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**TOWARD A RECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER:
A CRITIQUE OF FEMINISM**

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Toward a Reconstruction of Gender:

A Critique of Feminism

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Introduction

Over the last fifty years, feminist scholars have sought to refute the claim that sexual inequality is inevitable. In this endeavor, they have sought to prove that sexual inequality is neither culturally nor historically universal; and therefore male dominance neither socially nor biologically based. Rejection of the cultural and historical universality of sexual inequality is rejection of it as a "natural" and therefore immutable fact of life. Rejection of the latter has been, for women, rejection of their second-class citizenship and sexual oppression. Feminist scholarship has been political as well as academic.

Implicitly or explicitly, feminism asserts that our society has a problem in the form of gender hierarchies, and that our problem cries out for a solution. In whatever framework we individually cast our understandings of male-female inequalities, we are united in our identification of the problematic. Feminists inside and outside the academy share a commitment to two tasks : spreading consciousness of the existence of gender hierarchy, and collective action aimed at dismantling it. But before a structure of inequality can be dismantled, we must first know the base on which it rests. Thus our common search for origins is implicitly a search for a strategy with a politicized goal. (Reiter 1977 : 5).

In their rejection of the universality of sexual inequality, feminist scholars have searched through history and across cultures for proof of sexual equality. That search uncovered for many the real relations of society - the dominance of women. While women were led to believe that men were everywhere and at all times "dominant" and that this was a necessary outcome of Nature, women were the real powerbrokers in society, the real decision-

makers in the household, the real economic providers and the biologically superior of the two. With this discovery feminist scholars asked the question : why were women told that they were inferior when in fact they were superior ? Why and how did the so called universality of sexual inequality arise ? Feminists came to the conclusion that sexual inequality was not a fact but an ideology, more precisely, a myth erected by men to hide from women the real biological, political and economic relations of society. This false ideology of universal male dominance was used by men to ensure their control over what was not rightfully theirs. If women were equipped with the real knowledge of society they would necessarily seek to overthrow the perpetrators of the myth and establish themselves in their rightful position in society. Thus an "ideology" of male dominance was necessary to keep women in their place and men in theirs. Feminists drew on the term "patriarchy"; meaning rule by the father, to characterize this ideology of male dominance.

Some feminist scholars, motivated by their attachment to Marxism went one step further. These feminists asserted that patriarchal ideology hid not real sexual equality or female dominance but the real socioeconomic relations, in particular class relations. For some the particular class relations patriarchal ideology hid were capitalist class relations. The myth of universal male dominance was meant to keep in a dominant place, a socioeconomic system - capitalism. Capitalist relations, like the group of men controlling them were rife with tensions (contradictions) and weaknesses; vulnerable to destruction. By clearing away the

smokescreen of patriarchal ideology, capitalism could be toppled. Rightful relations could be returned to their rightful owners. Armed with a clear understanding of the real world and its social relations, proletarians (including women) could throw off the chains of their patriarchal capitalist oppression and claim what was rightfully theirs. The task for feminist scholars, Marxist and nonMarxist alike was to provide that clear analysis.

The logic of these analyses' definitions of the problems and their solutions- rests on a variety of empiricist claims. In their rejection of universal patriarchy, feminists embarked on a search for the real relations of society; disproving the validity of universal patriarchy. In place of universal patriarchy, feminists asserted sexual equality or female dominance and later capitalism as the real relations of society. In so doing they replaced one set of empirically derived "facts" with another.

This methodology involves a variety of essentialist epistemological and theoretical claims. In sum, essentialist arguments about sex and gender condense sexual inequality's various political, economic and cultural determinants into one essential determinant and they condense multidirectional and mutually inter active determination into simple unidirectional causality. Essentialist feminism additionally involves the substitution of one essential determinant of social life for another.

In this perspective social life is presented as a result of a singular and unidirectional determinant whose own constitution is unanalysed, therefore/^{empirically}"unknown". That essential determinant is

is inaccessible to human knowledge, therefore impervious to influence and change. In its employment of singular and unidirectional determination, essentialism precludes all encompassing change. In its place, essentialism asserts an element that is unchangeable.

This perspective inhibits construction of an analysis for revolutionary change of gender, class or any other aspect of society.

The project of this paper is to identify and criticize those essentialist elements of contemporary feminist analysis of sexual inequality in order to construct a more revolutionary program for gender reconstruction.

Section one of this paper constructs the feminist rejection of universal patriarchy focussing on the anthropology of gender. Section two criticizes the empiricism of the feminist rejection. In the critique, the practical political consequences of empiricism and its epistemological basis, essentialism, are examined. The paper concludes with an alternative for understanding gender.

The Universality of Sexual Inequality : A Feminist Response

In 1935 Margaret Mead published one of the first social scientific challenges to the universality of male dominance. In her book Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935), she established that sex role prescriptions varied culturally. Among New Guinea Highland Arapesh, men and women were ideally maternal and nurturant; among the Mundugumor both were ideally aggressive and rivalrous and among the Tchambuli, men were to be subordinated to women. Mead's earlier work in Samoa (1928) on the variability of adolescence, had laid the foundation for her findings in New Guinea. This research directly contradicted widely held belief that males were "naturally" dominant.

Male dominance was presumed to result from biology, in particular a biological need to preserve the species. As reproducers of the species, females were the natural caretakers of the young. Both reproducers and caretakers of the young needed protection if the species were to survive. As nonreproducers/caretakers, males were the "natural" protectors. Protection demanded the capacity to fend off predators. This necessitated great physical strength, large body size and a capacity for aggressive behaviour. Male dominance was therefore rooted biologically in preserving the species.

Empirical support for this phenomenon was found in studies of primate behaviour. Primates as the predecessors/^{of}humans, were indices of human behaviour. Male primates manifested larger body size and aggressive/protective behaviour, while females cared for

young.

Variations on this theme of biologically based male dominance abound in the literature. Harris and Divale (1975) analyse the "male supremacy complex" resulting from (male) warfare which is itself a means of regulating population growth and therefore ensuring the survival of the group. Lionel Tiger (1969) attributes male political and economic dominance to "male bonding", a natural male proclivity deriving from the historical practice of male cooperative hunting. Hunting is itself presumed to have arisen as a male dominated activity by virtue of its inherent risk and danger; therefore precluding the participation of females (Washburn and Lancaster 1968). The focus of women's work in the domestic sphere resulted from their childcare responsibilities (Brown 1970).

A particular focus within the preservation of the species theme is on (biological and social) reproduction. Bruno Bettelheim () attributes male dominance in gender relations to men's inability to bear children. Male social domination of women is the expression of men's psychological "womb envy"; domination of women is men's compensation for their biological incompetence. Others (Montagu 1974) went so far as to assert the biological superiority of women as proven by their greater resistance to disease, emotional durability, lower incidence of alcoholism and suicide.

Other explanations have focussed on the relationship between the demand for labor and biological reproduction. The need to control the labor supply results in the need to control reproduction of the laborer. This necessitates control over the reproducers. Male

domination of women is motivated by their need to control the labor force (Meillassoux 1975;1981).

All of these analyses focus on some aspect of biologically determined sexual inequality : preservation of the species(the protection of females by dominant males),female reproduction or biological constitution. Appeals to biology or evolution empirically validated universal male dominance (and therefore sexual inequality). Appeals to biology represented empirical proof of the inevitability of sexual inequality.

Margaret Mead's rejection of this biologically determined sexual inequality in 1935 was followed in the 1960s and 1970s by a large number of ethnographic studies and historical reinterpretations of women's roles in culture and society. Each of these studies presented empirical evidence that refuted the universality(and therefore inevitability) of inequality based on biological sex differences. In so doing each rejected the necessary social dominance of men. The studies generally oscillated between showing the variability of sex role prescriptions to demonstrating the equivalent or greater social, political and economic power of women. Each of these studies presented evidence contrary to that presented by the sexual inequality theorists: sexual inequality was neither natural nor necessary.

Following Mead's lead, feminist anthropologists began their rejection of sexual inequality with a reanalysis of primate society. In place of pair bonding and male aggression (for protection of females and young) feminist scholars emphasized the greater evolutionary selectivity and centrality of the mother-infant unit and relations among siblings, the equal aggression of females and males toward predators, the common use of tools and the importance of

female socialization of the young (Zihlman and Tanner 1976,1978; Leibowitz 1975;Lancaster 1975; vanLawick Goodall 1971). Males (and hence male behaviour) were not dominant in primate society. Females played a(if not the)central role.

Feminist anthropologists then turned to an extensive reanalysis of women's roles cross-culturally. In these examinations they focussed on the emic and etic importance of women in kinship, politics, economics and culture. If analysts looked below the surface appearance of gender relations and freed themselves of androcentric biases (which presumed male social dominance) women could be seen making contributions equal to or greater than men in the economy, political life, religion and in kinship. Female spheres of activity were reconceptualised as the "private" and "informal" domains of social life (Sanday 1974;Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Female relations were reanalysed as kin and nonkin networks of exchange (Maher).

At the same time some feminist anthropologists rewrote some of the male biased (classic) ethnographies,correcting earlier mistakes in the quantitative and qualitative treatment of women (Weiner of Malinowski's Trobriand society 1976;Faithorn 1975,Strathern1972, Brown and Buchbinder 1976 on New Guinea). Others conducted new research on polygyny (Clignet 1970), marriage arrangements (Rubin 1975 female marketing (Katzin 1971; Legerman 1971) and household decision-making (Schlegel 1972). Each study demonstrated women's important economic,political and cultural roles in society.

Cross-cultural studies of women's power/women's status proliferated (Fazel among pastoral nomads,1977; Murphy and Murphy in Brazil 1974 ;Mernissi,1975 and Fernea 1965;1975;1977 Middle

East; Paulme, 1971 and Sudarkasa, 1973 in Africa; Wolf in China, 1968; 1972; Henry in the Caribbean, 1975; Chinas, 1973, and Elmendorf, 1972; 1976 in Mexico; Nash and Safa in Latin America, 1976; Cornelisen in Italy, 1976; Maher in Morocco, 1974; and Leacock, 1980 and Brown, 1975 among native North Americans).

Each of these studies sought to prove that if the researcher would merely peer beneath the apparent dominance of men, the real importance of women would become evident. In this way feminists exposed male dominance as a social construct vs. biological "fact". They asserted that male dominance was a culturally specific, particularly "Western" phenomenon.

Other anthropologists focussed on the historical specificity of male social dominance, in another way belying the universality of male dominance. For these analysts sexual inequality came into existence at an historically specific moment - in the formation of class society. Sexual inequality was the product of class society. With the rise of private property (class relations) women were removed from the public sphere of work into the private sphere of the household, laying the grounds for sexual inequality (Leacock 1975). Prior to class society and capitalism, sexual egalitarianism prevailed. Leacock analysed the rise of Montagnais sexual inequality with the introduction of colonial relations by the Jesuits.

Other refutations of universal male dominance also drew on historical reconstruction. Reed, together with many nonanthropologists (and early anthropologist Bachofen) posited matriarchy as the earliest form of human gender relations (Reed 1975). The primary social unit consisted of a "governing" mother and economically dependent siblings. The universality of male dominance was belied

by the historical existence of matriarchy.

Each of these studies, by refuting the empirical basis for male dominance/sexual inequality undermined the assertion of male dominance as a natural fact of social life. In place of male dominance, analysts asserted the "fact" of egalitarian or female dominant social relations. Each study of cultures historically prior to or outside of modern "Western" society, presented proof of the equal or greater contribution of women. These societies invalidated claims to universal male dominance. Whether feminists asserted real gender equality or real female dominance, all rejected as false, necessary universal male dominance.

But if male dominance did not constitute the real relations of social life, then what was this thing called "male dominance"? For many feminists, the answer lay in the understanding of male dominance as a set of ideas, an ideology, vs. a "fact" of reality. Male dominance was best understood as an ideology of patriarchy. Hence as a set of (mere) ideas (vs. a slice of Reality), patriarchy was potentially destructible. What was needed in the place of patriarchal ideology was a clear science of gender relations; a set of empirical facts discovered by researchers with untainted tools of research. When the science of gender relations supplants the myth of patriarchy, the real relations of social life can surface; women can regain their rightful political and economic position in society.

All our information must be filtered through a critical lens to examine the biases inherent in it... We need to be aware of the potential for a double male bias in anthropological accounts of other cultures : the bias

we bring with us to our research, and the bias we receive if the society we study expresses male dominance. All anthropologists wear the blinders of their own civilization in approaching other cultures...Male bias is surmountable, just as racial bias, or any form of ethnocentrism, is, but only when it is taken seriously as an area for self-critical investigation (Reiter 1975 :12-14).

For a number of analysts, the mere identification of patriarchy as an ideology was insufficient for a radical restructuring of gender relations. What was needed was an investigation into patriarchy's composition : its origins and its internal dynamic.

The search for origins is a theme which unites much of the recent wave of feminist scholarship. That this should be so comes as no surprise. Feminism, and the research whose perspective it informs, assumed that women's experience in any and every aspect of culture, while broadly shaped by the same forces which define male experience, is not reducible to it. The recognition of significant differences in male-female lifeways leads us immediately to speculate on the origins of those differences. Furthermore, under specific conditions, the differences between males and females are used to justify and underwrite power differentials as well. It is this question of the origins and perpetuation of gender-linked power hierarchies which lies at the heart of the feminist perspective (Reiter 1977 : 5).

This internal examination led some to an analysis of patriarchy's external relations, particularly its relations with the political and economic structures of society. Anthropologists were joined by non-anthropologist Marxist feminists in their deeper investigation of class and particularly colonialism (Mullings 1977; VanAllen 1974). These analyses focussed on the relationship of patriarchal ideology

later called "capitalist patriarchy" (Eisenstein 1979). The real relations of society were ^{neither} sexual egalitarian nor female dominant, but capitalist. The ideology of patriarchy existed as a veil which hid the real economic and political exploitation of a group of dominant men, the capitalists. Patriarchal ideology functioned to divide working class men from women and to keep women in the domestic sphere, reproducing workers and their labor power for capital's exploitation (Saffiotti 1978; Eisenstein 1979). Aided by the ideology of patriarchy, domestic labor went unpaid; an added benefit to capital.

By hiding the truth about capitalist exploitation from women and from men, patriarchy contributed to their exploitation. Only when ^{armed with} the real knowledge of capitalism, would men and women be able to end that exploitation.

Theorists extended their view of patriarchy as an obfuscation of capitalist class relations to a critique of those relations as the necessary or inevitable relations of social life. As inherently exploitative of human beings, capitalist social relations ran up against the essence of human beings whose true nature was communal, sharing, nonexploitative i.e. "socialist". Competition, exploitation, hierarchy were characteristics of capitalism and capitalist behaviour which distorted human true (socialist) nature. In place of "capitalist behaviour" as essential human behaviour, feminists asserted "socialist" behaviour. For feminist Marxists gender equality would necessarily occur under socialism. Gender equality was the essence of gender relations.

A Critique : Feminism and Empiricism

i. Empiricism and Essential Causality

Nonessentialism² views thinking as the metaphoric and metonymic³ conceptualization of social life. Essentialist thinking involves the condensation of that life into one of its aspects and the substitution of those aspects for each other as the essential determinant of social life. Essentialism therefore involves the condensation and displacement of social life.

In this focus social life appears to arise from the unidirectional determination of one of its elements : class, capitalism, free will, human nature(etc.) instead of from the simultaneous multidirectional determination by all of its elements. In the latter nonessentialist perspective, the focus is not on the metaphoric (condensed) and metonymic (displaced) forms of social life but on their complex overdetermination.

In essentialism social life appears to result from unidirectional causality instead of complex mutual interaction. Social life appears to emanate from one of its elements. In this conception a hierarchy of essential effectivity is asserted; with one element the apex, the creator, the essence of social life. In the absence of overdetermination therefore, social life appears condensed with the elevation of one element to a position of greater relative significance in the constitution of social life.

In that conception, that essential element's own constitution is unanalysed (it is condensed). Therefore its overdetermined constitution ignored. In this framework, the essential element's complex constitution is "unknown". There exists, in other words,

an unknown quantity in the construction of social life. This unknown quantity is suggestive of something outside human control, outside human influence; something humanly "unchangeable." This element, inaccessible to human analysis and understanding is therefore immutable, unchangeable.

This "unknown quality" is precisely the quality that empiricists claim to eliminate in their competing quest for the "real" facts. In this search each empiricist claims to have eliminated the "unknown" and replaced ^{it} with the "known", the truth, the answer, the facts. ⁴ The assertion of an empiricist "known" is therefore contingent on the prior assertion of an "unknown." Only in the place of a mystery, can a solution be asserted; only in the place of no knowledge can Knowledge be asserted. Empiricism is partially then the act of discovering knowledge, the truth, where neither exist.

This act of asserting a "known" is simultaneously the act of asserting an unknown, which as indicated, is simultaneously the assertion of unchangeability. Essentialist empiricism then asserts unchangeability. This particular perspective limits analyses for social change; of immediate concern, analyses for the radical reconstruction of gender.

ii. Empiricist Feminism

In feminist analyses patriarchy is rejected as Reality and replaced with sexual egalitarian or female dominant social relations as the true relations of society. Patriarchy is then analysed as mere

ideology; false ideas that hide real social and economic relations whether those relations be sexual egalitarian, female dominant or capitalist. Patriarchy is a veil which hides the true relations of society from those who, armed with a true knowledge about patriarchy might seek to overthrow it and the relations it supports.

In later analyses, capitalism is rejected by Marxist feminists as the true or necessary relations of society. Capitalist relations do not accurately reflect the essential "socialist" nature of humans, men or women. Therefore in place of capitalist class relations, socialist relations are asserted as the essence of society. In this analysis feminists replace an essential economism (the economy as the essence of society) with an essential humanism (humans, or a derived essence, as the essential determinant of society).

This analysis involves the following essentialist assertions:

- 1) the assertion of Real relations in place of false or "apparent" relations
- 2) the substitution of an essence in society for an essence in humans
- 3) the assertion of a level of knowledge (ideology) that is less "scientific", complex (therefore truthful) than another

In addition, essentialist arguments about gender and sexual inequality involve the condensation of sexism's political, economic and cultural determinants into one determinant and the condensation of multidirectional interaction into simple unidirectional causality. Sexual inequality is attributed to the singular determination of

patriarchal ideology or capitalism.

Essentialist feminism also involves the substitution of one essential determinant ; accompanied by its unidirectional determination , for another . Sexual inequality as the real relations of social life is replaced with sexual equality, female dominance, capitalism or socialism. This is done in spite of feminists' rejection of the immutable and universal existence of patriarchy and its production out of the singular immutable "fact" of biology. Feminists reject sexism's singular determination (by biology, male psychology evolution or Nature) because of its implied immutability. Yet they in turn assert their own immutable "facts." In neither sexist nor feminist arguments is there rejection of unidirectional or singular determination . In neither analysis is there employment of multiple and complex(over) determination.

Conclusion

In contrast to essentialist empiricism, nonessentialism views no one condition of social life, whether patriarchy, capitalism, or socialism as the Real, essential condition of society or human beings. Nor does nonessentialism regard any set of ideas as less coherent, complex, scientific or truthful than another.

IN contrast nonessentialism looks at the overdetermined effectivity among all aspects of social life. No condition of that life is Given, more Real or basic than any other. And therefore no aspect of social life unchangeable. All aspects -political, economic and cultural- are changeable by the very mutuality of

their constitution. Only when analyses focus on that mutual constitution, that overdetermination, is there infinite possibility for change. Movement from analysis of metaphoric and metonymic forms of social life to their overdetermination will facilitate this process.

When applied to gender, this would include analyses of gender's multiple and complex determination by all of the various and contradictory aspects of social life - including but not restricted to class, race, kinship, religion. The ideological construction of gender as well as the constitutive effect of gender in economic, political and cultural relations would be incomprehensible outside of its analysis of these "other aspects" of social life. An understanding of those aspects would simultaneously include an incorporation of the constitutive effect of gender. No one group (women, proletarians) would be comprehensible outside of an analysis of their overdetermined constitution. Sexual inequality would be irreducible to an ideology, though ideological constructs of gender would be understood as mutually effective aspects of social life. Sexual inequality would instead be understood as a complexly determined practice - constitutively effected by politics, economics and culture (including ideology).

Only in this overdetermined framework is every aspect of society, including gender, changeable.

FOOTNOTES

1. In this understanding patriarchal ideology is a myth, a folktale, both themselves constituted by ideas which portray something other than reality. Patriarchal ideology as "myth" and "folktale" present not an accurate picture of Reality but a distortion of it. This "mystification" of Reality's real relations in the consciousness of a people can reduce their otherwise great threat to a system that seeks to oppress them. This notion of "false consciousness" is examined closely in the works of Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci and others (see Oakes, Elizabeth. "Class and Consciousness : Complexities and Contradictions in the British Virgin Islands" University of Massachusetts, 1983).
2. Essentialist epistemology is understood by nonessentialists as theory's ability to capture an essential or single truthful Reality. This notion is an extension of the essentialist assertion of a "gap" or noneffective separation between Reality and thought. Nonessentialists assert no such "gap"; hence no such "noneffective" or essential element of social life. In nonessentialist epistemology theory (thinking) is complexly constituted by the material totality as is that totality by thinking (among other aspects of social life). Hence there is no single Reality, but realities; no single Truth; but truths.
3. Metonymy is understood as the linguistic displacement of meaning in language. Metaphor is understood as the linguistic condensation of meaning in language.
4. It is interesting to look at the unconscious component of essentialist reasoning through the lens of nonessentialist psychoanalytic theory (expressed in the works of Freud and Jacques Lacan). The essentialist "quest" for the Truth can be understood as a projection of the essentialist searcher's quest for his/her self, which stems from the absence or "lack" of that self created in the separation of the child's identity from that of the mother.

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