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Comment on Rosaldo's "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology"

Linda J. Nicholson

In "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding" (*Signs* 5, no. 3 [Spring 1980]: 389–417), Michelle Rosaldo raised serious questions about a theoretical model of great importance to contemporary feminist theory, one that she herself had earlier helped to construct. This model offers the opposition between "domestic" and "public" spheres as the explanation for the supposedly universal differences in status among men and women, and attributes women's universally inferior status to women's universal involvement in childbearing and child rearing. Rosaldo argues, I believe correctly, that the model as so constructed is ahistorical and hides the diverse causes and content of gender roles. As she points out, one cannot

merely look to the things women do, still less to the ways women biologically are, to explain the social organization of gender. The ways women "biologically are" or the things that "women do" are always part of a given social system that interprets such biology and such activities in specific ways. Moreover, these specificities in cultural interpretation themselves reflect relations of power that are lost in an appeal to a universal domestic/public explanation. Thus she comes to the conclusion "that women's status is itself not one but many things, that various measures of women's place do not appear to correlate among themselves, and, furthermore, that few of them appear to be consistently related to an isolable 'cause'" (p. 401).

As is made clear by Rosaldo's criticisms, the gravest danger that results from relying on the evidence of women's biology or women's activities in the construction of feminist theory is that we read into this evidence assumptions from our own culture. There is nothing in itself problematic about the assertion that in all human societies women bear children—a statement resembling the assertion that in all human societies women and men urinate. Moreover, it may be that in all societies women have the primary responsibility for early child care. The important issue, however, is whether in our judgments about the significance of such universals we project onto other cultures a meaning borrowed from our own culture. At least within post-Victorian society, women's association with childbearing can certainly be taken as a significant one, closely allied to the identification of women with the "natural." Also within our society, childbearing and child rearing take place in a context where women are devalued. However, if only because of the effect such association of the feminine with the biological or the quasibiological has upon us, we need to be careful about projecting our assumptions where they might not belong. In short, we need to be careful lest we too easily deduce the political from the biological.¹

Rosaldo has raised certain needed caveats for contemporary feminist theory. However, in doing so she makes certain claims with which I would disagree. Rosaldo connects the methodological problems she has pointed to with the inclination of contemporary feminists to search for "origins." As she notes, a persistent tendency in contemporary feminist writing—one that she claims reflects an old-fashioned evolutionary approach—has been the attempt to uncover the roots of modern forms of male dominance in our far-distant past. She argues that because of this tendency feminists have been willing to grant to anthropol-

1. The claim that we need to differentiate questions of politics or power from other types of generalizations replicates an argument Iris Young recently made about Nancy Chodorow's work in a panel at the American Philosophical Association meetings in Boston in December 1980. Young argued that we need to distinguish the process of gender development and differentiation from the process by which women are devalued and denied power; she maintained that Chodorow's work explains only the former.

ogy an importance not accorded by other social theory. Rather than employing anthropology to supply "comparative insights," feminist writers use anthropology to locate the present in the past. The consequence is a tendency to ignore historical diversity.

What I would argue in response is that there is no necessary connection between the methodological errors Rosaldo has pointed to and a search for origins. A search for origins can be understood in a variety of different ways, not all of which lead to an ahistorical methodology. If the goal were to search for replicas of the present in the past, then it would be difficult to reconcile this search with a sensitivity to historical diversity. However, the search for origins may be conceived of rather as the attempt to link our present with a quite different past, as the telling of a tale whose beginnings may be markedly different from its end. I believe this distinction is important because I would not want it to be concluded from Rosaldo's article that we must abandon a search for origins in order to avoid the methodological problems she has correctly identified. Trying to understand how we got where we are remains, I believe, an important task, and history in the broad sense is a tool we ought not to relinquish.

Moreover, it might be the case that the opposition between domestic and public spheres, differently interpreted, could be of crucial importance in our tale. Since this opposition certainly does help to structure gender relations in our contemporary society, it seems worthwhile at least to explore how far back the separation extends, where and how its meanings change, and what the connections are, if any, with the politics of gender. In other words, while we recognize that anything we shall call "domestic" or "public" must refer to specific social constructions with their own forms of significance and not to anything which can be reduced to biology, may it not be the case that there are certain connections between such constructions and others extending back in history? We could describe these similarities as being like "family resemblances," in that they exhibit varying shared features as well as types and degrees of differences.

The domestic/public opposition, if understood in this sense, might be said to be methodologically comparable to the category "class" in Marxian theory. While I would argue that the connotation of the term "class" must be understood differently in different historical contexts, nevertheless I would also claim that the term plays a useful function in Marxian theory in part as an account of such differences. It remains, of course, to be seen whether the category "domestic/public" possesses the same power of explanation as the category "class." I myself incline to the belief that it might, in part because I see much interesting work being done that can be said to exemplify the type of framework sketched above. Thus I believe that historians such as Ellen DuBois and Eli Zaretsky have provided interesting insights on our recent past in the

United States and in England in part by elaborating on the changing meanings that the opposition between domestic and public has taken on within that past.² Other historians have provided comparable insights in reference to other historical periods—Marilyn Arthur in ancient Greece and Rome, and Natalie Zemon Davis and Lawrence Stone in early modern France and England, respectively.³ Such work, with that of others, might be said to form the beginnings of a feminist history of Western civilization both different from the one with which we grew up and broader than the Marxian account. Moreover, there appears no reason to rule out the possibility that our tale might have certain interesting connections with phenomena occurring prior to the Greeks or with histories of other cultures, and here feminist anthropology and archaeology might play an important role.

Even if the category “domestic/public” should turn out to have limited theoretical usefulness, this would not negate the kind of approach I am arguing for: an approach that is both theoretical and historical. Rosaldo was correct in noting the ahistorical tendency in much of contemporary feminist theory. Her reminder that women’s status is not one but many things and her warning against understanding the domestic in biological terms should be listened to. I, however, would also caution against any countertendencies in the direction of a historical relativism, that is, toward a rejection of explanations altogether in favor of a variety of descriptions.

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2. See esp. Ellen DuBois, “The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement: Notes toward the Reconstruction of Nineteenth-Century Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 3, nos. 1–2 (Fall 1975): 63–71; and Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 57.

3. Marilyn Arthur, “‘Liberated’ Women: The Classical Era,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), pp. 60–89; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975); and Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).