

the historical junctures of 'what exists' with 'what is possible' with a view to the structural transformation of unequal socio-material relationships. Enigmatically, this particular kind of interpretation, this 'active' side, carries no 'position', except insofar as it is situated historically—a history of the present which interacts with that which is 'lived' and that which is received. But there is no 'interpretation' of 'false-consciousness' here, only an interminable and asymptotic negotiation with the ambiguity between the *de facto* and the *de jure* domains of ideology, between ideology as lived and its investment in social reproduction. What is significant in the contemporary situation is the renewed importance of interpretive intellectuals who would *exploit* this ambiguity, who look to the atmospheric agency of the 'master-ideology' or some sort of ever-abstracted 'cultural unconscious', to set these up as knock-down dummies without which there would be nothing to be critiqued: no negativity of a lack against which critique can define itself as radical.

To break with the instrumental fix is to combine a critical history which holds vigilantly to that which is 'lived' or received with a critique of ahistorical accounts—an historical account of unhistorical thinking. Separated, the two intellectual labours will inevitably be co-opted into the closures of post-modern theoreticism. Combined they point the way forward to attending to the heterogeneous processes which are remaking the possibilities, or the *lack* of possibilities, of political practice in advanced capitalist society.

Of course, it is not to argue that somehow by pure *methodology* such an approach spontaneously furnishes a praxis adequate to to contemporary social relations—in fact such a promise of spontaneity is what characterizes much of the intellectualism (in its specific form) of 'post-modernism'. Rather the approach I am suggesting is first and foremost capable of identifying the chimeras of a reified radicalism, but, more importantly, it attempts to critique and change the conditions which produce such conceptions; especially in the form in which they are received.

## Comments

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### The Politics of Representation

Julie Stephens' review of Zed Books' publication policy and associated epistemological issues, 'Show and Tell: Writing on Third-World Women' in *Arena* 88, is a useful and provocative essay. Some fascinating 'political' contradictions pull and tug at the text, but given its crisp generalizations about the international women's movement, I think it is important to take time unravelling some of these knots. From the outset, it is clear that the author's theoretical inclinations are divided between the totalizing class analysis of marxism, on the one hand, and adherence to a relativist Foucauldian epistemology, on the other. Since both discourses are masculinist conceptual enterprises, Stephen's dismissive use of phrases like 'elite women academics', 'the sovereign female subject' and 'object of feminism's gaze', massages both marxist and post-structuralist ambivalence towards feminism. The question which comes immediately to mind however, is what (class or other) interest would lead an author to embrace such an anti- or 'post-feminist' voice at the expense of her own sense of integration as a woman?

'Show and Tell' proposes that Western feminist dialogue with Third-World women is a form of 'bad faith'. While the author seems to be happy working with a universalizing marxist analysis (in spite of the odd 'nomadic' neo-liberalism), she is highly critical of feminism's attempt 'to universalize itself' and thereby 'transcend its Western origins'. What Stephens means by feminism universalizing itself, however is rather that it 'particularizes' itself by arising in different cultural contexts. The terminology is unfortunate here, because it gets caught up with the 'universalizing principles' of the modern secular humanist tradition, which is to involve another facet of feminist development again. But I will return to that theme. Following through her concern about feminism's falsely 'erasing' its specifically Western heritage, Stephens cites the typically uneasy editorial disclaimer, 'As a Western feminist...', spoken by Western activists dealing with the writing of Third-World women. In my view, this disclaimer is simply an effort to be reflexive within the historical conditions

that attend a woman, who, in gaining access to resources and acting as a catalyst for others, may run the risk of contaminating the latter's voices in the process. This discursive power is not the sole prerogative of women editors, needless to say.

It is well known that women in the Arab world cannot get their writing distributed because men who control the publishing outlets do not find it 'interesting'. Western feminist editors are surely facilitating a liberation from centuries of what might be dubbed the colonization of women by patriarchal mores and standards. And this oppression intensifies as imported models of 'development' become superimposed on indigenous practices. In fact, judging by the international-agency bureaucratism that informs many Third-World essays, the violence of neo-colonialism is already well underway. Clearly, this is part of what disturbs Stephens with respect to the 'nationalist' mood of some Third-World feminism. There is certainly collusion with the imperialist project here; yet, nationalist struggles have also been a positive transforming force, awakening many women to a sense of their own potential. The bourgeois-liberal era has a mixed heritage.

A major source of confusion in Stephen's analysis is her failure to distinguish between paradigms within the Western feminist tradition, not to speak of Third-World feminisms. Her review homogenizes feminists, much as it proposes Western feminists do with their Third-World sisters. It is essential that we identify the respective attitudes toward neo-colonial relations of liberal, marxist, radical, post-structuralist and eco-feminists. Liberal feminists, for example, might be said to endorse the dependency of the West on an exploited Third-World labour-force by their reliance on micro-processors to get policy submissions into shape. Marxist feminists meanwhile, uncritically endorse 'development' and a neo-colonial mentality with their ideological commitment to placing Third-World women on vehicle assembly lines. Eco-feminists, on the other hand, learn from the age-old farming practices and hands-on environmental know-how of Third-World subsistence farmers, or collaborate in a refusal to act as contraceptive guinea pigs of multi-national pharmaceutical companies. From the latter feminist perspective, 'development' is seen as destroying the fabric of women's lives, just as the environment is seen to be damaged by 'the growth ethic' of capitalism and nationalism. Stephens' either/or schema would probably categorize eco-feminists as playing 'guardians of culture'; but that would be to miss another historical contradiction at work: namely, women's specific contribution to the shift from modernist universalism to a renewed political localism with the emerging environmental sensibility.

Without calling on 'hallowed' terms such as 'womanliness', it can be demonstrated that the damage of development applies to women at the 'centre' as much as at the 'periphery', to borrow from the Left-essentialist lexicon of the '70s. Women of the North and South, as the agency lexicon has it, have more in common than Stephens thinks. The general rule is maximum responsibilities and minimum rights — 65 per cent of the world's labour is done by women for less than 10 per cent of the world's wage; 80 per cent of Africa's food is cultivated by women; Western domestic workers complete a 70-90 hour week, unpaid. Further, patriarchal exploitation is given a new edge, new potentials for control, through Western technology. As Third-World women begin to recognize this (and it doesn't take a diploma in semiotics to do it), they increasingly join Western feminists employed in nurturing a subsistence ethic. To quote one Aboriginal sister: 'If you have come to help me you can go home again. But if you see my struggle as part of your own survival, then perhaps we can work together.'<sup>1</sup> Because Stephens' approach takes no cognizance of these more recent tendencies in the international women's movement, many of her generalizations rest on dated premises.

At this point another limitation of 'Show and Tell' becomes plain. Intellectual training in simple class analysis or, alternatively, Derrida-like deconstruction both discourage attention to the intending subject. Consequently, if openness to the subjective dimension — pain, confusion, discovery, outrage — and its constitutive intermesh with pressures for social change at a public level were to inform Stephens' evaluation of feminist politics, then the apparent contradiction between abstract notions like 'emancipation' and 'orientalism' would dissolve in an understanding of lived historical process. This seems to be a case where the chosen post-structuralist lens, driven to divorce from its modernist bourgeois 'origin', throws the baby out with the freezing fluid and loses the fragile human capacity for self-conscious reflexivity. The lens is permitted to constitute 'the object' of debate. From a different point of departure, sensitive to the unfolding interplay of institutions over time, the contradiction and its associated problems are not so impenetrable. The authenticity of individual voices would then be heard as they battle to make sense of their condition with the always chequered conceptual tools available to them.

Here are existential strains which are our own, just as they are those of the Indian women who urge an autonomous feminism informed by their own culture. Undoubtedly, Indian history was affected by the colonial era and the 1917 Indian Women's

Association was influenced by the British suffrage movement. But why should this cancel the possibility of a feminism emerging in response to home-grown grievances, especially considering the daily round of misogyny to which so many Indian women are subject? Why should history manifest an all or nothing pattern? A 1/0 logic always, everywhere? Foucault certainly would not have been happy with this. Marx is another question. Why not 'feminism' and nationalism? Recent writing within feminist epistemology suggests reality can be both/and.

In a related vein, those of us who are interested in a radical feminist critique of modern Western instrumentalism are aware of a distinctively Indian view of 'the feminine' as positive and creative. And, in as much as this can be extracted by Indian women from its patriarchal subsumption (certainly not a job for 'guardians of culture'), then many women in the West are eager to explore its political potential. Ideological 'colonization' can work both ways; yet, the author of 'Show and Tell' seems so enclosed by Western presuppositions about textual politics, not to say collective guilt over 'orientalism', that the option for this reciprocity is not acknowledged.

Stephens says that Third-World women activists are peculiarly lodged in this contradiction between feminist liberation and nationalism. Yet, the nation state and the universals of liberalism are intrinsically tied to the bourgeois secular order: no longer modern for a post-modern West, yet still to be realized, here as elsewhere. In the West, liberal and marxist feminists continue to rely on the state and its agencies, the public service, law courts, academia, etc., as guarantors of their 'legislated equality' *vis-a-vis* men. By contrast, eco-feminism, drawing inspiration from a radical-feminist paradigm, focuses more on qualitative changes than on structural reforms. Eco-feminist politics eschews both the instrumentality of the state and cash nexus, seeking autonomous, communal solutions to a sustainable, caring co-existence between nature and women and men. Similarly, Stephens' claim about the contradictory emancipatory potential of 'capitalism' depends on blurring distinctions between feminisms. So, while there will be an educated elite who pursue careers in capitalist institutions just as men do—women who see themselves emancipated by economic independence as opposed to inter-dependence—the housewives of Seveso in Sicily, or Shibokusa grannies of Japan are 'subjects of history' whose motivation originates outside that system. The point to keep in mind about feminism is that it is not just a 'label' patented by some universalizing group; it exists organically in the 'actions' of women wherever they recognize and contest patriarchal power.

Turning to the themes of 'otherness' and difference', there is a second confusing switch of meanings in Stephens' review. Sometimes 'difference' is used synonymously with orientalism or nationalism, and sometimes it is used in the more common feminist sense pertaining to what is valuable in the attribution of 'the feminine'. Giving the author the benefit of the doubt here, for her usage may well replicate Zed usages, it should be noted nevertheless that the earlier pair—difference/nationalism—is coterminous with modern secular 'universalizing principles' and liberal or marxist-feminist problematic. In this sense, it really denotes a 'sameness' between Western and Third-World feminisms, but 'same' in terms of a sovereign discourse that is historically masculinist. On the other hand, the allusion difference/feminine derives from a radical-feminist problematic, an expression of feminine grievance not necessarily mediated by abstract principles, but readily recognized by those who labour as women do. This sense of 'difference' twists the argument in the opposite direction.

Both instances of 'difference' Stephens paints as essentialism. But that very claim should be overturned by her own allegiance to discourse determinism. Neither 'nationhood' nor 'femininity' are shaped outside of history. Third-World women as well as the majority of us in the West can experience ourselves as 'closer to nature', because this is precisely where patriarchal discourse has put us. The Judæo-Christian teaching which permeates international economic and political institutions constructs masculinity in the sphere of culture, subjecthood, rights and transcendence. Femininity is constructed such that it belongs with nature, object (of gaze), resources and immanence. Women's social status, their labour, sociality and sexuality, are mediated by this fabricated identity/difference. This insight should be taken hold of by feminists, because it continues to have profound implications for women and men.

Western feminists accustomed to an entrenched divide between mental and manual labour are often unable to resonate with the reality that women's role has been constructed across many cultures so as to bridge men and nature. But for most mothers and housewives in the Western world, and women subsistence farmers in the Third World, this 'mediation of nature' is a fact of life. Meanwhile, the introduction of so-called labour saving technologies in the homes of a few does nothing to shift this fundamental identification of women and nature. The continuing conception of domestic labour as economically 'unproductive' is proof enough of the view that such activities are somehow subhuman. And it is symptomatic of the masculinist bias of liberal and marxist

feminism that they are too embarrassed by the call for a domestic wage to pursue it—even as an heuristic tactic for the transvaluation of 'nurture' in a consumerist, technocratic society.

Finally, like many intellectually trained sisters, Stephens has trouble with 'difference' because she anticipates it may open the door to deprecatory patriarchal arguments about women's biology. My understanding is that 'difference' refers to an historically generated role specificity, one that deforms 'both sexes' but in complementary ways. Yet, to address the 'biological' bogey for a moment—how could childbirth, for example, not be considered experiential, mediated by consciousness and therefore a discursive practice? One could equally consider childbirth an 'economic' event for example. Stephens' undialectical biology/culture dualism provides a straw premise which bends to an equally weak conclusion. *Viz.* the theory of 'difference' (since it is grounded in biology!) allows no basis for the 'universalizing principles' which must rest at the heart of any emancipatory programme. Now, while rights theory offers one set of guidelines, which have brought many of us, men and women, a fair way, we should be careful not to ontologize or 'naturalize' these same principles as men are sometimes inclined to do, seeing them as the only possible foundation for a reconstructed politics.

Here, the debate might gain something from the current exchange between eco-feminists and environmental philosophers, where an alternative ethic based on 'caring' is proffered as more appropriate to a new political relation between men and men, men and women, women and nature, men and nature. The beauty of this argument from caring is that far from relying on disembodied, abstract, cognitive principles, it derives from the sensuous, manual, committed and planful character of feminine labour (as constructed by patriarchy). We are looking at a form of labour that is intrinsically relational, a labour in relations between persons and between humans and nature. Recognition of this ethical ground demands a radical shift of gear beyond both liberal and marxist patriarchal paradigms, of course. It does not start out from historically arbitrary universalizing principles which only an intellectually trained elite can apply (and which lead to absurd ethical dilemmas—such as 'the custody' of frozen embryos in a property settlement or 'the right' to carry arms). Objectified in nurturant physical labour, 'caring' is universally accessible.

Nor is 'caring' beset by contradictions of a would-be post-colonial era, which brings me to one last observation about the Western bourgeois 'narrative' and its successor politics in marx-

ism and liberal feminism. This was never a consistent liberatory programme, but one where emancipation would be 'given-out' as education, political rights, and the like. Reliance on the state is no less reliance on 'a master' to ensure that conditions of equality are maintained. The tensions which Stephens attributes to a liberatory colonialism in the Third World are no different in this sense from those experienced at home, for contradiction inheres in the socio-political source of Western 'universalizing principles' themselves. Varieties of feminism, Western or otherwise, informed by this politics and at the same time attempting to be reflexive, will simply have to contend with that. Other feminisms, spontaneous local eruptions having their source in the 'different' cultural experiences of women, are not compromised in the same way. Integrally related as they are, bio-regionalism, communitarian values, and radical or eco-feminism mark an active transitional move from the imperial process towards a Green political future.

Locked behind the synchronic lens Stephens wonders what it is that could link women together. The question is telling, I think, of how the lived organic base of radical feminist energy in the twentieth century has been invaded, colonized and emptied out by intellectual tendencies, discourses such as marxism and post-structuralism. Indeed, the 1980s were promoted by some as the era of 'post-feminism'. But the question also signifies ethnocentricity, because of the implicit assumption that only access to the political privileges of the West can bring women together as feminists. My own observation has been that the struggle for these privileges in a patriarchally contrived system of scarcity sets women against each other. In this context then, Stephens' own authorial voice comes to collude with the master project. Plainly, it is not only Third-World writing that calls for a little more reflexivity.

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1. *Ecoforum*, August 1989.

## Third-World Women? A Reply

I am grateful to Ariel Salleh for her response to my critique of some Zed publications on Third-World women. My review aimed