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Response to Rowbotham - 2

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Response

Teresita Martínez Vergne

There are two kinds of feminism in Sheila Rowbotham's essay. One is associated with words and phrases such as livelihood, empowerment, Third World, poor women, women of color, action around consumption, working class, popular, social emancipation, social responsibility, moral economy, collective expression of control over daily life, experience of being women in relation to the family, collective claims. The other feminism is contextualized with the following concepts: self-determination, civil rights for women, assumption of sovereignty, autonomous identity, rights of citizenship, demand for ownership of their own persons, Western, individual rights, reproductive rights, sexual identity. Not all of these words are the author's — sometimes she is characterizing the work of others — and she certainly would object to this dichotomy. Her point in this essay is precisely that the **connections** between these two feminisms have historically been dismissed by scholars who focus on gender or women's networks.

In this short essay, and in her numerous published works, Sheila Rowbotham rectifies this situation. Women's movements or the political activity of women did not take place in a vacuum, the author shows, and at several moments in history, these two feminisms have converged, diverged, neutralized one another, reinforced each other — yielding good and bad results. Anti-imperialist nationalism in India at mid-century, according to Radha Kumar via Rowbotham, linked individual self-development and a collective project of emancipation. This was good. When Margaret Thatcher cut welfare and privatized public services in the late 1970s, women defended their livelihoods by retreating to the local level and pursuing limited objectives. This was also good. But their success in, for example, obtaining funds for battered women backfired, in that women fell into the "victim" category, which detracted from the self-defining aspect of feminism. This was bad. "[F]ocus[ing] exclusively on power relations between men and women and regard[ing] other concerns as diversionary" in the early 1980s was also bad. And one gets the impression that working women groups that coalesced to resist the negative effects of economic restructuring in the 1990s were good: "[t]hough they led to the empowerment and self-development . . . of individuals, they were always distinct from 'feminism'" (the popular kind that the media had equated with women's

career concerns or personal lifestyle). What is even better, and I am proud to reiterate Rowbotham's point, is that in the Third World (broadly defined), we continue to mix, with some ambivalence and friction, a popular feminism based on human dignity and empowerment for all, and a narrower feminism concerned with individual issues, such as sexual preference and reproductive rights.

Although Rowbotham is careful not to attribute moral worth to the actions of women historically (as I have), there is an undercurrent in her essay that privileges working class, popular, progressive, broader, politically expressed causes taken up by women, and consequently casts suspicion on the agenda driven exclusively by the desire for gender equality and individual self-fulfillment, and fueled — why not say it? — by bourgeois complacency. I am not offended by this bias; I applaud it. I believe we stand more of a chance to improve our situation as women if we act upon our concerns as a society, than we have of constructing a better world if we focus on our needs as women. We need more current examples that will inspire us in this century of globalization. This is especially important in the Latin American scene after the Beijing conference, when the transnationalization of discourses and practices, and the absorption of some elements of feminist agendas by dominant cultural institutions and NGOs, jeopardized the continuous examination of what Sonia Alvarez calls the consciousness raising dimension of feminism.

Two other feminisms co-exist in this essay: the one lived and the one read, the historical and the historiographical. Rowbotham is interested in how women in the past got together and pursued objectives from both a "resource mobilization" and a "new social movements" perspective. She examines the structural opportunities that were available and the ways women used them to carve out a political presence. In general terms, when does a group of people come to see themselves as sharing certain interests, so much so that they act politically to achieve their goals? For women specifically, is what makes women coalesce in (what appears to be) a "women's" movement the fact that they are women? Are they aware of their condition as such? Is this consciousness important? And...when do women act "politically?" That is, what is a political act? These are judgment calls for the historian to make. Two scholars can examine the same material and write it up very dif-

ferently. Is Rowbotham measuring the “right” quantities of self-determination feminism and claims-to-livelihood feminism in the examples she gives us? Would the objects of her subjectivity agree with her assessment? Does it even matter?

I worry about these things because, although I have no pretensions that we historians will ever “get it right”—I am a postmodern woman after all!—I am also aware that our writing has serious political implications. I’d like to offer four examples of what I’m talking about from work of Latin Americanists who study social movements in which women are the principal players. What I want to highlight is the continuum that runs between two extremes: a conservative movement that engages in traditional politics, and a progressive coalition whose political impact goes unnoticed. In other words, there are two variables here: (1) what are the politics of the movements under discussion and (2) how do they “do” politics? At one end, then, are the Chilean middle class housewives who clanked their empty pots as they marched to protest consumer shortages during Salvador Allende’s brief period in office. This illustrates a conventional, albeit “feminine,” way of putting pressure on government, with a reactionary goal in mind: to regress to privilege.¹ At the other end, one can place female teachers in the Amazon during the military regime, who along with men were disenfranchised, and channeled their efforts to mediate between the community and outside forces.² These actions easily fall outside the realm of formal politics (which had been obliterated by the military), but are progressive in intent and, I should add, empowering for women. In between, we can find Eva Perón, who, as a labor activist for her husband, pushed what was, even by our definitions, a feminist agenda in Argentina (conventional political channels to pursue progressive ends), as well as the millions of women who work more or less contentedly outside and inside the home (a personal definition of the political impact of their actions and a radically conservative outcome).

There is no claims-to-livelihood and self-determination mix here, either because they don’t exist “in real life” or because the authors who wrote up these case studies were more interested in the continuum that addresses types of political action and types of causes. These social scientists, in fact, have turned their backs on the gendered private-public dichotomy, which has dominated the mainstream Western feminist discourse since the 1970s, and are looking for those spaces in which women act in empowering ways, which can be “political” or

not, and definitely impact all of society. These scholars suspend judgment on whether historical figures consciously acted to promote their individual rights as women or to demand a measure of control over their lives. It's a question, I think, that allows us all too easily to associate practical feminine concerns with the domestic-private sphere, and movements with strategic feminist goals with the public arena,³ and one we'll never know the answer to.

These writers are quite intent, however, in making some political statements that might serve our purposes today, regardless of how the historical actors in the past may have behaved. I cannot quite accept that, if Rowbotham is correct and opposition is a necessary element for liberation, the right-wing anti-Allende female demonstrators were empowered. Certainly they were, using Rowbotham's scheme, along the livelihood axis, and perhaps even as activists at the self-determination emancipatory level. However, I prefer to conclude, as María de los Angeles Crummet does in her study of this phenomenon, that in pursuing a conservative agenda, middle class Chilean women engaged in anti-liberation activity, and did not move outside of the parameters set by dominant male political hierarchies.

Where do we locate the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other movements organized by women to demand justice, broadly defined? Do we look for the mix of livelihood and self-determination feminism? Or do we use them as a vantage point, an oblique one for sure, for a look at the politicization of an entire society—men and women, of different ethnicities and races, with different political styles, and cultural practices? I am proposing, then, that we look for even more feminisms—in real women's and men's experiences, and in how we write about them.

Notes

1. María de los Angeles Crummet, "El Poder Femenino. Mobilization of Women Against Socialism in Chile," in *Social Movements in Latin America. The Experience of Peasants, Workers, Women, the Urban Poor, and the Middle Sectors*, ed. Jorge I. Domínguez (New York: Garland Publishers, 1994), pp. 169–179.

2. Linda Miller, "Patron, Politics, and School: An Arena for Brazilian Women," in *Women and Politics in Twentieth Century Latin America*, ed. Sandra F. McGee (Williamsburg, Va.: Studies in Third World Societies, 1981), pp. 67–89.

3. Lynn Stephen, *Women and Social Movements in Latin America. Power from Below* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 11–12.

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