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College of Arts and Sciences
Bryant University**

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Revisiting Feminism: Who's Afraid of the F Word?

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Thursday, October 16

3:30pm

Stepan Grand Hall, Bello Center

Bryant University

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Revisiting Feminism: Who's Afraid of the F Word?

Delia D. Aguilar

While preparing for today I discovered that I had already used the “F” word in a panel presentation at Sarah Lawrence College almost 15 years ago. This was something I had completely forgotten. But that time I was questioning feminism itself: what’s wrong with the “F” word? I could well have asked, as I’m doing today, who’s afraid of feminism? It’s a question, by the way, I’m asking of you. I’m hoping that you will tell me later on. When I wrote that piece in 1994 a resident fellow of the American Enterprise Institute had just addressed exactly that issue. That writer asserted that while three-fourths of U.S. women claimed they “support efforts to strengthen women’s rights,” only one-third accepted the label “feminist.”

I should disclose that it took me a while to accept for myself the “feminist” label. It didn’t have to do with fear of the images some students associate with feminism: lesbians, hairy legs and armpits, Birkenstocks, etc.—images of unattractive women, in short. Let me explain my own reasons, and in the process revisit feminism with you by recounting my involvement in what was then called “women’s liberation.” Parts of my narrative may sound arcane and weird to the youth among you, but it’s always useful to know a bit of history, so please bear with me.

My political development began in work here against the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. The energies of progressive Filipinos in the US then were harnessed in support of the national liberation struggle taking place in our homeland. That was a time of great social ferment in this country. The civil rights struggle and the war in Vietnam had spawned a massive social movement that included women, gays, people of color, students, religious, labor, and just plain everyday people. We Filipinos who stood against Marcos and against foreign intervention were simply taking our place alongside many other national liberation movements that included Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Korea, and so on. It was a very exciting moment in history, and it was an especially important time for students who, because of the clamor outside the academy, were impelled to raise necessary questions about the nature of their society, big questions that today’s conservative climate have made impertinent, if not totally absurd. The women’s movement, too—in fact, everybody who considered themselves forward-thinking-- asked these big questions then.

But I digress a little. What being anti-imperialist meant in practice was that our campaign as progressive Filipinos was to educate the US public to the fact that it was people’s tax dollars that enabled the abuses of the Marcos regime. What support work also meant was that we followed the political line drawn by the resistance movement in the Philippines. With respect to what was then referred to as “women’s issues,” the belief was that participation in the movement itself already implied a break from traditional sanctions placed on women and that national liberation would ultimately spell gender parity. In short, the assumption was that there was no need to elaborate on women’s subordination. Whether or not to assert gender relations as one platform was a dilemma we shared with Blacks, Latinas, and other Asian American women for whom bringing up gender with male friends in our organizations carried the risk of being called divisive, individualist, or worse, “bourgeois.”

Before long I saw the limitations of the assumption that women’s equality would necessarily follow national liberation. I went back and forth in dialogue with friends in the Philippines, arguing for specific attention to women’s issues. That was a very frustrating experience because these folks were quite doctrinaire. I did not find US feminism particularly appealing either, in spite of my participation in

women's discussion groups and my teaching women's studies. I did find comfort in the slogan, "triple jeopardy" –i.e., sexism, racism, capitalism--put forward by women of color, to distinguish our situation from that of white, middle-class professional women who were at the forefront of the women's movement. And I was relieved when Black women and other outspoken women of color began to voice their objections to what is now understood as universalizing tendencies in feminism, since they were expressing my reservations.

I remember giving a talk to women's studies faculty at my university about how white middle-class feminists tended to see their experience as universal. To advertise the lecture, the women's studies Director gave it a catchy heading: "Why Third World Women Reject Bourgeois Feminism." Somehow, at this meeting my complaint-- that white women's experience was presented as universal-- fell flat. I made an argument for class and nation—now familiar themes in cultural studies—citing the case of the Philippines, a former US colony whose political economy could hardly be labeled sovereign. I explained that a sizable portion of the population, 70%, fell below the government-defined poverty line and that any reckoning of women's condition would have to take this fact into account. Then I described the dilemmas facing women as workers on the assembly line, or as migrant workers, hospitality girls, and mail-order brides. As the responses indicated, the information I was presenting seemed to fall outside the purview of the kind of feminism existing at the time, for although there was sympathy for the poor, my colleagues wondered, "Are class and nation feminist issues?"

Back in the Philippines, changes were taking place rapidly. From the impassioned cross-class outcry that met the assassination of former Senator Benigno Aquino emerged a variety of "cause-oriented" organizations. It was this massive mobilization that allowed women already active in the resistance movement, who had undergone incarceration and torture, to articulate their specific needs not just as revolutionaries but as women, and to appropriate for themselves the term "feminist." This was the move that made it possible for me to call myself a feminist.

Now let me return to that plenary panel in Sarah Lawrence in 1994. By that time, social movements had dissipated if not disappeared completely, and feminism had gotten pretty much confined to women's studies enclaves in the academy. I am not sure that I was very conscious of that fact then, even though I distinctly recall that it was around 1982 when feminists around me began turning to each other wondering, where's the women's movement? The conference theme at Sarah Lawrence was "The Feminist Moment/um" which, in hindsight, perhaps implied doubt: has feminism lost its momentum? Is the feminist moment gone? Sponsored by organizations of students of color, the conference was initiated by two white women students who were disturbed by what they saw as the continuing exclusiveness of feminism in the United States. In my lecture, I underscored the changes that had taken place in political thinking that inevitably exerted an impact on that "feminist moment." The collapse of the Soviet Union led progressives to doubt the viability of a humanely instituted socialist project. These doubts became reflected on the philosophical level where intellectuals began to be disdainful of the use of explanatory frameworks with a wide compass, fearing that these might invoke totalizing thinking, which in turn was/is believed to lead to totalitarian regimes. I argued that these revisions in progressive thinking had to be situated in the context of changes that had been transpiring since the beginning of the Reagan era. Reaganism and the conservative tide it brought along had left its mark on people's outlook.

I then sketched out some implications of this new thinking and how it affected feminist circles at the time. One welcome change was that the emphasis on "difference" restrained white feminists from using the totalizing plural "we," and instead alerted them to pay attention to other social relations like class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. But I pointed to how this "politics of difference" approach –

these days known as “intersectionality” in women’s studies—failed to take into account asymmetries of power because of its repudiation of an overarching theory or metanarrative. That is, in its zeal to acknowledge the existence of a plurality of differences—presumably to celebrate these in the age of multiculturalism—the relations of power that produced those differences are obscured or ignored. So, for example, class—which is the result of power relations and often irresolvable conflicts between the haves and the have-nots—becomes interpreted as a matter of lifestyle and is frequently interchanged with “classism,” presumably meaning class bias. So, while on the surface, there is a celebration of difference (and the list of differences can be very lengthy), we never really get to understand how the differences came to exist. This fragmentary thinking is an immediate consequence of not having a larger context, an overarching frame, that would try to make sense of component parts. Viewed from this angle, attempts to resolve racial, class, and other divisions within feminism by specifying and clarifying differences, are closely linked to neoconservative trends that impel the move away from analytical instruments attempting to describe and explain larger social systems.

If I were to crudely distinguish early second-wave feminism from that of the early nineties, I would say the following. While second-wave feminism may have been blemished by race and class biases in white women’s fervor to achieve gender unity, feminism existed at a historical moment (late 60s to the mid-70s) of social ferment and activism. This ferment was characterized by an openness to calling social systems by their names—e.g., capitalism or socialism—and to use analyses of macrostructures to explain social phenomena. To cite an example, when we discussed the oppression of women in the domestic realm, we looked at the gendered division of labor and tried to show how this mirrored the inequities in the labor market of capitalism, a profit-based society of private ownership. We envisioned how these disparities might be eliminated or minimized in a society with the goal of fulfilling people’s needs. Many of these explanations, one must admit, were economic and simplistic. Nonetheless, the temper of the times encouraged the creation of visions of alternate societies that entailed, if not outright revolution, at least some sort of thoroughgoing social transformation. In contrast, the nineties’ call for “recognizing differences” also came with a radical switch in emphasis, what British feminist Michele Barrett referred to as a move from “things to words.” By this she meant a downplaying of the significance of material life and the elevation of discourse or culture. That, in sum, was what I saw was wrong with the “F” word.

How about today? First of all, to speak of “women’s liberation” is definitely passé. Is this because women’s equality has been achieved, at least in the United States? Let’s take a look at campuses. In 1972 males comprised 56% of overall college enrolment. By the year 2004 this figure had gone down to 43%, a phenomenon that rang alarm bells in some quarters. Closer examination, however, revealed that male enrollment hadn’t declined; that of females simply soared. Males don’t enroll because with high-school diplomas they can make a living doing manual labor (for example, in construction) and they join the army in larger numbers than females. But a definite plus for females has been demonstrated in a study, released this past August, of math scores of seven million students in ten states showing that girls are now on par with boys.

More recently another indicator of gender equality, this time not entirely uplifting, has been attained—equality in unemployment. Since the 2001 recession women have lost jobs and left the workplace at the same rate as men, as victims of the same problems: outsourcing, downsizing, layoffs, wage stagnation. But for women a special rationale is offered, that of the “opt-out revolution.” For several years now the media has been printing stories about women in mid-level professional positions “opting out” in order to devote themselves to the truly more meaningful activity of rearing children. In truth, women continue to face the task of balancing work and family today just as they did at the advent of second-wave feminism. In light of this situation, it is hardly surprising that the World Economic Forum that conducts

an annual study of the world's nations based on gender equality rated the United States as no. 31 in 2007, a fall from 23rd in 2006. The four areas of ranking: salaries, access to education, political representation, and health. What with today's economic collapse? Dare any of us predict what's in store for women—and men?

If this is the condition of women in the United States, one can just imagine what it's like for those in nations of the South for whom, in this era of capitalist globalization, migration to the global North is the only way to survive. Let me use the Philippines as an example because, strangely enough, it ranked no.6 in the study I just mentioned. This is obviously due to the fact that Filipino women—and women from developing countries in general—are now in the workforce in such large numbers that they can be rightly referred to as the engine that propels globalization.

Given this, how has feminism treated the diaspora of Third World women? Let's glance at the Philippine case. Continued indebtedness to the IMF/WB and faithful compliance with structural adjustment programs have forced presidents beginning with the dictator Marcos, who launched the practice of exporting "warm bodies"—sending masses of unemployed abroad to ease tensions at home. Remittances of Overseas Filipino Workers constitute the largest dollar earner (\$14 billion in 2007), making the export of people a permanent fixture of the socioeconomic landscape. Up to 12% of the population of 90 million is deployed overseas, 75% of whom are women who mostly get employed as domestics or maids. President Arroyo recommended skill-training to transform and package these women into even more marketable "supermaids."

It appears that the dispersal of women of color to practically all corners of the globe and their insertion, as maids, into the private homes of well-heeled women does not bother Western feminists too greatly. What is curious is that second-wave feminists once situated women's oppression at the heart of the family—in the household gender division of labor, to be exact. Insisting that the household work that women perform is real labor, not an act of love. They introduced household and family relations as the most important arena of gender conflict, demystifying its presumed sanctity. Now that the "chore wars" have come to an end (men won), and menial duties turned over to Third World domestic workers, feminist researchers have taken a different tack. To illustrate, the paid labor of domestic workers is now called "caregiving," (reversing the stance on household work as real labor), and it is portrayed as but a link in the "global care chain" in which the US female in the mistress/domestic relationship is similarly doing "carework"—i.e., helping create a caring climate in the corporation in which she is employed. Is this what "sisterhood" has come to when women of privilege come face to face right in their own homes with subjects so profoundly situated below them in terms of class, race and nationality? Needless to say, studies today continue the trend begun in the 90s; macrostructures are obscured or at best given slight mention, with heavy emphasis on the individual lives of migrant workers and how their daily strategies for survival magnificently translate into matters of agency and empowerment because, you see, they are not mere victims. With the "big picture"—that is to say, relations of power between nations in the international arena—erased, what is left is a trivializing of the experiences, many of these not only degrading but horrible, of women domestic workers from the global South. Similar conceptual tools are being applied to sex work, previously known by the name of prostitution, which is now presented in terms of "desire" or "emotional labor."

If this is not a form (or feat) of feminist mystification, I don't know what is. And how is it achieved? By ignoring the economic backdrop to women's individual stories, feminist scholars have abdicated the responsibility of demonstrating how globalized capitalism works for large numbers of women. But they do not because, and tell me if I'm wrong, the global "free market" (now suffering a catastrophic meltdown), is assumed as normal, natural and, presumably, eternal. The very unstable times we're in,

however, may be forcing us to think otherwise. As we look around us and witness what's happening—home foreclosures, mass layoffs, lengthening food lines, an endless war, etc.—it might be useful to once again ask that old political economy question, *qui bono*? Who benefits? The answer may turn out to be equally instructive for feminism.

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