

Introduction

Ideas begin in personal experiences and circumstances and then move outward. When we write theory, we need to start from the self, move in and through it, and then go beyond this narrow starting place of simple identity.

I grew up in the 1950s, one of four daughters of parents who had been members of the Communist Party. My childhood was defined by the civil rights movement. My earliest political memory is of my sister Sarah and me carrying picket signs outside of Woolworth's. I graduated from high school in 1964, and I came to adulthood active in the women's movement of the 1970s. The 1980s felt politically dismal and very different from the preceding decade, as the gains toward racial and sexual equality were systematically attacked. With the election of Clinton, the 1990s look more hopeful: for the first time in over a decade, it is not a foregone conclusion what politics will look like. One is allowed to hope that the "new" Democrats will retrieve democracy from its rightward drift.

My imagining of democracy begins here, between the legacy of the Reagan-Bush decade and the possibility of change. It responds to a politics heavily racialized and encoded through the gender imagery of black women, a politics also defined by the internationalization of the United States economy, which excuses less equality in the name of greater competitiveness.

Over the past decade in the United States, there has been an unnoticed revolution of a sort. It culminated in the spring of 1989 with a

series of Supreme Court decisions which have all but destroyed civil rights and abortion law. Even as the Bush administration embraced the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe as a victory for “democracy,” it continued to oversee the demise of democracy at home.

The Gulf War was supposedly an attempt to protect democracy in the Middle East. But how can one term Kuwait or Saudi Arabia democratic, even in a narrow sense? Better than 90 percent of the population of both countries is not allowed to vote. Few observers made much of the issue that U.S. military women were risking their lives for countries where women could not even drive, let alone vote.

My discussion also takes us to Eastern Europe and to the revolutionary struggles of 1989. Eastern Europe popularized the idea of democracy anew. Totalitarian statism was rejected, and the discourse of liberal democratic rights was adopted. Yet even within this discourse, women’s rights have not been viewed as essential to the construction of democracy. Unfortunately, since 1989, ethnic warfare has all but stalled any reenvisioning of democracy. In Eastern Europe, the imaginings remain patriarchal and ethnocentric. These limitations in democratic vision reflect and reverberate back on neoconservative assaults against racial and sexual equality within the United States.

I write this book as a white woman of the middle class (hazy concept as that is) in a society where whiteness (a much less hazy concept) is privileged through a racialized system of difference threaded through economic class and gender privilege. In such a society, difference reflects power and structures of oppression more than the richness of diversity. I take this problem of racialized patriarchy and push it to reinvent the way we think about democracy. This is a book about democratic theory which does *not* discuss the literature of white men on democracy. There are many books already written of this sort.¹ I instead take the language of universal democratic rights and demand that they be reconceptualized to include women of color.

RACIALIZED PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy differentiates women from men while privileging men. Racism simultaneously differentiates people of color from whites and privileges whiteness. These processes are distinct but intertwined. Like any structuring of power, the racializing of gender is a process that always needs to be renegotiated. I use the term “racialized patriarchy” to bring

attention to the continual interplay of race and gender in the structure of power.

Language is already racialized and engendered (i.e., coded with gender) at the start. Toni Morrison argues that language is so threaded in and through racial imagery that we can subvert ourselves without knowing it.² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham believes that gender has always had a racial meaning, that it is constructed in and through racialized contexts, and that gender is both constructed and fragmented by race.³ Donna Haraway says that feminists must recognize that there is a race/gender system both similar to and different from the sex/gender system.⁴

Economic class is completely embedded in the way race and gender play themselves out. When we speak of “racism and sexism and economic class,” it sounds like the systems are more separate than they are. (The same is true of phrases like “women and blacks.”) I hope to show how a racialized and sexualized gender system is differentiated by economic class to create complicated processes that often stand in for each other, as in the racial coding of family issues or the gender coding of race in much abortion rhetoric. As we shall see, one only needs to reflect on the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings to recognize the complex relations of racialized gender privilege.

NEOCONSERVATISM AND THE MYTH OF UNIVERSAL RIGHTS

My rethinking of democracy requires the deconstruction of universalism. The doctrine of universal rights must be reinvented through a recognition of individual needs. I want to work from this position of specificity to radicalize liberal rights discourse.

The neoconservative attack on affirmative action and abortion rights has operated in exactly the opposite direction, embracing universal rights while silently privileging the white male. Although neoconservatives claim to be defending the rights of the individual—meaning, presumably, *all* individuals—in fact the individual they have in mind is always a white male. From this point of view, affirmative action programs are allegedly unfair because they privilege “difference” of gender and/or race. They represent “special” interests rather than “universal” (i.e., white male) ones. Abortion rights are suspect as well, because the “universal” rights guaranteed by the “founding fathers” were in fact based on a man’s body, which cannot be pregnant. Any reproductive rights for women

are inherently different from the traditionally recognized rights guaranteed to men.

In most theory, the universal and the abstract are preferred for their supposed neutrality and objectivity. They are also assumed to be more democratic, encompassing everybody in their nonspecificity. But nonspecificity is really quite specific when it is revealed to mean “white male.” Instead of speaking of individuals but really meaning white men, I will speak of women of color. By stipulating both “women” and “of color,” I move toward a more inclusive meaning of “individual,” one that includes previously invisible categories of gender and race. Thus, to become more specific, in this case, is actually to encompass more of humanity. Universal categorizations exclude the specific; they are hopelessly abstract. History bespeaks the need for the realignment of such terminology.

I am speaking of rethreading the fabric of democratic discourse with a new thread of the concept of rights. Parts of the civil rights and women’s movements of the sixties and seventies took this discourse as their own. Much of the politics of the eighties and nineties have focused on struggle over the honest meaning of liberal democratic rights discourse. Instead of rejecting the universality of this discourse, I want to reinvent it by locating its specification in gender, race, and class. The radical subversiveness of rights discourse lies in its universal claims: anyone can claim these rights as their own. But the silent privileging of white middle- and upper-class males excludes those who are not white, male, or affluent from this source of power.

Neoconservatives are revisionist liberals. They wish to revise liberalism back to what they deem as its original core: liberty rather than equality. Neoconservatives argue that liberalism was never intended to promise equality; that, at its best, society (and government) can offer only opportunity or incentive. They argue that interpretations of liberalism that promote civil rights breed dependence and poverty. Reagan-Bush neoconservatives were preoccupied with “reverse discrimination” against white males by affirmative action programs which supposedly privilege people of color and white women.⁵

Throughout the 1980s, neoconservatives came to dominate both Republican and Democratic Party politics. Republicans became straight-jacketed during Bush’s tenure by the Right. A troubled relationship emerged between the rightist, evangelical, antiabortion lobby and the more centrist, neoconservative factions of the party. As a result, a rightist, moralist neoconservatism took hold. The Democratic Party, on the other hand, remains defined by a centrist neoconservatism that stands

in uneasy alliance with “old-style” liberals, civil rights activists, and feminists.

The Clinton administration has begun yet another revision of liberalism. The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), with which Bill Clinton and Al Gore are aligned, says it will provide an alternative to the kind of liberalism that dominated the Democratic Party in the 1960s. Clearly, new ideas are needed for the 1990s to cope with the global economy and with the country’s fractured families. But it remains to be seen what form of liberalism will emerge. Will Clinton remain the centrist neoliberal of the election campaign? Will his administration swiftly redress the right-wing evangelical initiatives on such issues as abortion and family leave? Or will neoconservative rhetoric—endorsing less government, fewer taxes, and more governmental privatization—prove a daunting legacy that inhibits radical democratic stirrings?

At present, a neoconservative discourse of neutrality remains firmly in place: government is supposed to be neutral in order to protect “universal” rights. This discourse is used to silence specific demands related to sexual and racial equality and to justify the privatization of the state. Most neoconservatives expect individuals to create the conditions of opportunity for themselves. Privatization of the service aspect of the state has reduced government’s public responsibility for private business, for families, and for individuals. The same reasoning underlies the destruction of affirmative action law: government no longer has an affirmative role in bringing about equality. The Reagan-Bush state redefined the racialized aspects of patriarchy for the 1990s through the destruction of civil rights and abortion law.

My argument challenges the dominant neoconservative view while remaining committed to universal rights. I neither want to reject the idea of a universal right nor to deny its specific meaning. Every woman has a universal human right to control her body, yet this right must be specified in terms of a woman’s differing circumstances, such as her ability to get pregnant. I will work from the specific—imagining women of color—to reinvent the meaning of rights discourse. This is just as neutral a starting point for discussion as beginning with white men, and it is more honest than pretending to be universal.

LIBERAL AND SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY

Throughout the globe, current struggles to define democracy are positioned between factions of neoconservatives, old liberals, and former socialists. Liberal democrats and socialists disagree with neoconserva-

tive narrowings of democracy, but both visions of equality are based on a false universalism.

Socialist notions of equality need to specify racial and sexual equality and not reduce these concerns to economic class concerns. The liberal democratic commitment to freedom needs to specify that individual freedom must include sexual freedom as well as racial, gender and economic class equality. Rights discourse must be concretized through reference to sex (biological femaleness or maleness, and sexuality), gender (the institutionalized meanings of one's sex),⁶ race (color and its meanings as defined by a racialized culture), and economic access (the economic ability to get what one needs). We must embrace the specificity and variability of the individual while recognizing the collective expression of groups within the language of equality.

Equality expresses a desired relationship between groups of people. The concept of freedom more readily focuses on individual expression and thereby cuts through the divisions of race and gender by recognizing people's differences. A concern with the diversity of individuals must be incorporated into a socialist vision of equality. And "individuality" must be deconstructed for its traditional representation of racialized maleness. The point is not to de-sex equality, but rather to allow sexual diversity without engendering or racializing it. Individual diversity requires freedom. Our similarities require equality. Radical egalitarianism must therefore recognize individuality. From this point of specificity, *I want to look through these differences to define a shared humanness.*

The concern here is not with differences per se, but rather with how we can start with differences to construct a particularized understanding of human rights that is both universal and specific. Specifying difference allows one to see individuality in a collective stance. The excesses of some postmodernism—such as the belief that there are no universals—poses problems for my analysis. Its skepticism of universals and its embrace of differences rejects any envisioning of democracy and any politics of feminism because they would represent overstated unities. Nevertheless, I intend to use the skepticism of postmodernism to radicalize democratic theory to embrace differentiated unities. I do not position my project in opposition to postmodernism, but I critique its excessive preoccupation with difference and uniqueness of context.⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah says there are several "postmodernisms." I utilize the strains which emphasize the elusiveness of boundaries, the end of metanarratives, and the rejection of the claim to exclusivity.⁸

By starting with women of color, I recognize their specificity *and* the

similarities and differences between them and white women. I am not trying to create a new generalized and totalizing category in “women of color”; instead, I hope to create the exact opposite: a continual reminder of diversity. When we start the discussion of democracy with women of color, we must take notice of the racialized and sexualized bodies of women. Then reproductive rights (as necessary to the control over one’s body) can be theorized as fundamental to a reenvisioned democracy—as fundamental as rights for food, shelter, and clothing. Reproductive rights are not secondary rights; they are initial and universal.

If one wonders about the promissory importance of reproductive and abortion rights for a radicalized democracy, one need only look to the United States and the assault against these rights by those who seek to deradicalize democracy. But the abortion struggle is hardly limited to U.S. politics. Abortion was a major sticking point in the unification of East and West Germany, and it continues to be a significant controversy within Poland and Hungary.

DEMOCRACY, LIBERALISM, AND SOCIALISM

The struggle over the purview of individuality and privacy rights, especially for women, is presently being contested in both socialism and liberal democracy. The struggle to achieve democracy is located somewhere in the mix between liberalism, capitalism, socialism, and feminism. An antiracist stance must be woven through this mix. But there is little agreement relative to this project. Prominent members of the Left in the United States, such as Sheldon Wolin, insist on assuming that liberal politics are conservatizing. He wrongly equates white middle- and upper-middle-class politics with a demand for rights like those guaranteed by the ERA, abortion rights, and the right to sexual preference, and he argues that these demands are one and the same with consumerism and privatism.⁹ In doing so, he washes away liberalism and feminism. Christopher Lasch also discredits the democratic aspects of liberalism, and with it feminism. For Lasch, liberalism has come to represent the “tyranny of the self.”¹⁰ Feminism, then, represents this tyranny as done by women. It is difficult to distinguish leftists of this order from neoconservatives: both see feminism as a result of liberalism’s excesses.

Antistatist discourse currently dominates, though differently, both in the United States and in most East European societies. In Eastern Eu-

rope, such discourse rejects the totalitarian Communist state. In the United States, it is the social welfare state of the sixties and early seventies that is being rejected. Privatization in a society defined by the capitalist market is of course different from the partial decentralization of state power in Eastern European economies. But the issues of the structure of society and the place of family life—particularly the place of woman and her relation to a state which in the past provided certain services—remain key for rethinking democracy, whether in the United States or in Eastern Europe. If democracy is to emerge in Eastern Europe, it will develop within a pluralized economy with a combination of market incentives and social planning. There will be moves away from the bureaucratic centralized planning of socialism, but no simple embrace of market capitalism.¹¹ A new understanding will have to emerge about what is public and what is private.

The critique of statism in Eastern Europe has particular import for women. Women's lives are often more dependent on state policies than men's are in both capitalist and socialist states. Women are most often the recipients of welfare policy, rather than its creators. They are the ones most directly affected by government support for day care, pregnancy leave, and so on. Although women often benefit from an activist service state, they can also be the targets of a paternalist, interventionist one. However, the line dividing public from private can be drawn in different places. For example, in the Nordic countries, the state is quite active, and privatization is a multifaceted concept.¹² Further privatization can mean a transfer of activities, control, and ownership from the public sector to the market, to the family, and to women. Yet privatization can also narrow the prospects of democracy for women.

FEMINISM AND DEMOCRACIES

How does one speak and write of feminism in the 1990s? There are obviously many different kinds of women. Women are located in various societies and cultures and differ by race, economic class, sexual preference, and more. The differences are endless. But there are also connections between the differences which allow me to speak of feminism. As long as one remembers that no view of gender is total and complete, it is important to call political attention to it. However differentiated gender may be, gender oppression exists.¹³ The dynamics and contexts of the oppression can shift, taking on different meanings, but it is still oppression. The fact that gender is always defined through

racialized economic relations does not negate its significance; it only makes clear that gender cannot be understood in isolation from the relations which define it. A more inclusive feminism would allow us to imagine a more inclusive democracy.

Feminist Slavenka Drakulic has said of Eastern Europe that new male democracies are emerging. She writes that Yugoslavia is "a country where even mother's milk is poisoned by politics."¹⁴ She worries that many women in these countries do not see their own rights as a litmus test for democracy. They do not make enough of the fact that their economies have never been able to provide them with menstrual pads, tampons, or contraceptive devices.

Inji Aflatun, an Egyptian feminist, argued in 1949 that the enemies of women are the enemies of democracy: that Egyptian women's struggles for their political rights are part of the struggle to strengthen democracy in Egypt.¹⁵ The Arab Women's Solidarity Association has argued for women's active participation in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the Arab world in order to create a true democracy. Such participation requires the elimination of gender discrimination in both the public and private realms of society and a full opening up of the workplace to women.¹⁶ Gada Samman, a Syrian feminist, has stated that "the liberated woman is a person who believes that she is as human as a man. At the same time, she acknowledges that she is a female and he is male, and that the difference between them is how, not how much. Because they are equally human, they must have equal human rights."¹⁷

These statements cannot be translated identically across cultures, but they do resonate with connections that allow us to see feminism more clearly. By looking at Arab women's lives, one sees, as Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke have argued, that feminism is not always a public expression. It can be the act of one woman writing to another when women are forbidden to write. An analysis of Arab, Indian, African American, South African, or Eastern European women's lives "allows us to see feminism where we had not previously thought to look." But one must be able and willing to look.¹⁸

Madhu Kishwar, an Indian woman, argues that although she is committed to pro-woman politics, she resists the use of the label *feminism* because of its association with Western feminism, which she sees as another Western export, one which has often been a tool of cultural imperialism.¹⁹ But Kishwar is left without a language to express her commitment. And, in the end, she thereby allows Western imperialism to erase the continuity of the politics of gender.

I continue to use the term *feminist*, even though I recognize its troublesome history, because I need it. It is the only politics that names the problem of gender. We can make it speak through the differences to find the woman in us all. We are better off radicalizing and specifying feminism than speaking only from our differences.

I believe feminism must not only recognize the differences between women but also nurture those differences. This means that feminists must stretch beyond themselves. I am reminded of black filmmaker Bill Duke's statement about crossing boundaries: "Anybody can direct anything—but the point of view will be different." He goes on to say that he has enough humanity and anger in him to make a decent film about Jews in Nazi Germany even though "I don't have the same experience as a young boy who was rocked to sleep in the lap of a grandmother who had a tattooed number on her arm, who told him stories of the people who disappeared, the relatives she never saw again, as he drifted off with his cheek nestled next to that number."²⁰ Duke does not make light of the differences. But neither does he become circumscribed by them.

A DEMOCRACY BETWEEN "ISMS"

Democracy in the 1990s will be fluid: it will move freely between different economies and politics. Maybe this is the political meaning of postmodernism: that what were once thought of as clearly dichotomous and competing ideologies, discourses, and economies are now recognized as necessary pieces of each other. This realization does not erase politics or make it irrelevant; rather, it recognizes that oppositional politics are not conducive to real democracy. Oppositional politics often lead those in power to use oppressive strategies to hold the oppositions in place. Part of this process is often the limiting of dissent, privileging the viewpoint of those in power. This attempt at silencing dissent was seen in the Bush administration's charges of "political correctness" on college campuses and its wrongful attack on the Western secular model of knowledge; its call for color-blind legislation rather than preferential treatment; and its limited support for AIDS research because it was a disease of those who are "different." Even the Gulf War was made part of this process of silencing dissent and privileging the Western model: once again the message was that we should love America or leave it. Loving America meant supporting the all-American, white, heterosexual family and rescuing poor, oppressed Arab women. One glitch in

this message was that many of the troops in the Gulf were women—women of color as well as white women—and these women told another story about family life.

Given recent developments throughout the world, any discussion of democracy must begin with what is missing in both socialism and liberalism. As elements of the two political systems are incorporated not only economically but also politically, we must recall the patriarchal foundations of both systems. The problem of language, especially political language, is key here. Although many argue that it is wrong to call the political systems that evolved in any of the former Eastern European states truly “communist” or “socialist,” they *were* named as such, discrediting the discourses of socialism, Communism, and, indirectly, Marxism. Although the real revolution may have been against totalitarian statism, it has been named as a rejection of Communism and its variants. As a result of this naming, many on the Left have argued for modernizing Marxism via liberalism, individualism, and free markets. But others have equated this argument with an embrace of neoconservatism or neoliberalism: an acceptance of the competitive individualism necessitated by the capitalist market.²¹

The struggle toward democracy is a struggle, in some sense, over just how democratic liberalism and its discourse of rights can become. Just how much of the socialist promise of equality can liberalism incorporate without losing its commitment to individual freedom? Most neoconservatives have rejected any moves toward equality and argue that the state has no responsibility for creating equal access. On the other hand, feminists and defenders of civil rights argue that rights must become true to their democratic promise and intention. My argument here is that the radical orientation of rights discourse can be used to transform both liberalism and socialism by specifying their universal commitments to both freedom and equality in terms of sex, gender, and race. Gender, racial, and economic equality must be specified while guaranteeing sexual freedom. This argument reorients liberal democratic rights beyond liberalism and beyond democracy as we have envisioned it in either capitalism or socialism, moving us toward a new theory that has no name.

A well-known Marxist, Ralph Miliband, would agree in part with my orientation here. He acknowledges that socialists will have to build on the foundations of liberal democracy while pushing further in democratic directions. He also states that he does not reject Marxism; instead, he wants to use Marxism to highlight further the contradictions

that challenge us.²² Marxism's strength lies in such uses rather than in providing ready-made solutions. Chantal Mouffe similarly hopes to develop a "post-individualist concept of freedom" that pushes toward a radically libertarian, plural democracy. She adopts the de Tocquevillian notion of "perfect equality" and "entire freedom."²³ The challenge is to give all of these concepts concrete meaning.

Black activist and writer Manning Marable is hesitant about the enterprise of revising liberalism for socialism. For him, liberalism only tries "to humanize an inherently irrational, wasteful and inhumane system"; it "tries to reduce but not eradicate great concentrations of poverty and homelessness." Such attempts are insufficient for him when there are 3 million homeless people, 38 million people without any medical insurance, and millions living in substandard housing, poor and hungry. Given this context, he argues that we must dare to have historical imagination and dare to be Marxists.²⁴

Marxism focuses on an egalitarian economy, and in this sense I am a Marxist. However, I think we must also dare to move beyond Marxism to recognize the complex interweavings of racialized sexuality and gender in current structures, and to embrace the diversity that exists within these webs. Marxism is not enough, nor is liberalism. Nor is a feminism bound by these categories. In the end, a radicalized democracy inclusive of women of color may not be enough either—but we are as yet a very long way from finding out.

My sense of postmodern politics is that theory does not create reality. At best, history will be the test of theory. For this reason, I privilege practice and everyday life as definitive of political narrative. It is this practice I turn to now.