Engendering Powers in Neoliberal Times in Latin America : Reflections from the Left on Feminisms and Feminisms

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Reflections from the Left on Feminisms and Feminisms

by
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The differences among the various components of the women's movement in Latin America today are assumed to be gradually diminishing. I question this assumption here and argue that the currents known in the late 1970s as "autonomous," "authentic," or "radical" feminism are increasingly being mainstreamed. These branches of feminism are becoming "institutionalized," that is, dependent on international agencies and therefore seldom critical of the reigning order (or disorder) and even going so far as to enter into alliances with governments and agencies (such as the World Bank) that support neoliberalism in Latin America. These institutionalized branches of the women's movement, which in the 1970s accused socialist feminists of seeking utopian solutions and being hostile to the modern world, have not just been co-opted by the powers that they once criticized (such as the state and transnational capital and their agents) in their pragmatic pursuit of programs and laws of benefit to women but, in opting for fixed identities and immediate rights, distanced themselves from their original libertarian feminism. The route they have chosen has diverted the women's movement from its most promising course, that of promoting awareness and practice through creating identities or nonidentities, combining various connections in matters of class, and thus contributing, in association with other movements, to a renewal of socialist projects. What they are risking by negotiating, in the name of a pragmatic feminism, with the authorities is the very identity of the

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women's movement in Latin America and their practical knowledge of protest and critique.

My objectives in this left-oriented interpretation of Latin American feminism today are as follows:

First, I want to encourage reflection on the abandonment by the women's movement—or the most visible or "official" tendencies within it—in Latin America of any critical stance vis-à-vis the neoliberal state. In the 1970s the women's movement played an outstanding role not just in the struggle against dictatorships and the return to democracy but also in the reshaping of the left. Despite the differences among their various tendencies—radical, socialist, anarchist, and so forth (see León, 1994)—all feminists and women's movements in those years played a part in some way or other in building a new left. They all drew attention to the many ways in which women suffered discrimination, even within the working class. They stressed the importance of the things that happened in everyday life and the connections between micro and macro levels in politics and between public and private life in the perpetration of various degrees of violence against women.

Second, I want to stress the importance of distinguishing between the various tendencies and orientations within feminism and then supporting those currents—such as socialist feminism, a feminism with a community base, and projects of social transformation—whose attack on the inequalities suffered by women is combined with attention to those other inequalities—of gender, race, and class—that affect working-class men as well. The result of such support would be a feminism that was simultaneously movement-based and class-based (i.e., one concerned with the working class) and had the flexibility to create strategies and tactics for social movements that excluded generic and "natural" references to women and men (see Castro and Lutjens, 1998; Therborn, 1995). In Latin America, we find such an approach being adopted (albeit hesitantly) in community-based organizations, small advocacy-oriented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), entities with a Marxist-feminist or emancipatory orientation, the women's sections of some trade unions and political parties, and various social movements (for Brazil, see Abramovay and Castro, 1998).

I begin by analyzing the living conditions of women in Brazil and the effects of neoliberal policies. I go on to provide brief glimpses of the trajectory of the women's movement in Latin America, suggesting the possibilities for a critical approach to neoliberalism that exist in a Marxist-oriented feminism and in community-based organizations and trade unions (see Castro and Lutjens, 1998; Abramovay and Castro, 1998).

A MILITANT FEMINIST CRITIQUE

At the end of the 1970s, the autonomous wing of the Latin American feminist movement was looked upon as "the left wing of the left" for defending libertarian positions not just for the benefit of women but as an attack on the authorities and the stereotypes or imposed identities that helped perpetuate discrimination against women, blacks, homosexuals, and the poor by a variety of agents—for example, the state, the family, political parties, and trade unions, whether of the right or of the left. The feminism that called itself "autonomous," "authentic," or "radical" derived in part from organizations of the conventional left simply because many feminists were or had been active in left-wing organizations. But this variety of feminism insisted in principle on the autonomy of the women's movement in relation to the parties and unions on the left, which it criticized for their authoritarianism, hierarchy, and failure to recognize the links between public and private life. Conspicuous among the disagreements between feminists and left-wing parties in Latin America that led to heated polemics in the 1980s were whether radical groups might act as vanguards, advancing beyond party policy, the extent to which infrastructure and superstructure might be separated, and the dichotomy between use value and exchange value. A particular quarrel was over the way the left would set up hierarchies of scale between conflicts and contradictions, a principle that led to the treatment of "domestic" violence and discrimination based on race or sexual behavior as mere "secondary contradictions."

The various currents of feminism, but especially the radical feminists, contributed to a reform of the left through their insistence that the dynamic of subjectivity and of day-to-day life was important enough to become a political topic. Radical feminists were already critical of the Marxist wing of feminism, objecting to its stress on the role of economic policies in perpetuating sexual discrimination and its practice of double militancy (Marxist feminists being at the same time members of their political parties or trade unions and of autonomous bodies of the feminist movement). The radicals argued that the Marxist feminists' attempts to associate analyses on sexuality, the value of domestic work, and relationships between men and women, among other topics, with economic factors often led to Manichaean associations that attributed only secondary importance to the division of power, pleasure, and work according to gender to the advantage of men. Marxist feminists and many of the conventional organizations of the Latin American left have in fact been broadening their agendas and reflecting critically on their practices.

Although to a lesser extent than adherents of so-called authentic feminism, they have been paying more attention to the material impact of symbols, fantasies, personalities, and subjective considerations and individual situations. They have, however, been less ready in debates on economic, political, and cultural questions to admit links between the macro and the micro level—to consider the repercussions at the level of the individual and daily life (including the affective and sexual) of the perverse results of the current phase of capitalism, in which the lives of the men and women of the working classes are being impacted subjectively and objectively by unemployment and social deterioration.

The currents of feminism that were once called "autonomous" or "radical" because of their criticism of the left for its authoritarianism, economic determinism, and so forth are nowadays increasingly considered less so because of their dependence (following the model of the NGOs) on the resources of international agencies and partnership with governments in the competition for funds and the effort to conform to the generalized language of the documents produced by United Nations conferences. Ambiguity as to its identification as a critical social movement also extends to what used to be called "socialist" or emancipatory feminism and is now known as "feminism with a class-conscious orientation." This current has become increasingly timid and limited in its struggle for rights and for immediate equality and in its support for working men and women in their fight against the effects of capitalism in its global and neoliberal phase—particularly as regards unemployment and various forms of violence. Nevertheless, this is the current with the best chance of contributing to a united front against neoliberalism in Latin America (see Castro and Lutjens, 1998). Feminist academics who have discussed the role of Latin American feminism in these times of globalization include, among others, Álvarez (1998), León (1994), Jaquette (1994), and Vargas (1994).

At the Seventh Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Conference in Cartagena, Chile, November 23-29, 1996, some 650 women (Álvarez, 1998; León, 1997) discussed the autonomy of the feminist movement, its political definition, problems of representation (e.g., women and organizations of the popular sectors each trying to speak for the other), ethics, dependency on external resources, and, indirectly, the contradictions between seeking power through institutionalization—such as through the NGO model—and the loss of dynamism and of the capacity for independent criticism that one would expect from a social movement. León (1997: 28) summarized the polemics that divided conference participants as follows:

> The debate over their political position concerned the need to adopt a more definite position against the neoliberal model and on interaction with the state, multilateral agencies, and organs of cooperation. While, as Mexico's Ximena Bedregal pointed out, "an enormous wave of political moderation is affecting the feminist movement," with important sectors "looking for a chance of legitimacy within the established order," quite a substantial part of the movement is seeking to reassert autonomy as a necessary basis to build upon.

At the center of the discussions was the need to reaffirm the character of feminism as a *social movement*, differentiating it from NGOs, most of which have taken up as their central challenge the possibility of direct negotiation with the powers-that-be in the hope of securing input into the formulation of public and international policies.

I do not pretend to judge political positions; this is neither an attack nor a prescription for a solution. I simply want to share concerns. It is important and necessary to consider the role of various types of feminism, investments in services to specific groups, laws for equality, "affirmative action," and attempts to implement the resolutions of the United Nations conferences of the 1980-1990 period. But my review of the situation makes me uneasy about the lack of commitment in another direction as well, that is, toward feminism's potential as a liberating ideal, a utopia, a perspective concerned not just with defending identities and differences but also with creating new identities, including combinations of identities and nonidentities or "de-identification" (Butler, 1992:4)—forms of existing openly, of being created in the free exercise of creativity and through critical mobilization and the "rearticulation of democratic contestation," without being limited to individualized sexual differences.[1] Part of such a concern with de-identifications would be a socialist position, but this would be a socialism reshaped by the concept of class in such matters as race, gender, and the recognition of various sexual preferences—that is, a humanist and liberating socialism.

I am also unhappy with feminism's ineffectiveness and its divisions, especially with regard to public policy and doing something in the here and now to counteract the worsening of working-class living conditions. The statistics on income, maternal deaths, and other indications of living standards do not suggest that the strategy of negotiating with neoliberal governments has meant gains for *all* women, especially when one looks at them not just by gender but also by income level and racial and ethnic classification and when indications in the health sector are taken into account. At the same time, women cannot struggle effectively to secure their rights when their energies have to be diverted into the fight to survive and to keep their jobs.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT, HEALTH, AND TRADE-UNION EXPERIENCE

The Brazilian government promotes the idea that economic modernization depends wholly on such neoliberal measures as taking away what the working class has won in the past, reducing investment in social services and policies, controlling the trade unions, repressing social movements such as those of the landless peasants and the homeless, making concessions to foreign capital in exporting and investing, supporting finance capital, pursuing the privatization of state-run enterprises (many of which are both profitable and of strategic importance), emphasizing the control of inflation at the expense of social investment, and returning to the model of the minimal state, abandoning its role as the regulator of social relations between capital and labor and the guardian of social well-being (see Fiori, 1997; Sader, 1995).

The Brazilian government, through its rhetoric and its programs, presents itself as the champion of women and blacks, with a human rights policy (see Brazil, Presidency of the Republic, 1996) that overlooks not just the rights of workers but also discrimination against homosexuals. Under Fernando Henrique Cardoso, various mixed commissions, with representatives of NGOs and of government, have been established with regard to identity and other topics. Official speeches have accorded pride of place to the law and affirmative action in defending and promoting the interests of women and blacks. This stance and the measures that have resulted have in fact had some positive effects, especially through the social visibility they have conferred on historically neglected problems related to the racist and sexist components of Brazilian culture. Structurally, however, the adoption of a development model that reinforces inequalities has blocked the expansion and enjoyment of these rights. The contradiction between a progressive discourse and a social dynamic that works to increase poverty without providing social security generates a perverse and ambiguous process. NGOs and even some black and feminist activists are confused by the official speeches and the measures, most of which are of limited application and selective as to those they benefit. The apparent paradox is that while women and blacks have been steadily gaining rights in law, the everyday reality is that they still fare badly and are conspicuous, for example, among the unemployed and the poorly paid.

In 1995, around 30 percent of the Brazilian population were earning less than the legal minimum wage (US$150 a month). The country's best-paid women in 1990 were earning an average of 3 to 4 reais an hour, while men in similar jobs were getting 4 to 6 reais. Black women in 1990 were earning on average twice the legal minimum, while white women were earning four times the minimum. Black men were getting three and a half times the

minimum wage, but white men were getting seven and a half times it (data in Lavinas and Pereira de Melo, 1996). Women in urban areas, in 1995, were earning on average 45 percent less than men in the same ethnic groups. Gender differences in income were observed even among those with higher education, and, indeed, the difference in incomes between women of different ethnic or racial groups increased with their length of education, showing that race is a selective factor throughout the labor market.

Analyses of recent unemployment patterns in Brazil's urban areas have shown that the situation of women in the labor market is affected not only by general tendencies that affect men too but also by their specific gender profile. According to Lavinas et al. (1998a),

> Although, until the end of the 1980s, female unemployment rates were observed to reflect the male unemployment curve (with 3 percent to 4 percent difference between the two sexes), there has been in more recent years a degree of disconnection, with a tendency for female unemployment to increase disproportionately. Data for urban areas from the PNAD [Pesquisa Nacional de Amostra Domicilar—the National Household Sample Inquiry] of 1995 reveal that the level of urban unemployment is 6 percent for men and 8.5 percent for women.

Lavinas et al. (1998b) show that it was the women with the least education who experienced increasing unemployment in the 1991-1997 period. The group best protected against unemployment in that period was that of males with higher education.

Another area indicative of the quality of life of the population is health, and it is precisely in this area that Brazilian women's organizations have been most successful in promoting a form of feminism that is concerned with the well-being of the whole population, particularly the poor and women of the lower classes. It is this feminism that has been most critical of the effects of neoliberalism on living conditions for both men and women. Maternal deaths in Brazil are among the highest in Latin America: 200 for every 100,000 live births. The principal causes of such deaths are circulatory problems and uterine cancer, reflecting a lack of diagnostic testing and medication at an early stage. Women's groups have denounced the poor quality of the health care available to those on low incomes and the lack of attention to women's reproductive rights as the primary reasons for this situation (Lavinas and Pereira de Melo, 1996). They have called attention to the recent increase of deaths in childbirth among women under 25 (31 percent of all maternal deaths in 1980 and 35 percent in 1987). A United Nations report on human development in Brazil (UNDP and IPEA, 1996) points out that excessive blood loss during labor, birth, or confinement accounts for 18 percent of the total of maternal

deaths, an indication of the poor quality of health services. NGOs concerned with women estimate that about 10 percent of maternal deaths arise from induced abortion or attempts at such abortion and the lack of medical intervention that results from its illegality. They estimate that there were 1,890,000 clandestine abortions in Brazil in 1996 (UBM, 1996).

Research by both women's organizations and bank employees' and supermarket employees' trade unions have called attention to the increase in repetitive stress syndrome, particularly among women workers. According to the World Health Organization and the International Labor Organization, this syndrome is typical of occupations involving finger movements such as those needed to operate computers and cash registers but is also associated with any repetitive work and aggravated by stress, tension, and worry. Feelings of insecurity contribute to these illnesses, as do overworked muscles, long workdays, and a lack of work breaks (Menecucci de Oliveira, 1998). Various bodies in civil society have warned that repetitive stress injuries have acquired the character of an epidemic, being responsible for almost 70 percent of the cases of disability due to occupational disease in Brazil (an official figure that is probably an underestimate). In the case of women, the increase in repetitive stress injuries is also associated with their having housework responsibilities over and above their full-time employment. Repetitive stress disorders can be considered a symbol of the way the bodies of men and women are exploited in the process of making labor more flexible and efficient. "In the past 20 years in Brazil, some 29 million work-related accidents were recorded, with women accounting for 16 to 17 percent. The rate has grown notably since 1980, with women now featured in 20 percent and repetitive stress injuries playing a basic role in this change" (Menecucci de Oliveira, 1998: 1). Concern over health matters has been growing in the women's movement in Brazil, and a feminist health network with international connections has been formed. Feminist voices endorse the critique of neoliberalism, the worsening of health services, and the effects of work processes and fear of unemployment on the daily lives of men and women. In fact, many works by feminist researchers indicate links between work outside the home, unemployment, worries about economic survival, the burden of housework, and a deterioration in the living conditions of workers, male and female (see, e.g., Menecucci de Oliveira, 1998; Lavinas and Pereira de Melo, 1996).

The experience of women trade unionists in the city of Salvador, Bahia, illustrates the devastating effects of the modern globalized economy and the political microculture on the possibility of a feminist and class-based counterculture that might link erotic-aesthetic-ethical language with a class critique of management—that is, on the engendering of alternative feminisms. After five years of research and collaboration with the women's department

of the bank employees' union, I reported (Castro, 1995) that women members had been getting the union's council to hold debates on sexuality, love, masculine sensibility, and domestic violence. The *piqueteiras*—the women activists in the union—were also introducing workshops on their topics and repeatedly raising with the union leaders (all male) the questions of the sexual division of power, sexual harassment, and forms of social relations in respect to gender. They wanted to know why male union members should constitute the leadership and female members the rank and file, a sexual division evident not just in the hierarchical gap between the women on the picket line and the *palanqueiros* (union leaders and spokesmen) but in many other ways, including their role in various forms of protest. This union collaborated with a local branch of the gay movement to arrange three homosexual weddings in 1993 and held workshops on working-class homophobia. Its departments of culture and women's affairs published a newspaper, *Mulher em Movimento*, in which humor, irony, and criticism of the state were mixed with offers of help in fighting sexual harassment and discrimination in banks. The women unionists organized a carnival band that became celebrated throughout Salvador for its allegorical critique of social history and customs. During a parade of the "shirtless" (i.e., the impoverished) held to publicize a strike that had been going on for a fortnight without any mention in the media, it was the unrestrained irreverence of the women participants, pulling off their tops, that broke the press's silence. In 1991 the trade union's meeting hall was renamed in honor of Raul Seixas, a musician of anarchist views who had translated the "International" as "Long Live the Alternative Society." "The Communist Party of Brazil [the party represented by the union's leadership] really lets its hair down," commented political adversaries. In demonstrations held to demand the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello, drums accompanied the women's shouts of "love, desire, beans: the people want to eat/screw."[2]

In under two years, however, the membership of the bank employees' union in Salvador was reduced through layoffs by an estimated 40 percent. All the active workers in the women's affairs and culture departments of the union who had not been laid off were now working in other departments, mobilizing resistance to the effects of restructuring in the financial sector, unemployment, and the weakness of workers in the relations between capital, the state, and labor. Cultural activities were reduced to arranging weekend soccer games, and there were no longer any discussions of the government's efforts at down-sizing or plans for local demonstrations. The only activity not directed toward pure economic survival and the defense of wage rates was the health program on repetitive stress disorders, which are "almost endemic" among bank employees.

The signs in some Brazilian trade unions of a retreat from gains in the area of the discussion and implementation of practices with regard to gender are not due to the imposition of "masculine" or "patriarchal" power, but this is not to deny the increase in machismo in environments such as the unions and political parties. The way the women in the bank employees' union of Bahia have lost ground—not so much in having questions of gender included as in getting them acted upon—indicates the subtle connections between political economy and a culture of fixed identities and stereotyping. In other words, we have to deal with the way culture and economic policies are intertwined while still keeping them separate and recognizing the way economic factors restrict how far we can go in developing alternative cultures of identity such as a class-based feminism.

A LEFTIST APPROACH

Being on the political left is complicated by the variety of directions we may choose for our immediate goals, but it is a position sustained as much by a rejection of what we experience in our present-day lives as by the assertion of our ultimate objective, a postcapitalist paradise. "Cultural unease"—"the feeling of weariness that is so important a part of our contemporary mental structure" (Heilbroner, 1993: 110)—is not a natural attribute of the left but has many sources. It is also hallowed in those wakes in which the participants chant their anticipatory dirge for the death foretold, the end of history and the class struggle—usually wakes without a corpse or in which no one notices changes in the corpse that show it to be still alive. But if we redirect our gaze beyond the relationships of capital and labor in production units or the attainment of a specific type of capitalism (the post-Fordian model) to the quality of workers' lives, the pattern of consumption of symbols and images, and the fact that most workers in Latin America are still in the so-called informal economy, then we come to questions of culture, power relations, and the many forms of social exclusion. There has been an increase in social and cultural situations and relationships that have the political potential to fragment and diversify conflicts. The most radical proposals of such movements as the radical and emancipatory feminism of the 1970s and those concerned with race or ethnicity reject the logic of the market in favor of ethical and aesthetic values concerned with social justice. Whether in putting theory into practice, enduring the prosaic routine of day-to-day survival, or joining rival tribes (a political party, a trade union, or a social movement), being on the left nowadays is a bit like accepting the challenge of the Sphinx: "Decipher me or I

shall devour thee." As the Sphinx suggested, one's gait may change, but one remains human.

Being on the left nowadays is above all being aware of the way things change over time. The rhythm of modernity has not just altered but speeded up. Being on the left today is, in a sense, an act of mourning—recalling the past critically, acknowledging where we went wrong, and looking back wistfully on what we have lost. We increasingly use our experiences in the game of constructing identities and alternatives that are plural but remain united in repudiating the powers-that-be. For a new era, a new way of being on the left, we need a new consciousness. We need to move away from fixed positions, to "step out of the old boxes" (Giddens, 1990), to uncover connections between the global and the local. This awareness concerns both the limits of the nation-state and the new economic powers and the extent to which we can return to the parochial in our obsession with nationally and religiously particularized identities. I call the latter identities "self-contained" to differentiate them from what might be called "deserialized" (Guattari, 1990), mobile, collective identities. The assertion and discussion of such identities or nonidentities—based on ethical mobilization, recognizing otherness, asserting solidarity, and opposing cruelty and superseding identities that derive from a narcissistic obsession with essential particularities such as the navel gazing indulged in by the institutionalized versions of some of our new social movements—is one of the potentialities or opportunities of our time.

Can we leave history aside and stop identifying ourselves by ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, or some other such category? As I have argued elsewhere (Castro, 1993), retaining such categories as class, ethnicity, or gender is a zero-sum game. Instead, we should have correlations of powers, divided or multiplied depending on the circumstances, with different outcomes related to projects of emancipation—projects that transcend identity in which our discussions and our efforts are concerned with the human in each category.

SKETCHES OF FEMINISMS, 1970-1998

The dynamic of the various organizations of the feminist movement at the end of the 1970s was characterized by their having as their central concern discussion groups on the struggle against dictatorship. The role of women's organizations in the process of the return to democracy was generally recognized at the time (Jaquette, 1994).[3] Many of these organizations have gradually abandoned their "intimate" tone and their public demonstrations against

economic policies. Their preference for greater formality and administrative complexity led them in the 1980s to structure themselves as NGOs, either for services or for advocacy. Many of these were no longer concerned with popular participation and public discussion but concentrated on supplying experts to advise working-class women and their movements, with emphasis on empowerment from the perspective of gender. They also began to make lobbying for the inclusion of women in the various spheres of public life their main concern. According to some interpretations of this development, the NGO model differs from that of the social movement of the 1970s in having given up any attempt to put pressure on the powers—the state in particular—by demonstrations and protests. Some writers consider the "social" approach to have been the distinctive keynote of a "second wave" of Latin American feminism in the period after 1975 (Chinchila, 1992; Vargas, 1994). According to Sternbach et al. (1992 : 74), "Unlike radical North-American feminists, the Latin Americans maintained their commitment to a radical change in the social relationships of production and reproduction at the same time as they continued struggling against sexism within the left."

Feminists have been holding regular conferences in Latin America every other year since 1981.[4] Some of the themes of these conferences suggest a regular reiteration of the uniqueness of feminism as a movement. In the first half of the 1980s this stance signified a complete break with the characteristic practices, theories, and politics of the left. In the 1996 conference (in Cartagena) the autonomy of the feminist movement—its political definition and the problems resulting from its having to depend on outside sources—was discussed once again. The conference was dominated by the types of feminism known in the 1970s as autonomous, radical, or authentic and pure, with their love affair with the powers on the right and their failure to confront neoliberalism. The odd thing is that in the discussion of autonomy the target of critics was no longer the left, now on the decline with the "end of real socialism," but the movement's autonomy in relation to the agents of contemporary capitalism and whether it should be associated with the negotiations conducted in preparation for the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing.

By the time of the Cartagena conference it was no longer necessary to be concerned, as the earlier meetings had been, about visibility and legitimacy. These had been achieved at the international level by the media's coverage of the Beijing conference, a recognition of the power of a movement that had achieved a record attendance for a United Nations conference—35,000. Power had also been one of the central themes among the feminist programs set out in Beijing, using a neologism that is now part of the feminist vocabulary: "empowerment." The question of power had become a central concern.

The enemy was no longer the left parties and unions, and the confrontations during the Cartagena meeting between yesterday's "autonomous feminists" and those of today had nothing sisterly about them (see León, 1997; Álvarez, 1998).

The defense of pacts, alliances, and partnerships with institutions like the World Bank was based on a concept of citizenship that made no reference to the capitalist system or the existence of social classes. Virginia Vargas, considered the leader of the tendency associated with "institutionalization" (quoted by León, 1997: 29), recognized that

> many of our struggles and proposals are aimed at a reconciliation with the status quo without appearing to undermine its basic assumptions. This is appropriate because it allows us to seek an equality in basic rights that will benefit the position of women through the whole of society. And this is a fundamental objective because it asserts a clear level of justice in the here and now for the great majority of women, thus broadening our democracy and strengthening feminine citizenship.

Margarita Pisano, a Chilean, speaking for the "autonomous" tendency, implicitly rejected the consequences of Vargas's position as seeking an abstract "feminine citizenship" without regard to the inequalities and differences among women. However, her observation, identifying patriarchy as the system of discrimination against women par excellence, suggests that for these women discussion of social classes would be secondary. Pisano (quoted in León, 1997: 30) criticized the generic orientation toward pacts and alliances:

> One cannot negotiate with those who go against the basic principles of feminism, even when they happen to be other women. I will not collaborate politically with racist or homophobic women, with those who fail to defend a woman's body and her right to abortion, or with those who support the neoliberal model, because the political aim of such women destroys and negotiates away any chance for us of a civilized change. For this reason, I call for, as our priority, a pact among all women who are sustained by a system of ideals and ethical proposals and who, above all, have as their political aim the deconstruction of patriarchy.

León points out that besides these two groups there were others aligned with neither, such as socialist feminists, trade unionists, feminists connected with political parties, black feminists, and Native American feminists.

Such polemics and name-calling among feminists in Latin America support my thesis that there are various types of feminism, not all of which are necessarily on the left and critical of the existing economic order. These new

polemics call into question the idea of a homogeneous feminism or "second wave" (see, e.g., León, 1994; Álvarez, 1998). I argue that our dynamic times have seen the re-creation of various waves, various feminisms, characterized by their vagueness of definition and their diversity.

MARXIST FEMINISM—A TIMID PROMISE

During the 1980s, criticism of feminists with a double commitment (to a political party or a trade union as well as to the movement) and the emphasis on autonomy gradually became less rigid, with an increasing appreciation of the importance of feminists in fostering changes in practice and outlook in such organizations. It is significant, for example, that in June 1998 one of the largest trade-union confederations in Latin America, the Confederação de Trabalhadores Rurais (Federation of Agricultural Workers—CONTAG), with some 450,000 members, held a national congress in Brasília with the title "Congress of Rural Working Men and Women." Discrimination persists, however, against currents such as the Marxist-oriented feminists. This discrimination has been evident in the various feminist conferences, where there has been no recognition of Marxist feminism's increasing efforts to link its class-based approach and its critique of capitalist economic policy to concerns with such questions as sexual rights, reproductive rights, and domestic violence. In the statements of those feminists who call themselves "authentic" it is common to find intolerance of currents that seek to combine feminism with their other concerns. Vargas (1994), for instance, recognizes the risk of a degree of exclusion in a concentration on an "essential feminism" but nevertheless contributes to a discourse of exclusion when, describing the history of feminism in Peru, she denies socialist feminists their identity as feminists, deriding them as mere "appendages of political parties" rather than as a group trying to combine its militancy with a political outlook and one that does not necessarily sacrifice its autonomy or the search for other ways of being on the political left.

Various feminist organizations in a number of countries still consider themselves socialist feminists. Some have gained a degree of popular support and influence in the women's movement (see, e.g., the writers of the emancipatory feminist current in the journal *Presença da Mulher*, published since 1987 by the União Brasileira de Mulheres [Brazilian Union of Women—UBM]; see also Chinchilla, 1992, on Marxist feminism in Latin America in the 1980s). Articles with a Marxist feminist slant are, however, rare in the Latin American literature. Women who call themselves Marxist feminists have had little success in creating a Latin American network. They

confront organizational and financial problems, especially because many of them are engaged in various forms of organizational work with political parties and trade unions whose priorities are determined by the dynamic of their confrontation with neoliberal politics. At the same time, in contrast to other currents within feminism they cannot expect help or financial assistance from international agencies, although some agencies, particularly those based in Europe and connected with progressive organizations such as the Green party, do not base their financial support on ideological considerations.

Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, and others who work among ordinary people—that is, leftist feminists—are nevertheless playing a basic role in the construction of a new left, insisting on internal democracy and pluralism and giving priority to working with grassroots community organizations. They have connections with opposition political parties such as the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' party—PT) and the Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil—PcdobB). Some are active in parliament, others in trade unions, local town councils controlled by the opposition, or organizations of landless peasants and the homeless. Many are also leaders of small and active NGOs, of social movements like those of blacks, and in community-based organizations, such as those of the women's movement.

FEMINISMS AND FEMINISMS IN THE ENGENDERING OF POWERS

Feminism in its origin bears both the stamp of the left and a critical understanding of how the left has functioned—of the incompatibility between the range of subjects in its history and the recognition as a subject of history (or of another history yet to be written) of the excluded, the oppressed, and those who live by their labor. But whereas the most radical utopia, that of a humanist socialism, would have to deal with class, race, gender, sexual preference, and other demarcations that have led to discrimination and social injustice, some forms of feminism are fixed at the halfway stage, concerned only with rights in the narrow liberal sense. With the institutionalization of feminism as a means to secure rights for women, to obtain an equality concerned with nothing beyond gender or sex, it has to engage the powers-that-be in partnership and dialogue. On this level, it becomes difficult to relate to the other (the powers) while maintaining one's own identity as the "non-other," the counterpower.

I have referred only tangentially to pieces of the thematic mosaic for a leftist reading of feminism. There is, however, a need to discuss the concepts

used indiscriminately in the works of different schools of feminism that muddle the distinctions between different worldviews and projects. Recognizing that each really deserves detailed treatment, I summarize these as follows: (1) the concept that there is symbiosis but no fusion between the terms "woman," "gender," and "feminism" and that each of these has a valid status when looked at from a class perspective and one that is concerned with both women's interests (with respect for their diversity, taking into account race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other identities) and a questioning of the social relations between the sexes and the gender system; and (2) the idea that developing the concept of gender runs the risk of making it static, codifying social relations and positions. The manuals on gender of international agencies and some NGOs often omit to mention that this is a process that develops its significance through a dialectic and so does not always have the same meaning in different cultures.

Engendering implies changes, challenges, and questions. The concept of the feminine has to be found within that of being human. Gender discourse must be linked with other discourses on ending oppression and with other ways of asserting individuality. In the same line of reasoning, it is important to recognize that the institutionalization of feminism in the NGOs—where gender is dealt with as a question of status in relation to that of men, as a game of the differences between the sexes—does not exhaust the possibilities of feminism. On the contrary, it fails to fulfill the greater promise of feminism as the practice of criticism of the powers-that-be, the promise of feminism as consciousness/power.

These reflections are linked with a concern about the meaning for us of this institutionalization of feminism and of the discourse on women and gender. Suddenly, gender and feminism have ceased to be adversaries of the authorities and have become their darlings, the subject of official speeches, policies, and statistics—things that smack of authoritarianism and social perversity as far as the living conditions of the poor and the working class are concerned. In the case of Brazil, it is difficult to remain on critical alert in the face of such ambiguity and conceptual distortions. Everyone is talking about human rights and participation, for example, and paying lip service to the importance of women's rights, and there are programs and specific laws that are of benefit to women in certain ways. But we have to remember that the very president who signs into law a human rights program (see Brazil, Presidency of the Republic, 1996) consistent with all the latest concerns of international agencies and public opinion regarding diversity and the rights to individual identities is the head of a neoliberal government. And that government has, through unemployment, a worsening of the living conditions of poor women in Brazil, and an assault on the unions and other forms of organized

labor, contributed to the increase in various forms of violence, including domestic violence, destroying the conditions that would foster respect for difference through a creative sexuality.

Since the late 1980s, feminism in Latin America has become more generally accepted or at least more visible, but, succumbing to the attractions of a pragmatic approach, it has been counting less on "de-identification" than on a search for new identities shaped by emancipatory utopias. The resulting rivalries have affected our behavior and social relations; we feminists are becoming increasingly "macho" toward each other, especially when it is a question of competing for funds from international agencies or for academic status or even our public image. In the 1970s we worried about giving priority to the debate on social class, lest this undermine what was essential to feminism—its individualism. Today, however, if feminism does not concern itself with social class it will lose the lawbreaking lightness of play and the erraticness of the erotic, becoming just an impotent element of official discourse. And this domestication will not have been imposed on us by patriarchy, at least not without our complicity.

Institutionalized feminism, the sort of feminism welcomed in the environment of the United Nations and adopted by international agencies and by governments of varying degrees of authoritarianism and exclusivity, does have the merit of protesting (even if only rhetorically) against violence toward women as human beings and publicizing our demands for equality and special treatment. However, when social movements that have been known for their spontaneity, flexibility, and democracy and the opportunity they have provided for grassroots participation and direct action become institutionalized they do not thereby become a new "Third Estate," an element of popular representation within the existing power structure. They may become types of power, dependent on funding from international agencies, tending toward bureaucratic rigidity, and competing with one another. Like other institutions they are vulnerable to all the vices of bureaucracies, including the use of their power for private ends. Recognizing these risks is not, however, to deny that the NGOs' experience in group advocacy and action within civil society is important. They must be looked at on a case-by-case basis, avoiding generalizations: there are NGOs and NGOs.

The feminism that is concerned with legal rights—with representation of women in civil society—is important, but it is only as one agent of feminism. Socialist feminism—the "nucleus of the dream" to which Marcuse (1974) referred—characterized by its attack on the productive ethic of the market and an unrepressed sensuality oriented toward pleasure is today just a nostalgic reminder of the flower children. We are losing both the bread and the circuses.

The feminism of the 1970s was severe in its criticism of the left, and this contributed to a reevaluation by the left of its thought and political action. But this feminism in its institutionalized version is becoming too soft on the right—on neoconservatism and neoliberal policies. The pursuit of financial resources from the international agencies contributes indirectly to the silence of many NGOs and of academic feminists regarding the modus operandi of some international agencies—the way in which they precodify a "gender-based perspective" and their choice of priority areas. Differences are played down, and everyone sings the same tune.

Much is being written by feminists today about freedom, subjectivity, and technologies of sexuality. But, paradoxically, we are so dominated by the needs imposed on us in the globalized political economy, supported by objective acts of violence, that we have little opportunity for erotic, aesthetic, or ethical experience and are deprived of the possibility of a micropolitics of de-identification. Can it be that we feminists are becoming what Souza Santos (1994: 84) calls "prisoners of the great trap that modernity has sprung for us: the incessant transformation of emancipatory energies into regulatory energies"?

The liberal option of "giving capitalism a human face" is wearing thin: witness the persistence if not the increase of social inequality in Latin America. This continues to be a challenge for feminism, cutting across analyses by class, gender, or race, among other factors. How can we give it this "human face" without ignoring the real-life situation of so many women and men—without abdicating, in a search for immediate victories on a narrow front, the ultimate aim of building a more humane society through a socialism based on class consciousness and mass movements (Therborn, 1995), enriched and colored by the denial of multiple subalternities and therefore radical and socially committed?

NOTES

1. "Lauretis (1994), a feminist writer whose subjects are images, gender, and the cinema, looks at things as engendered spaces. She criticizes the cultural accommodation made by those varieties of feminism that anchor themselves in the concept of gender as a social construct, losing sight of the dynamic, and become obsessed with appearances. Their one-track minds emphasize sexual differences, accept man, a universal, as their parameter, and, in the discourse on sexuality, never question heterosexuality. Lauretis proposes a possible radical epistemology. Feminism would be built by engendering itself not only through sexual differences but also through relationships of race and class. It would become 'a many-faceted subject, rather than a single-sided one, and would embrace contradictions instead of just being divided' (Lauretis 1994: 208)" (Castro, 1997: 159).

As for nonidentities and "de-identifications," the basic references are Eagleton (1990) and Butler (1992). These writers also point to the possible subversive effects of particular concrete situations when identities are combined and do not conform to fixed ideas. According to Eagleton (1990: 414, quoted by Castro, 1997: 158), a radical policy would require "a refutation of what Raymond Williams has called 'militant particularism'—of those currently categorized as the 'other'—women, foreigners, homosexuals [I would add blacks, male and female]—who are happy to be just recognized for what they are. But what is it 'to be' a woman, a homosexual, an Irishman? In fact it is important to recognize that excluded groups develop a certain style, values, life experiences, which suggest a form of political criticism and which demand the right of free expression. There is a political question lying in the demand for rights equal to those enjoyed by others in the discovery of one's potential, rather than in simply assuming some pre-molded identity, whose only peculiarity would be in ceasing to be oppressed. All reactive identities are in part the result of oppression, and also of resistance to that oppression, which makes it difficult just to stop being whatever one is. The privilege of the oppressor is his privilege of deciding what he wants to be. And it is precisely that privilege that the oppressed should insist on for themselves."

2. A double entendre in Portuguese—Translator.

3. The text of this section was originally drafted for Castro and Lutjens (1998).

4. Bogotá, 1981; Lima, 1983; Bertioga (Brazil), 1985; Mexico City, 1987; San Bernardo (Argentina), 1990; Costa del Sol (El Salvador), 1993; and Cartagena (Chile), 1996. See, among others, Vargas (1994), Sternbach et al. (1992), and Álvarez (1998).

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