of women's and feminist struggles, not only do they open up qualitatively new space for reflection, they underscore the profoundly contested character of gendered histories thereby presenting new possibilities for transformative (i.e., practical-critical) activity. From

this perspective, which itself is a *gendered* political practice, one can affirm the multiplicity of subject positions (race, class, gender) which moves theory and practice in the direction of articulating a different understanding of the nature of the social totality—and the tactics and strategies they call forth for navigating through these differences as well as for transforming them.

Put in the contested discourses of the revolutionary movement, this perspective affirms Marx's own methodological posture of taking seriously "concrete sensuous reality" through "practical-critical activity," moves with the Gramscian instinct that refuses to interpret culture, politics, and economy exclusively from within the categories of "base" and "superstructure," and, follows the post-structuralist insight of an Ernesto Laclau or Chantal Mouffe that the social totality is overdetermined. Women's and feminist struggles, in fact, deepen these insights, particularly, as men seek to discover whether or not their politics, if not revolution-

ary practice, has unthinkingly capitulated to an empiricist (and ironically, an idealist) ideology and therefore, has lost touch with the "this-sidedness" (*Diesseitigkeit*) of its own thinking, compromising, thereby, the very revolutionary efficacy it claims for itself. (Interestingly, Marx played with the notion of *Diesseitigkeit* in his "Theses on Feuerbach," noting the distinction between abstract thinking and sensuous contemplation, and between sensuous contemplation and practical, human sensuous activity. We need to attend to the practical-critical significance of Marx's insight. But the exploration of this pathway must await another time.)

In fact, women's and feminist struggles articulate women's history, i.e., "women's time, space, and place," even as they invite communities of women and men to shape and transform their gendered histories in the direction of justice, equity, and community.

## Notes

1. The expression is Audré Lorde's.

2. S. Lansang, "Gender Issues in Revolutionary Praxis." In *Debate*, pp. 41-52.
3. R. B. J. Walker and Saul Mendlovitz, *Contending Sovereignities: Redefining Political Community* (1990).
4. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, p.25.
5. Hull et al., *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), p. 49.
6. I. Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (eds.), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Eco-feminism* (1990), pp. 126ff.
7. Emma Goldman, "Red Emma Speaks," p. 388.
8. Goldman, p. 388.

## References

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body, in Theory: Histories Cultural Materialism)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Diamond, Irene and Gloria Orenstein (eds.). *Reweaving*

- the World: The Emergence of Eco-Feminism*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977.
- Goldman, Emma. *Anarchism and Other Essays*. 2nd Rev. Ed. New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1911.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Tr. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977.
- Grosz, Elisabeth A. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994.
- Harrison, Beverly Wildung. *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Ed. Carol S. Robb. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
- Hartsock, Nancy M. *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter.

- New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women Studies*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.
- Lorde, Audré. "Age, Race, Class & Sex." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Trumansburg, N.Y.: 1984.
- Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor*. London: Zed, 1986.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In *Boundary 2* (1985).
- Walker, R. B. J. and Saul Mendlovitz (eds.). *Contending Sovereignities: Redefining Political Community*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990.