Third World Practices, First World Funding and The Women Between: A Case Study In Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article is an examination of the ways four levels of knowledge create misunderstandings and difficulties in a Brazilian context. A Brazilian NGO, a feminist Center for Gender Studies in Campinas and the working class "subjects" of these groups combine, as a result of a problematic challenge from European funding agencies, to teach each other new ways of thinking about theories of gender, women's work, and the positive effects of research in the community.

RÉSUMÉ

Une analyse de la facon dont quatre niveaux de connaissance créent des malentendus et des difficultés dans un contexte brésilien. Face à un défi problématique posé par les agences de subventions européennes, un NGO brésilien, un centre féministe pour les "Gender Studies" à Campinas et les participantes issues de la classe ouvrière de ces groupes , travaillent ensemble pour se familiariser avec les nouveaux modes de pensées concernant les théories ayant trait au "gender", le travail des femmes, et les effets positifs de la recherche sur la communauté.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes and analyzes my experience in a successful project in a Brazilian "community."[1] It is a story of crisscrossing tensions that relate to "differences" between "Third World" practices and "First World" funding requirements, to the specific and sometimes competitive knowledges produced by academics and by nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), and to divergent positionings in the slippery terrain of contemporary feminism. As a South American feminist anthropologist concerned about possible links between academic and community practices, I have found this project one that raises provocative and troubling questions. It also points to possible ways of negotiating among differently located groups, experiences, and theories. Finally it suggests that the act of research in the community can make positive changes in that context as well as in the way feminists practise research.

HOW THE STORY BEGAN

The Center for Gender Studies in which I work is an academic research center comprising teachers and researchers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. In 1993,

when ADITEPP[2], a Brazilian NGO, first contacted us, the Center's main links with the non-academic community were set up through lectures and published material that were intended to stimulate social analysis in a gender perspective. The NGO's director, a university trained social worker (as was half of the staff, the rest being working- class leaders) was seeking "academic" advice on gender issues.

ADITEPP, established in Curitiba, the capital city of the state of Parana in the south of Brazil, has been associated for a long time with work related to education. For more than twenty years the NGO has organized courses, seminars, and meetings for educators and for leaders of social movements. It has also worked with low income families that live in the outskirts of Curitiba and in rural communities near the city. The NGO's work is developed through groups organized around different goals such as teaching adults to read and write, as well as other skills, but their primary aim is to stimulate "consciousness raising" among working-class people in order to help them feel and act as "subjects." The organization's staff defines its task as "a pedagogy for change."[3]

The NGO's specific concern for "women's condition" arose long before our first meeting. Although the organization did not define itself as "women oriented," its staff was seriously interested in women. Comprising more than half of their group's population, women were a strong presence in the NGO's activities. The organization chose not to present itself as "feminist" nor did the staff members identify as feminists.[4] They were, however, preoccupied with women's

rights, as well as with the human rights of other oppressed groups, and particularly worried about the specific effects of "patriarchal subordination." Thus, along with its broader programs, the NGO had also designed a specific Women's Program. This organized women's groups (sewing, arts and crafts, and communal cooking groups), produced reading material focusing on women's conditions to be used by these groups, and organized annual Women's Meetings with the assistance of a Brazilian feminist activist group.[5] Both the women's groups and the women's meetings operated as "consciousness raising" feminist groups. It was concern about the Women's Program that led the NGO to contact our Center for Gender Studies.

The NGO is supported by a number of funding agencies. After a single visit to a cooking group organized by the NGO, advisers from three European agencies decided that the Women's Program was reinforcing "traditional women's roles."[6] One of the problems they "detected" was that the staff did not have a clear idea about gender as a concept. They therefore suggested that the NGO should pay attention to gender issues. Furthermore, they advised the organization to look for experts in gender issues so as to elaborate a gender policy, not restricted to the Women's Program but extended to all the NGO's activities. Listening to this, the NGO's staff was quite worried, as they felt they had worked as seriously as they could to improve "women's conditions."

I do consider myself a feminist and I feel an enormous respect for community-based work. Thus, listening to the NGO's story, my

sympathy with its staff's anxieties was almost immediate. Besides, it was not necessary to be particularly critical about "First World" advice to perceive how insufficient a single visit to a group might be in order to formulate a statement such as the advisers'.

COMPETITIVE KNOWLEDGES

Once our Center decided to work with the NGO, our team, composed of three anthropologists and a historian, travelled to Curitiba to interview the organization's staff, read the material produced by the organization, and design a work project. During this process my initial disagreement with the unknown advisers disappeared and reappeared at different moments, and sometimes, in quite conflicting ways.

Following our first visit, we felt that the NGO's staff was committed to women but, did not, as the advisers had stated, have a clear idea of gender as a concept. We were particularly concerned, however, by the perspective informing most of their reading material. In it, they assumed that all women shared a common identity, and they presented a simplistic conception of patriarchy which turned every situation involving women into expressions of subordination, discrimination, and effects of "machismo." This viewpoint also appeared in the audiovisual material used in the groups, and in the Women's Meetings that focused almost exclusively on husband-and-wife relationships.

The NGO had requested our assistance in order to analyze their own knowledge about gender among the low income population; in their words, they wanted to work within an "academic system." Therefore, our team organized a project in successive phases.

First we offered the NGO's staff some workshops in which we presented gender theories. We discussed and critiqued theories that relate women's oppression to an almost transhistorical patriarchy. We presented theories that considered gender relations as power relations and seriously inquired how, not why, women are oppressed in specific contexts. We discussed theories that deconstruct women's identity, highlighting the importance of understanding gender in the interrelation of a myriad of other hierarchies, and we also debated the broader political relations in which gender theories have been constructed. During the debates we encouraged the NGO's staff to relate these perspectives to the work they had done, and particularly, to their ideas about gender among the working class, which we felt had stereotyped their target groups.

The final part of these workshops aimed to introduce the premise of indepth interviews as an addition to the participant observation they typically practised. The NGO staff was used to detecting concrete interests and needs among working class people. They organized their groups around those interests, guaranteeing people's participation in them and opening a space for their own "pedagogic practice." We tried to show how rich in-depth interviews could be in this perspective. The NGO's task was to carry out this type of participant observation for a few months. We hoped that the tools offered during the workshops would help them think about how gender operated among the low income people with whom they worked.

During this part of the experience, the

most acute tension arose when our team refused to incorporate the community-based NGO staff in the workshops. We felt that we had almost no chance of developing a common language with that part of the staff in such a short time. We decided to start working with the university-trained members, thinking that these, in turn, might be able to transmit the new information to the rest of the staff. Part of the university-trained staff completely agreed with us but the other part, including their director, openly disagreed, feeling we were imposing a division among academics and community-based activists that was against their organization's philosophy. I shall return to this conflict below.

The second phase of our work started when we all met again to discuss the results of the organization's "participant observation through a gendered lens." The tension between the NGO's staff and our team reappeared. We, the "academic experts," felt disappointed. We thought that instead of looking clearly at actual differences among women in the groups, the staff continued verbalizing stereotypes about "working class women," "working class men," and "working class culture." The university-trained staff who had taken part in the previous workshops formulated clear ideas about gender in general but they were unable to relate them to the world of their target groups.

When our team pointed out this "difficulty," the NGO's answer was that the "fault" was all ours, since the community-based leaders--the ones who worked intensely in the groups and knew more about "working class culture"--had been left out of the workshops. The university-trained staff also felt that the new "knowledge" on gender was

highly complex and difficult to transmit in the short time they had to "study." After this clash we kept on with the already planned agenda, and the NGO's staff--including the community-based leaders--did fieldwork together with us. We jointly visited each of the urban and rural women's groups and on two occasions we also interviewed some of its members.[7] This phase ended with an intense workshop in which the whole NGO's staff discussed with us what we had all "seen."

The fieldwork allowed us academics to better understand why the NGO's staff had focused on domesticity and motherhood. Except for a widow, all the women we met were married, absolutely all were mothers, and although some had previous experiences of paid work, their jobs had been basically as domestic servants. Men, families, and neighbours were highly suspicious of the non-domestic activities women might have. For us, this sufficiently explained why the NGO's reading material focused so intensely on the domestic aspect of women's lives, and the type of activities organized by the women's groups. In fact, we felt that both the themes chosen for their reading material and the activities undertaken by the women's groups showed how sensitive the NGO's practices were. These activities were attractive to low income women precisely because they offered them concrete benefits within their "traditional roles." In fact the traditional aspects of these activities stimulated participation, as they did not shock families or neighbours.

The NGO's staff believed their preexisting approach was good strategically; they seemed, however, to believe that "real change" would only be effected either when

women started working "outside" the home and/or showed a spectacular change of values, particularly those related to sexuality. The NGO's most frequent question, and complaint, was: why do people refuse to change? Thus, the comments of the European evaluators affected them seriously because, if they were reinforcing traditional women's "roles," they would never stimulate change.

Discussing our fieldwork observations together, we found that our team and the NGO's staff had quite different perceptions of what had happened in the visited groups. We academics felt that women had verbalized significant differences within and among the groups, and that they had pointed to significant changes. We also felt that the NGO staff's ideas about "men" and "women" in "working-class culture" were so deeply ingrained that listening to the diverse and sometimes contradictory voices in the groups was indeed difficult for them. Because we thought that many of their generalizations--"men," "women," "working class culture," "society"-- had been contested by our joint "participant observation," we concentrated our efforts on showing that to them. From our point of view, differences existed in the groups' composition, in the network of relationships established by members, and in those people's values. The groups were rural and urban, and composed of persons with different origins and trajectories. Some groups included women of different generations. Some consisted of women related by kinship bonds, others not.

The NGO's perspective on "women's condition," and "the identity of the working class woman" had consequences for how they managed their activities. For instance, rural and urban women were exposed and urged to react to an audiovisual production that showed how a woman was recurrently "exploited" by her husband until she finally manages to get rid of him.[8] When rural women did not acknowledge the specific situations as "abusive," their opinions were simply dismissed. Instead of being "heard," these women were "taught" how wrong they were for ignoring women's common oppression in the "machista" society. When the NGO's staff pointed out the unequal and conflictual relations between husbands and wives, the women from both urban and rural groups immediately pointed to inequalities in some relationships between women, giving examples of relationships among mothers and daughters-in-law and among female commercial partners. Once more they were dismissed as if the only unequal distribution of power in gender relations should be located in intersexual relationships.

Our team felt that the NGO staff's difficulty in dealing with differences had consequences for their perception of how power operates and how change is produced. The organization had a clear idea of power relations in the household, between husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, sisters and brothers, but no analysis of how these relationships could be perceived in a gender perspective that pays attention to power interactions in a broader context. Lacking such an analysis, they had difficulty perceiving other changes. We argued that changes have occurred when differences that seemed to be fixed are displaced, for example, in redefinitions of "masculine" and "feminine" spaces in relationships that are not related to

conjugality or to family relationships. The fieldwork material offered several cases of such changes, as in this example: when one of the cooking groups exhausted itself, some of the women involved decided to continue their meetings around some activity that would give them an income. They chose to organize a cooperative to bake bread. Since their families and neighbours did not seriously consider those meetings as a money-making activity, they did not reject the plan. They laughed a little but felt it would do no harm since the women stayed in the neighbourhood, surrounded by their families. By the time the cooperative turned into a successful enterprise, selling its bread in relatively distant supermarkets, some men started to give concrete support to the women, even in housework.

From our perspective, the most interesting aspect of this example was that, while apparently playing the role of "traditional" housewives, the women managed to give new meanings to "traditional roles," opening up new spaces for themselves. They learned how to organize themselves in groups and to establish themselves as small entrepreneurs in a world hostile to women who work outside the domestic space. In fact, much of the material the women presented in the groups pointed to changes in the relationships of daily life. For instance, a low income black woman who works in one of the communal bakeries entered a bank with a cheque and was stopped by the manager and bank security, who suspected the cheque was stolen. This woman proved the cheque was "clean" and was a result of her activities. But she refused to leave the bank until the manager formally apologized. Nowadays, people at the bank are used to her and her colleagues' administration of their resources.

Interestingly enough, when we pointed to the "differences" we perceived and to what we would consider as "change" in the fieldwork material, the community-based leaders immediately offered plenty of examples. Only after that did the university-trained staff slowly start to relate their target groups to the "theoretical" aspects of gender we had debated with them. By the end of those exhaustive workshops we felt, for the first time, that we were developing some shared references for observation and a certain common language. At this point, it was clear that we should have incorporated the community-based leaders from the first moment.

After all these discussions, the NGO staff considered that, in fact, the foreign evaluators' opinion of the women's program as possibly reinforcing "traditional" women's "roles" was not justified. We had, in fact, given them theoretical elements to support their work. In a following meeting with the funding agencies' delegates, the NGO staff was extremely successful in showing how their work stimulated "changes" in gender relations. The new reading material they produced from a gender perspective was good; they had also acquired an "internationally convincing" rhetoric. The project therefore could be considered successful. Yet, the whole experience left me quite uneasy.

ETHNOCENTRISMS, FEMINISMS AND KNOWLEDGES

It would be possible to end this story

complaining about how "ethnocentric" the comments of the "First World" advisers had been, regardless of whether they were working from a liberal or a Marxist viewpoint.[9] Whatever perspectives the advisers held on "gender development," the small amount of information on which they based their views certainly overlooked the specific "Third World" views and experience involved. Thus, we could say that preestablished ideas of "First World" feminism, associated with the concrete power of funding, disturbed "Third World" practices. But, the whole project pointed to a much more complex reality in which "ethnocentrism" and "imperialist, universalizing feminism" are not so easily and immediately linked to "First" and "Third World" voices.[10]

In a certain way, the Brazilian NGO staff and the feminist activity group they worked with could also be labelled as "ethnocentric." By dismissing low income rural women's experiences, they intended to "teach" them how it is"to be a woman" and to "be discriminated against as such." Yet both organizations thought they acted on behalf of women, trying to stress their identities in order to "liberate" them. The universalization of women's experiences ignoring "differences" came, in this case, from local activists. They were certainly using the concepts and practices of "international feminism," but they were Brazilian activists who have done long lasting work with Brazilian working class women.

On the other hand, our rejection of the participation of community-based leaders in our workshops had also been ethnocentric. While the NGO's philosophy did not "privilege" academic knowledge, we used our already marked privileged position in this project to segregate as "inferior" a different knowledge. This was in spite of the fact that we, the academics, demanded that the NGO and their advisers acknowledge and respect differences. But in the unusual situation of being faced with "others" who were not traditional research subjects, we had our own difficulties respecting their special knowledge.

Acknowledging these "ethnocentrisms" and the concrete power relations they are embedded in was an extremely rich aspect of the project. Taking into account the already existing practices that did attend to views and experiences of "others" made the project successful.

The NGO may have placed too much stress on a limited notion of women's identity, but their practices did also acknowledge gender differences. This was obvious in the way they detected the diverse interests and needs of the women and in their effectiveness in helping the women obtain their objectives in differentiated ways. Certainly, some of their practices contradicted others, something that was particularly evident in their work with the feminist activist organization. Yet the NGO did work at paying attention to differences, and used our workshops to refine and deepen its theory.

On the other hand, we had only been able to offer the NGO the necessary tools to defend those aspects of their practice against the international funding agencies because we were acquainted with First World gender theory. We knew that contemporary First World theories are marked by Third World critical perspectives and these, in turn, helped us to assume a critical perspective on our own

work. In my experience, the most remarkable result of the project was precisely how it stimulated our critical thinking on what positive roles we could play as Third World feminist academics and how to negotiate these roles.

ENDNOTES

1.   Most of the ideas I discuss in this paper are the result of the serious team work undertaken with Dr. Suely Kofes, Dr. Mariza Corrêa and Carla Bassanezi, all of them researchers at the Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-PAGU, UNICAMP.

2.   ADITEPP - Associação Difusora de Treinamentos e Projetos Pedagógicos, Governador Wesphalen 1373, Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil

3.   The NGO's target groups are comprised of low-income families, mostly homeowners in the poor outskirts of Curitiba or small landowners in rural areas of extremely poor land. Among these people, mostly migrants from other states, urban men usually work in the service sector whereas women only work in domestic work, either at home, or outside as domestic servants. In the rural communities women and men usually work together on their lands.

4.   The staff hesitated before the word "feminist." They said that working

class people had a particularly negative perception of that "label", as they identified it with women who were either masculinized, or excessively free in sexual terms, or too supportive of women.

5.   Examples of these reading materials are the booklets: Mulher Hoje (1989); So podia ser mulher (1991). The 1993 Women's Meeting has been recorded and published in the booklet: Memória do Encontro de Mulheres Quem somos nós? (1993).

6.   The agencies involved were CEDAL (France), SAWA (Sweden), and CEDAC (Brazil).

7.   We did participant observation at: Prismapan, an urban women's group that bakes bread, is composed of married women of diverse ages (from 20 to 60 years old), some of whom are related by kinship bonds; an urban Sewing Group; a rural women's group, Comunidade Barra do Jacaré, that intends to develop a communal garden worked by young married women aged 20 to 30 years old; a rural women's group, Comunidade dos Borges, made up of women of different generations (aged 20 to 60 years), some of whom are related by kinship bonds and who are still discussing what they want to do together; an urban group that bakes bread, Arte e Manha, whose members are married women of the same

generation, and intensely related by bonds of friendship and neighbourhood. We also took part in a meeting of leaders of the <u>Communal Purchase of Food Movement</u> who were trying to organize groups to produce food. Four men and one women were interviewed during this visit. In a previous visit, we interviewed three women and one man, thus interviewing 9 persons. The interviews were loose but, in general terms, intended to gather information related to the subjects' trajectories, migrations, work history, personal history, family relations, other relations, and future expectations.

8.   In this video, <u>Um casal feliz</u>, there is a scene in which the husband enters the home in the evening and waits for his supper to be served. Rural women found that this was quite reasonable, since women work less time on the land precisely so that they are able to take care of the meals. They pointed out that in their sexual division of labour, men didn't help them with the housework on Sundays because the men took care of the stables while the women cleaned and cooked.

9.   In fact, despite their different underpinnings, both the liberal or the Marxist "gender in development" approach could give such a warning. Liberals believe that "sexual inequality" can largely be corrected if women, confined to the domestic

sphere, are integrated into the public sphere as the equals of men. The (liberal) Women in Development School thus <u>exports</u> ideas and strategies so as to incorporate women into the public sphere, specifically the expanding market economy. The objective of this school is to spread the benefits of modernization, the Western development model in particular, to women. They hope to accomplish this by the more complete integration of women into the formal sectors of Third World economies. Ascribing sexual inequality largely to traditional values and male ignorance, WID thinkers believe that this can be corrected through legislative reforms, attitudinal changes and interventionist projects designed to provide basic needs and income-generating work for poor Third World women. Marxists pay attention to a complexity in the integration of women into the process of capitalist development. They are emphatic that not all men benefit from technical and other aspects of change. From this perspective, income-generation projects for women that engage in labour in the home for the production of commodities, when women continue being labelled as "housewives" and their activities as "domestic production," might result in concrete disadvantages, such as not obtaining fair wages and other basic labour rights. Such projects might intensify rather than alleviate the exploitation of women

(Bandarage,1984, p.p. 496-97).

10. I am relying on "ethnocentrism" as defined by Barrett and McIntosh (1985), as neglecting other cultures' views and experiences. I am quite aware of the feminist discussion on ethnocentrism and racism. Authors like Bhavanani and Coulson (1986) suggest that the central problem for socialist-feminist theory is racism, of which ethnocentrism might be a consequence. Bhavanani and Coulson argue that the term "ethnocentrism" ignores the role of the state and international capital in creating and perpetuating inequalities between black people and white people. The word and the concept seem to imply that the problem is one of cultural bias, supported by ignorance. It then would follow that, if more sociological information was available, the problem could be overcome. Yet I preferred the term "ethnocentrism" because the information I have about the advisers, the agencies they were representing, and their concrete practices with the NGO, would not allow me to consider their comments as "racist."

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