

Feminism and Marginal Sectors: Achievements and setbacks in a difficult dialog*

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Abstract

The feminist movement has given voice to the demands of women and assured their conquests and demands. But not all groups of women have been equally recognized. Groups with greater social marginalization have the greatest difficulties inserting their demands within the hegemonic lines of feminism. There are currently polemics about how to approach themes such as sexual work and female crime.

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1. A difficult dialog and two dilemmas

The problem of granting credibility to sectors that lack power and social prestige, can even take place at the heart of movements seeking rights and recognition. This article will analyze the epistemological difficulties that feminism has confronted to include among its demands the voice of women from marginal sectors. These difficulties continue until today and lead to rough and bitter confrontations, for which reason it seems necessary to trace their origins, to better understand the present situation.

Despite its questioning potential, its universalizing will and its concern for victims of violence (although in reality also because of that) the more institutional feminism has frequently been caught in two dilemmas. If historically it has have sought civil rights, based on the moral superiority of women, what should be done with those to whom are attributed questionable or non-conventional morality? On the other hand, but convergently, if one believes in a single model of universal demands that are products of enlightenment thinking and in the existence of an undifferentiated individual “woman,” how is it possible to understand different priorities based on different conditioning factors such as class, ethnicity and religion?

Both elements, presumed moral superiority and the universality of the objectives of gender, are rarely made explicit, except in the proposals of U.S. cultural feminism which consider that in terms of sexuality the feminine manner of experiencing it would be liberating and masculinity degrading (Uría Ríos, 2009:125) and in certain lines of feminism of equality, which exclusively relate gender demands with Enlightenment ideals (which leaves no margin for those generated in other cultural realms) or some generalizations about the “patriarchy”. But these assumptions have influenced the form of determining priorities, generating alliances or a lack of confidence and in the credibility that has been granted to different sectors.

Because of its long-term efforts, the fact it involves half of humanity and its theoretical depth, the feminist movement has

gained a prominent position in social analysis, although this recognition has only been attained in recent decades. One example of this late recognition can be found in the fact that the theoreticians of social movements normally still include feminism in the analysis of “new social movements”, and even consider it as a paradigm of these movements, while the labor movement continues to be seen as the central axis of traditional social movements. Nevertheless, gender demands arose as early, as publically and as organized as those of workers in general. In fact, Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, the foundation of the workers organization, and the Seneca Falls declaration, the official beginning of feminism, are both from 1848, although this fact is much less known and recognized.¹ In reality, gender demands appear to have been the implicit interlocutor in counter to which academic thinking was developed, that with whom it argued, without being named, the “polemical referent” of which Mari Luz Esteban (2004) spoke.

Despite these rejections of feminism, historic, economic and social studies are now being revised from a feminist perspective; which is considered to provide essential support for understanding processes and problems that affect all of us, both men and women. But the current recognition of the need to incorporate a gender perspective, does not mean that the task has been concluded. A millenary tradition has fixed within all of us, as men and women, stereotypes and prejudices about women, which are easy to ignore and difficult to combat. These are not individual and conscience attitudes, because the demeaning symbolic constructions are transmitted in a complex and sophisticated manner (Cabruja Ubach, 2009:130).

¹ Some current studies suggest that the social sciences were constructed as they were as a counter to gender claims, for which the feminist movement was the “other” against which theorized Le Bon and Tarde in the late nineteenth century Rodríguez Luna, R. (2009:91).

And if it is thus difficult to overcome prejudices and incorporate a gender perspective in social studies in general, as demonstrated by the difficulties that we still find at times to obtain disaggregated statistical data, which would make women visible, we can understand that the difficulties are increased in specific situations when we study women who belong to ethnic minorities, when racial or ethnic prejudice is involved and above all when what we analyze is conduct that we do not approve of. Here we find ourselves before a dual obstacle at the time of addressing the problems: the resistance that society in general has to gender studies, and the prejudice found within this women's movement towards some more or less marginal sectors.

2. A history of disparagement and distrust

The feminist movement has had a long history of difficult relations with marginal women, and this stems from the struggles against the technique for degrading the female sex most employed in the West, which consists in considering them incapable of autonomous reasoning, and distrusts their moral standing and demonizes them. The disdain for women and the accusation that they are evil are abundantly documented since classic antiquity in mythology, historical tales, and philosophical essays. The Old Testament is full of evil women such as the temptress Eve and the ignored Lilith, the traitor Delilah who tricked Samson and the seductress Jezebel who had her husband Ahab kill the prophet Elías. In the New Testament, Herodias and her daughter Salome plotted to have Herod kill John the Baptist. In nearly all of these cases they are blamed for crimes actually committed by men, and are used as practical demonstrations of the danger of the power of women. The image of Jezebel, who disdained God, was used throughout history to question all Queens who displayed a minimal autonomy in respect to religious power (Ferris Beach, 2007).

In the Middle Ages these prejudices can be traced in treatises of jurisprudence and in literature and later in dictionaries and

proverbs. The authors of these documents accuse women of a wide range of defects: evil, duplicity, lust and avarice and construct around them the imaginary that gives origin to the idea of the witch, the negative model of all that women do in real life, which was essentially to care for others, postpone their own interests and strictly control their sexuality.

If the “courtly love” of the twelfth century had produced a positive turnabout in the consideration of women, this did not prevent the survival of misogynist ideas, strongly anchored in social customs and imaginaries (Gargan and Lançon, 2013:14-15). In many cases, the idea of feminine evil was combined with the idea that women were incapable of reason, which justified in the eyes of jurists their lower culpability based on their *infirmitas sexus*, *fragilitas* or *imbecillitas sexus*. Tiraqueu, Farinacio and their many followers affirmed that women were less culpable than men because of the weakness of their soul, intelligence and rationality (Graziosi, 1991). On the other hand, the theme of women itself was considered frivolous and insignificant, only apt to entertain jurists when they were not occupied by more serious issues. The condescending tone used by those who transcribed testimony of women is notable, as is the case of the recompilation of the medical councils of 1479 in France, in which the scribe systematically mocks the commentaries of his illiterate but informed interlocutors (Lacarrière, 1998).

In response to these demeaning strategies, not only is their intellectual capacity systematically questioned, but also their moral solidity, which placed women beyond accusation and which they could use as a base to demand more equal treatment. Thus, in the fourteenth century, Christine de Pizán and in the fifteenth century, the abbess of Valencia, Isabel de Villena, thought it necessary to demonstrate the moral value of women, indicating that they are creatures of God like men and not instruments of the devil (de Villena, 1987). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a similar line is found in Saint Teresa de Jesus (De Ávila, 1995) and the precursor to feminism Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz (Lledó, 2008).

If one keeps in mind that misogyny is sustained by male fear and jealousy and is derived from the objective weakness and desires for power of the “strong sex”, it can be understood that one of the strategies used to overcome the imposed social marginalization was to pacify men’s concerns by convincing them that to recognize certain rights of women would not place at risk the social structures on which their prerogatives were based.

3. Moral superiority as an argument

During the 19th century, both women who defended their civil rights (from the British suffragettes to those advocating the abolition of slavery in the United States) as well as their male sympathizers, one of whom was Romantic historian Jules Michelet, based their proposals on feminine moral supremacy.²

This was the predominant response since the late 18th century to the patriarchal misogyny that spoke of the evil of women, and which was accompanied from a religious perspective by the myths of the sinner women, beginning with Eve, which justified their exclusion from religious positions and from civil rights. As a counterpart, women should demonstrate their virtue if they intended to be accepted. To advance in the recognition of their rights, not only should they comply with the norms but also show that they do so better than most men. Meanwhile, a precursor of the movements to demand civil rights for women, Olympe de Gouges, established her legacy by saying “I leave my heart to the country, my honor to men (they need it), my soul to women”, to affirm their moral superiority.

The discourse of the demand for rights soon split into two branches, both focused on the theme of feminine morality: one affirmed that women were morally superior, while the other recognized their inferiority but considered it conjunctural and

² Other interpretations indicate that the recognition of feminine moral supremacy that was generalized in the nineteenth century was a symbolic compensation for the social, political and economic exclusion to which women had been submitted (Barrancos, 2001).

proposed overcoming the problem by improving their education (Wollstonecraft,1998). Both lines of argument contained difficulties by including in their demands women who departed from the norms.

The protofeminist discourse about the excellency of women was shared by the Saint-Simonians, Fourier and other utopians (de Miguel Alvarez, 2005:300). Women can and should have recognition of their civil rights because they displayed moral superiority over men, because their full participation would raise the ethical level of society. This argument, although it was effective to have their demands for participation as citizens accepted, had its risks and limits. When it was said: “We are and will always be indebted to women. They are mothers, there is nothing more to say...to be loved, to raise, to educate us morally later, to educate man ... this is the woman’s task” (Michelet, 1876) conditioned the recognition of women’s rights on a strict compliance with established goals. The same author had indicated in 1838 that the praise for feminine purity, crystalized in the cult to the Virgin, had contributed to consecrating contempt for real women. (Michelet, 1987:16). Moreover, to support the demands of gender on a presumed feminine moral superiority left without ideological support those transgressive women whose conduct undermined the interpretation of women as morally good and weakened their credibility.

The suffragettes, who supported their arguments on feminine moral superiority, were also against slavery and supporters of dry laws. Many of them were active participants in their religious communities. Thus Elizabeth Cady Staton and Lucretia Molt were Quakers and organized the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 and the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, in which they drafted and read the celebrated “Declaration” whose point 6 said that “He has withheld from her rights, which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men, both natives and foreigners”. The demand was clear “Why do they deny virtuous women rights that they recognize for men who are sinners?”

The relationship between feminine demands and anti-slave practices is also important. In 1850, the biography was published of Sojourner Truth, who was born a slave in the United States and participated actively in various religious communities, and demanded the abolition of slavery and advocated for women's rights. The next year, in the convention of the Rights of Women of Akron, she gave the "Ain't I a Woman" speech that marked the beginning of a feminism that questioned privileges of class and race, as well as those of gender (Ziga, 2014:33-47).

Harriet Beecher Stowe published the celebrated book "Uncle Tom's Cabin", which implicitly affirmed that the slaves do not deserve to be treated as such because they were (or at least there were among them) good people, which in her criteria meant good Christians, with solid moral principles. She extended this argument to women whom she depicted as the only ones capable of saving the United States from the intrinsic evil of slavery and as natural defenders of family stability and virtue (Jordan-Lake, 2005:61). The arguments in the book, which was the second most highly read of the 19th century, behind only the Bible, were soon widely used by the suffragettes to support their own movement, given that they, in general, shared a Puritan morality and a quite rigid idea of sexual morality.

But this was not the only connection between different movements supported by the religious defense of correct moral principles. The feminine activism in the struggle against alcohol, which led to drafting of the "The Dry Laws" of 1910 is well documented. As Gusfield affirmed

The affinity between the Temperance Movement and the Movement for gender equality was evident even before the Civil War. Many of the important people in the history of the women's movement were active in the Temperance Movement (Gusfield, 1986:88).

This relationship did not grow spontaneously, the feminists had to first convince the even more conservative supporters of the Dry

Laws that they were innocent of the accusations of secularism and sexual immorality. But they were finally able to have them support feminist demands aimed at obtaining greater equality among genders, proposing the acceptance of women in the Ecclesiastical conferences and as ministers of worship. They also supported the separation of men and women in prisons.³

It is interesting to note that Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to come before a U.S. Congressional committee in 1871, to demand the right to vote, and who ran for the Presidency in 1872, did not have the support of the suffragettes who believed that she was too sexually liberated, given that she had married three times (although her divorce was for reasons of poor treatment), and she defended the right to free love and the legalization of prostitution. These were limits that the Puritan suffragettes were not ready to cross.

As Nobel Prize winning author Sinclair Lewis affirmed, the suffragettes could attack the politics of the president or of the institutions

but they should do so as Christian women and solid taxpayers. They should be convinced, think whatever they think privately, and then convince the others, that the vote will not lead to an era of 'moral relaxation'...and will immediately do away with prostitution, gambling and beer drinking (Lewis, 1973:134).

The suspicion with which the feminists were seen came not only from religion but also from science. The sexologists from the late 19th century and early twentieth century believed that "feminine criminality, madness, homosexuality and the demands of feminism...belonged to a group of interconnected phenomenon" (Sanfeliu, 2007:46). From these suspicions they

³ In reality, as Gusfield affirmed, the Temperance movement mainly functioned as a way to morally control Catholic immigrants (Italians and Irish) and demonstrate the superiority of Protestant ethics, leaving implicit the segregation and disdain for groups that at this time had little political power.

sought to defend themselves by distancing themselves from the transgressors.

Beginning from these moralizing bases and practices, the temptation to blame the infractors, represented by prostitutes or those suspected of prostitution, was at times very strong and found support within the women's movement, always in search of recognition. The other possibility consisted in victimizing them, considering that the "immoral" conduct was imposed on them externally. This was the route followed. They took advantage of their experience in the struggle against slavery and used this knowledge to apply it to the analogy of sexual workers, to develop important campaigns against "white slave trade". They worked against real crimes committed against the freedom of women, although they were minorities, the issue applied to all (Guy, 1994; Rubin and Butler, 1994; Juliano, 2002).

The analogy between slaves and women was supported in some prejudices of the time that believed that both groups had similar intrinsic defects such as a lack of intelligence and emotional instability, which was in some way compensated by the possibility of physical beauty and docility (Mercadante Sela, 2008:242). In this light, the emphasis on their moral capacities made by Stowe supported claims demanding more equal treatment. But the suffragettes focused the supposed analogies on another issue, which could stir immediate and generalized support, they denounced the lack of freedom of the prostitutes, without realizing that in an incipient capitalist society, the abhorrent situation of the slaves was more similar to that of housewives, given that both groups worked full time without economic remuneration and both were expected to provide affection, submission and obedience to their masters. Prostitutes, however, established another type of economic relation with men, in which they are remunerated for services and for previously agreed times, which was more similar to the paid work of men. They were an example of capitalist relations (Varela, 1995). The cases of economic exploitation and abuses such as pimping, could be better overcome by recognizing the legitimacy of their work, as

occurred with all the other cases of labor exploitation. But the Puritan undertone prevented the mainstream feminists from considering this option. As we saw, the use of false analogies and abusive generalizations is found today in “politically correct” thinking, influenced by the “moral panic” denounced by Vance and Rubin (Grupo Davida, 2005). A very recent news item reported on a debate within Amnesty International about an internal document that proposed the decriminalization of prostitution but triggered the anger of numerous feminist organizations that obtained the support of many famous actresses, who requested “throwing the document in the trash” (Celis, 30-7-2015).

It should not be a surprise that the discriminations supported by religious ideas have had such support in the U.S., given that in this country biblical fundamentalism, and the idea that faith should be the basis of legislation is deeply rooted in the population. Armstrong suggests that differently from the modern thinkers in the Protestant tradition, who support maintaining religion as a private practice separated from the power of the state, the settlers of North America clung to the idea of the union of both realms, which allowed them to feel morally superior to other peoples (Armstrong, 2015). As Susan George charged “U.S. citizens are a religious people...much more than the Europeans, who in the past one hundred years have undergone a rapid and spectacular de-Christianization” (George, 2009:135). George also indicates that 76.4% of people in the United States define themselves as Christians and many of them see lay conspiracies and those from the left in many places and believe that feminists, gays and atheists are threats to the foundations of the family and the nation. If this is the framework on which gender demands are based, the moralizing behind the rejection of marginalized sectors is not surprising. What is most dangerous is that the hegemonic position of the Nordic power causes their prejudices to be shared in other parts of the world, particularly places like Sweden where until not long ago an extreme Puritanism was practiced, but also in places with a more secular tradition.

4. The right to be bad

In “The Barber of Seville” by Rossini, first presented in 1816, the protagonist considers it necessary to first sing “I am docile, I am obedient” before informing that she is thinking of disobeying her guardian, who wants to marry her.

Throughout the 19th century, to accept assigned roles came before the possible questioning of some of the demands placed on them. But, as has been indicated: “It was not a question of claiming a moral reserve or goodness, but vindicating power, including the right to be bad” (Rodríguez Magda, 2003:96). To be bad, that is to act outside the norm in a given social context, is a privilege that is assigned to the powerful, perhaps precisely because to act against the norms imposed on others, can be a form of achieving power (Iglesias, 2014).

For Chesney-Lind and Pasko, the classic theoretical schools about criminality have always assumed that

male delinquency, even in its most violent forms, is a ‘normal’ response to their situations, while that of women of the same environment... who are not delinquent, have been considered as “over-controlled”, thus if men are not delinquent it is a proof of character, but in women it is interpreted as a sign of weakness (Maqueda Abreu, 2014:68-69).

Based on this basic political analysis, they reserve for their own group strict compliance with the norms (for example sexual fidelity of the couple, and postponing one’s own interest for that of the group) does not seem to be a policy of empowerment, above all because this compliance with the norm is given a biological hue, attributing it to instinctive conduct and without any merit, or it is attributed to a weakness that leaves them incapable of breaking the norms.

This is not to apologize for antisocial behavior, but to agree that the demands for compliance must be imposed on all, if you do not want to reinforce the subordination of those who abide. Traditionally, women rarely break rules, and undertake most of the

tasks of maintaining social life and group survival. But this “solidarity capital” is not lost if the fact is accepted that some women avoid the norms, or act more or less selfishly.

The historic problem of the feminist movement, of how to include in the movement women who deviate considerably from the norms, does not only affect sex workers, but also criminal women and other infractors of the dominant sexual morality, such as lesbians, who although they had earlier access to public discourse, facilitated by their presence in all social classes, also had to face a difficult struggle to be completely accepted within the feminist movement (Jeffreys, 1996; Juliano, 2004; Flory, 2007).⁴ It is well known that one of the catalysts of modern feminism, Betty Friedan, was opposed to the visibility of lesbians, whom she considered “the lilac threat” of feminism (Friedan, 1974; Ziga, 2014). But as a counterpart, the powerful current of radical U.S. feminism and its continuation in cultural feminism, proposed love between women as its main demand.⁵

Other sectors, such as the transsexuals, did not have this clout and are still in full struggle for the recognition of their rights (Ayllón, 2004; Fernández, 2004; Garaizabal 2004; Rullan Berntson, 2004; Mejía, 2006). As an Australian researcher lucidly expressed: “The scrutiny (to which they are submitted as a group) includes a feminist literature that exposes a stormy and often antagonistic relationship between feminists and transsexual women” (Connell, 2012:857).

As a lesser evil, if the intention is to ignore these disturbing issues, refuge can be taken in the “politically correct” discourses constructed about these groups. To study the culture of poverty, the psychological disturbances of descendants of broken families, the slavery suffered by sexual workers, or the mercantilization of

⁴ For example, in Argentina as late as 1984, when the magazine “Alfonsina” published an article entitled “Amar a otra mujer” it received letters from “feminists” who strongly criticized it for harming “the face of the movement” (Tarducci, 2014:43).

⁵ Susan Griffin, for example, proclaimed the “Lesbianismo político” as a form of overcoming what she considered the intrinsic violence of heterosexuality.

sex change operations, has led to acceptable approximations to confrontational themes. In all these interpretations, the global society was not questioned, and the studies focus specifically on the marginal sectors and on their problems whether real or allocated to these sectors.

From the perspective of institutional feminism, given that it strives to demonstrate the legitimacy of gender demands, which are always seen with suspicion, it often seemed that if it unloaded the burden of bad company, if it was or we were severe with those who are similar, we would earn the right to be recognized. From this follows the logic that any weak social sector should distance itself from the most stigmatizable of its members. This is, for example, what immigrant associations do when they distance themselves from sex workers and prisoners of the same origin, and what traditional families do when they reject their sons and daughters who are drug addicts, criminals, homosexuals or (in the case of women) promiscuous. We can see a modern example of this strategy in the theme of the Young Parisian Muslims “*neither whores, nor submissive*” in which they clearly separate from the infractors to be able to support their right to in subordination.

This authoritarian drift of a powerful sector of feminism became concrete in the late 1970s with the organization of Women Against Pornography (WAP), which enthusiastically supported the position of U.S. President Ronald Reagan who enacted censorship measures.⁶ The influence of these ultraconservative sectors extended throughout the world and is still visible in campaigns to abolish prostitution.

Fortunately, these proposals were contested. In 1982, at the Barnard Conference on *Toward a Politics of Sexuality* and in later works, Gayle Rubin charged that persecution against sexual liberty always winds up attacking the most stigmatized communities (Ziga, 2014:94-95). In recent decades, possibilities have been emerging

⁶ One of the voices most heard from this position, that of Kathleen Barry (1988), affirmed that “pornography is the theory and the violation is the practice”, supposing that sexuality and violence are inexorably united.

for alternative interpretations, based on contributions such as those of Butler (2007, 2008), and some groups (lesbians and transsexuals) have seen their options legitimated by feminism. But the ban remains on sexual work (which is part of the vital experience of many of these women) and for pornography. Despite the intensity of the debate, in which the more unfavorable sectors are highly engaged, there have few advances in the recognition of rights for those who voluntarily exercise these activities:

For working class youth, migrants and indigenous transsexuals, housing, income, security, education and health care are all at risk. One arrest can be disastrous and prison highly dangerous. Trans prostitutes have a clear interest in decriminalizing their sexual work and in providing it with sanitary services and security, placing themselves in the less popular side of the feminist debate (Connell, 2012:874).

Despite the changes in all the models of relations between men and women, which mark the weakening of the traditional model and the rise of new forms of inter-relations (Berstein, 2007), states maintain highly repressive policies towards the marginal sectors. In fact, a true offensive is currently being waged against sexual work,⁷ which not by chance coincides with a toughening in the laws and actions against immigration. In reality, the extreme position that considers all prostitution as human trafficking, offers perfect arguments to challenge all immigration, considering that its men are responsible for the sexual exploitation of women, who they systematically abuse (casting on all immigrants the suspicion

⁷ Sex workers have developed an organization to strive for their rights, which are not considered when policies are established for the sector. In Spain there are the Putas Indignadas [Indignant Whores], the Asociación de profesionales del sexo Aproxex and Hetaira, among many other associations joined in the *Plataforma pro-derechos en el Trabajo Sexual*. At the international level is the *Global Network of Sex Work Project*. See more information in Holgado Fernández and Rodríguez (2014:2).

that they are part of networks and of crime) and presenting all immigrant women as potential victims of sexual abuse. For some, the route proposed is deportation (to “save them”) or prison. Thus the old prejudices, instead of being discussed and overcome, are revived under new socioeconomic realities, and serve as a smokescreen for policies of control and the exclusion of groups with few resources.

Critical criminology has made clear the risks implied by interpretations that do not recognize women’s capacity for agency. Maqueda Abreu (2014:77) affirms:

Something that seems so simple – and that should appear so obvious to contemporary Western thinking – such as recognizing women’s transgressive capacity, represents a decisive step for advancing the theory that intends to explain their criminality.

But also warns of the difficulty of certain feminist currents of accepting these assumptions:

It is surprising that there are so few attempts by feminism to question the penal selectivity that results from the complicity between the patriarchal structures and the state. Why, have theories of social reaction and feminism not taken mutual advantage of each other given that they are contemporary?... Why such interest in including women in the traditional etiological affirmations of criminology and so little in questioning the stigmatizing and victimizing power of penal law itself? (Maqueda Abreu, 2014:77;105).

Abreu affirms that this difficulty is related with the option to protect and victimize, instead of empower.

The relevant theoretical problem is thus not to understand why certain people act differently from that established by the norm, but how these norms are constructed and maintained, which social functions they comply with and what system of sanctions are implemented around them. As Borrillo proposes

(2001:73) in his study about social intolerance for some sexual practices: “The question is not knowing what is the origin of homosexuality, but what is the origin of homophobia” (Borrillo, 2001). His proposal can be extended to the other cases of social discrimination. How is the social rejection constructed of women who do not follow the traditional model of housewives? Why does it seem so legitimate to treat sexual work as a perversion? What is “natural” about condemning alternative sexualities, or the romantic relations of adult women? Why does it seem legitimate to deprive the civil rights of immigrants?

5. Unilinear Evolutionism and claims

The other line of questioning from the gender perspective originated in Europe and encompasses some of the precursors of the feminist movement, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Flora Tristán. They did not idealize women, but to the contrary, believed that their lack of educational opportunities impeded the development of their moral conditions and proposed overcoming the problem by providing broad access to education. They thus followed the enlightenment model that led to the nineteenth century revolutionary movements.

This position, which we can qualify as more secular and from the left, nevertheless contains the other dilemma of which we spoke at the beginning of the article, the difficulty to include specificities within the generalized model. The interpretative error into which the dominant feminist lines had frequently fallen was to generalize the problems of some social sectors (white, middle and upper class women) and consider them universal, in an essentialist vision of identity. This error of understanding was shared by many revolutionary movements and is based on nineteenth century evolutionism, which spoke of a single historic transformation that leads to progress, a unilinear evolutionist interpretation strongly related to neocolonialism, ethnocentrism and even racism.

In reality, the left, and in particular Marxism, has been quite distrustful towards more marginal sectors of society, as is indicated

in the quotation in the epigraph to this article. This is seen in Marx's rejection (1985:85) of the "lumpen proletariat", the subproletarian who he describes as "decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*... this scum, offal, refuse of all classes" (Marx, 1985). It is evident that his model of social revolution was supported by organized workers and there was no place in it for the sectors considered unproductive within a capitalist model of society. This had political consequences, all nonsalaried workers were left out, which included sectors with clear economic functions such as women and peasants.⁸ In the case of women, it was thought that their revolutionary potential was reduced to those who were salaried workers, which ignored the vast majority involved in domestic work.

Engels argued that given that sexual inequality had its origin in private property and in the separation of women from productive work, the end of this form of social inequality, as of others, would naturally be produced when the proletarian revolution would abolish private property of the means of production and incorporate women en masse to production (Engels, 1971; de Miguel Alvarez, 2005:303).

Thus, addressing gender problems was relegated to a second place "after the triumph of the proletarian revolution", it was not only a consequence of the machismo of the theoreticians (although this was influential) but a consequence of a closed and

⁸ This produced strong disputes within the Sección Latinoamericana de la III Internacional Socialista, which in its Congress of 1929 rejected the proposal of José Carlos Mariátegui, founder of the Partido Comunista Peruano, to consider the peasants and the indigenous peoples as potentially revolutionary [http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partido_Comunista_Peruano].

dogmatic model of interpreting the world. Politically militant women had to overcome this obstacle that caused them to be seen with caution and faulted for being conservative nearly all women - those who were dedicated to domestic tasks. How could they be concerned with these conditions of the marginal groups? In reality, only anarchism was concerned with them, even if it saw them clearly as victims, creating “liberatories of prostitution”. For the anarchists, the problem was not the sexual promiscuity of the sex workers, given that they proposed free love, but the fact that they contaminated the romantic relation by charging for it. Curiously, this criticism was revived in later years by conservative feminists. As Paloma Uría indicated, what most bothered certain feminists who rejected prostitution was not so much the sexual relation as the commercial relation, as if they did not live in a society in which everything was purchased and sold and as if exploitation was only found in the sale of sexual services and not in any other activity or service, which paradoxically implied a sacralization of sex and an extreme reduction of the individual woman and her sexuality (Uría Rios, 2009:133).

The difficulty to establish a dialog with the marginal and stigmatized sectors took place under a moralist cloak (particularly in terms of sexual issues), which was widely extended among leftist movements before 1968. This was in keeping with proposals concerning being respectable. In general, militants, and especially women militants, should be virtuous and demonstrate this. I have indicated in an earlier paper (Juliano, 2011), that during the Franco regime political prisoners separated themselves from the common prisoners, mostly prostitutes, and criticized their promiscuity. The phenomenon was not limited to Spain, According to some testimonies from the Nazi concentration camps for women:

Passionate friendships were as frequent among the political prisoners, as among the asocial or the criminals, but the loving relations of the political prisoners were different from the others, mainly because they did not go beyond a platonic state, while the others often acquired a lesbian

character (that is to say they were affirmed in sexual relations) (Buber-Neumann, 1989:54).

This difference was believed to indicate a moral superiority of the political prisoners. The same testimony maintained that: “The ‘asocial’ prisoners, many of them prostitutes, were the most disparaged at Ravensbruck (the concentration camp closest to Berlin) they were considered human scum” (Buber-Neu, 1989:193). Thus, whether the ideology comes from the Puritan line, or the communist-socialist-anarchist line, the common prisoners and all women considered amoral, remain outside the margin of empathy by gender. The weight of stigmatization has been influential in making it difficult to consider them “comrades”.

The discriminatory ideologies are historically constructed through complex processes of stigmatization, marginalization and social exclusion, which label the people sanctioned as different (and inferior). This is realized through acts of social differentiation “which classify, label and segregate people and mark them to segregate them, using symbolic violence against them” (Munevar, 2014:4). These social options for control are frequently legitimated by presenting them as important for defending norms and the common good. In many cases they are even presented as a defense of the true interests of the people stigmatized, a benefit that they would not be able to recognize. Thus, to legislate to free them from their condition (even if against their will) has been the progressive equivalent of working to save their souls, which has been the more traditional option. This implies the risk of trusting in very conservative institutions such as the judiciary, to define which behaviors are acceptable. Critical criminology has warned that this option is dangerous to feminine autonomy. Bodelón refers to the perverse risks involved in building a feminine individual in the law, whose worse effects are found in the victimization of women, who are degraded to a situation of vulnerable beings who require protection (Bodelón, 1998). Maqueda, in turn, affirms surprise that feminism, despite its liberating vocation, has risked establishing a

complicit relationship with the law at the time of establishing a status of debility/inferiority of women (Maqueda Abreu, 2014:135).

Society does not capriciously or randomly discriminate, it selects certain social sectors and attributes specific conduct to them. Therefore, in a self-fulfilling prophecy society causes real people to act according to these models. The naturalization of behavior, victimization, denial of the recognition of autonomy for marginal sectors, restriction of rights and opportunities to act independently, and tough legal and social sanctions for those who depart from the norm, are other elements of pressure which ensure that social interactions remain within expectations. But all of this is not achieved without conflict, and generates what Audre Lourde calls "*malaise*" and which Pheterson typifies as "the anguish that can provoke in each person the discovery of their own complicity in any system of institutionalized oppression, as is the system of sex-gender" (Pheterson, 2013:25).

But in addition to this moral problem, late nineteenth century scientific socialism confronted another problem related to its theoretical framework and which affected the movements supported by its body of theory. The foundation of the difficulty in understanding different options was unilinear evolutionism, which supposes that there is a single route towards human progress that coincides with the development of Western culture. This model sees different cultural concretions as more delayed or advanced depending on whether they are closer or farther to the European and North American achievements, and still has weight today on the evaluations of the achievements of various paths. Nevertheless, Western culture is very far from being able to present itself as a model to be imitated in issues such as the rights of ethnic minorities (we can think of apartheid) or sexual rights. Much of the African legislation against homosexuality is based on colonial laws of the Victorian epoch (Serena, 2014). Moreover, traditional practices favorable to women, such as matrilineality and matrilocality were strongly combatted in the name of progress. Even in the more developed countries it is difficult to criticize the society of consumption, which is seen as the culmination of

progress. This is evident in the obstacles that ecologists find in having their proposals heard, which involve lowering levels of consumption and implementing reduced growth programs.

The universalizing pretensions of the social sciences is currently criticized, and Gadamer proposes as a criteria of validity of studies “the capacity to hear the other (those who think differently, the stigmatized, the marginalized) with the conviction that they may be right” (Chernilo, 2011:105). But without adopting the new proposals and without questioning the ethnocentric framework, some progressive feminist sectors have developed a historic interpretation according to which patriarchy is part of a universal process that becomes weaker as society modernizes, and completely ignores contributions from anthropology about egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, and the struggles and confrontations that have led women of different cultures to assert their knowledge in different historic circumstances. This is clear when noticing the lack of trust that some sectors of institutional feminism show towards Islamic feminism (Amorós and De Miguel, 2005).

Moreover, the demands of these women are not given priority, and any attempt to incorporate them in the realm of feminism recognized as such - as a consequence of a presumed multiculturalism (denominating cultural relativism in this way) - would basically consist in an attitude that “anything goes” as long as it is integrated within a cultural tradition. This is clearly a misrepresentation of some conservative twentieth century anthropological interpretations (functionalist and structuralist) related to small communities, which they consider stable and consensual. These presumptions are now broadly surpassed and no one defends them. Anthropologists today begin with the opposite presumption: that there is a social dynamism and all cultures have fractures, conflicts and questionings, among which those of gender have in many places been the most important and significant, although not the only ones.

As Ziga has indicated in a recent publication, to suffer only from gender discrimination is a privilege of class, and implies that

one belongs to dominant categories in terms of skin color, ethnic group, physical conditions, etc. This is far from being the condition of most women. Nevertheless, these minority but powerful groups of women tend to present their demands as common to all sectors (Ziga, 2014:11).

Black feminists are those who have carried the weight of dismantling these assumptions within U.S. feminism. The Combahee River Collective criticizes “white feminism’s fixation on only emphasizing gender oppression” while the experience of black women shows that problems such as sexual and racial discrimination, homophobia and segregation by social classes are multifaceted and are interconnected, so that “the syntheses of these oppressions create the conditions of our lives” (Clarke, Frazier et al., 2014). For this reason, since the pioneer works of Angela Davis, their demands have been both antiracist and anticapitalist (Davis, 2012).

Also in this case, the work of “uncountable generations of personal sacrifice, militancy and work” have been ignored and silenced by the preponderance of “reactionary forces, racism and elitism within the feminist movement” (Clarke, Frazier et al., 2014). This reproach is aimed at U.S. feminism, but can be extended to all institutional feminisms, which struggle to find space within the system and not against it.

In addition to the difficulties indicated, feminism also carries other contradictions, as a political theoretical proposal based on a discourse that, at the same time that it proposes the abolition of gender relations, or even gender, denies the possibility of a feminist identity embodied in “ambiguous” bodies (Fernández, 2009:89). This triggered the refusal by radical feminism (for example Jainice Raymon) to accept the possibility that men or trans people can be feminists, because they believe that the body determines experiences and thus behavior, which Linda Nicholson has denominated as biological fundamentalism.

It is understandable that an important part of the feminist movement is reticent to recognize the legitimacy of the demands of the more stigmatized sectors based on the history of the feminist

movement. But although it is an understandable strategy, this does not mean that it is suitable, in reality it is wrong and dangerous, to the degree that it extends, and even the sectors of women who were normalized later, and after many disputes within feminism can fall into the temptation to reproduce the structure of power, by silencing their more marginal members.⁹

A large social movement such as feminism cannot and should not leave aside its weaker sectors, or see them as victims needing charity as do official and religious institutions. Feminism has the theoretical tools necessary, such as standpoint theory promoted by Sandra Harding, which proposed that women, by belonging to an disfavored group, can provide a more enriched look. There is also the post-modern skepticism of Flax, who does not accept the universal or universalizing affirmations and Donna Haraway who focuses on situated and partial knowledge (Biglia, 2009). It can also turn to the theories of chaos or complex thinking of Edgar Morin (Sendón de León, 2002).

This process requires using the resources necessary to avoid joining the bandwagon of prejudice (Espejo, 2009) and involves understanding the strategies of the different sectors (and the limits of their real possibilities), we should also avoid considering those who occupy the most stigmatized positions (prisoners, sex workers) to be incapable of choosing for themselves or take for granted the ill will of sectors (nuns, traditional women, Muslims) who have assumed living options that are different from our own (Guillebaud, 1998). The “presumption of innocence” that the law establishes for

⁹ Ziga enumerates some intentions, within the feminist movement to silence the marginal women: “the whites who did not want to let Sojourner Truth speak in 1851.... The normalized lesbians who intended to take the microphone from Sylvia Rivera (a transsexual) on 28 June 1973, the antipornography [movement] that sought to boycott the encounter that would founded prosex feminism, the abolitionists who ordered the silencing of the prostitute”. But also warns that this narrow vision was shared by other questioning movements, such as the gays who ignored trans people (Ziga, 2014:13-55). Not in all cases does this involve “official” feminism, in some cases it involves giving a good image to the minority sectors within the women’s movement, silencing the voices that could be more disturbing.

criminal suspects should also be applied to our sisters (Juliano, 2011).

As black feminists indicate, the elimination of racism within the movement of white women is by definition work they must do themselves, but to demand it is the task of the silenced sectors. The more discrimination suffered by a group, the more their demands embrace different fields and collectives. They say “If as black women we are free, this means that any other person is free, given that our freedom requires the suppression of the totality of the oppressive system”. Here resides much of the interest in analyzing their demands and those of other groups, like transsexuals or prostitutes, whose problems, far from having an interest limited to their group of belonging, are objectively situated in strategic positions to demand social changes that affect all women and society in general. For this reason it is necessary “to strip away from feminism the regulatory character, ethically and politically speaking, to which it appears hostage” (Fernández, 2009:101).

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