

BOOK REVIEWS — RESEÑA DE LIBROS

FEMINIST RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA

This review of some works that have resulted from recent feminist research in Latin America aims at drawing attention to this rapidly growing field of investigation, arguing the way towards an adequate critical reading, indicating certain deficiencies in some of the texts, and raising a few general issues about the current practice of feminist studies.

The review and the texts brought under consideration are divided in four sections.

1. The first comment is concerned with the work of Susana Prates, in particular her studies *Women and Domestic Labour* and *The Double Invisibility of Female Work: Domestic Out-Work*, both from 1982; *Trabajo femenino e incorporación de tecnología: el 'putting-out system' en la industria del cuero en Uruguay* (CIESU, Montevideo); *Trabajo de la Mujer en una Época de Crisis o Cuando se Pierde Ganando* (I. E. S. del CUBS 1982); and *Women's Work in the Southern Cone. Monetarist policies in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile*.

Prates' paper on *Women and Domestic Labour* does not escape some of the theoretical short-comings of the *Domestic Labour* debate of recent years. Prates does not for one moment question the attempts that have been made to assimilate domestic labour to wage labour, petty commodity production and unproductive labour in spite of the fact that none of these solutions takes into account that something which is paid no wage, has no specific marketable product (use-value) and has no formal relation to the production process of the labour market, cannot be slotted into one of these pre-existing categories.

While the historic set of activities which makes up domestic labour could be socialized (as in fact Prates suggests in her policy-recommendations) this does not sanction an analysis of them as if they were so at present.

It should also be recognized that feminist issues have no necessary unity in them-

selves and should therefore be related to parallel problems in other theoretical areas. This questioning of the unity of feminist issues could be extended to the separation of some of the commonly associated concepts of the domestic labour debate itself, for example the complex: domestic labour – women – 'imprisonment' – privatisation which play such an important role in Prates' text. These do not necessarily and absolutely belong together and the historical reasons explaining their conjuncture must be established apart from any *a priori* assumptions of unity. It should be noted that the privatised nature of domestic labour or rather, of the reproduction of the labour force, would remain an issue even if it were performed equally by men and women and even if an equal number of men and women were engaged in wage-relations. Analysis of privatisation, on the other hand, might be more profitably linked with other forms of privatised labour, notably domestic out-work (so-called cottage industry), which are not necessarily performed by women and are not necessarily in the sphere of reproduction.

In the study *The Double Invisibility of Female Labour: Domestic Out-Work* Prates has given us an excellent analysis of these forms of labour. In view of the limited research and literature available on this subject, Prates' work represents an important effort to gain an understanding of the interrelationships between sub-contracting, informal labour, and the formal sector of the economy. Prates demonstrates that these two sectors do not constitute separate and parallel spheres in the economic structure, but that, on the contrary, the formal sector *links up* with the informal, transferring risks and costs to it and benefiting from the income taken from the informal sector, where workers are in one way or another underpaid. This *linkage* takes various forms according to the historical and structural conditions of each specific country, but that does not imply any difference in the underlying mechanism. On the basis of her investigations of female work in the putting-out system of the leather industry in Uruguay, a study carried out by CIESU-GRECMU *Trabajo femenino e incorporación de tecnología: el 'putting-out system' en la industria del cuero en Uruguay* Prates establishes empirically and theoretically well-founded conclusions.

Prates makes an important point, with implications that range far outside her specific topic, when she calls attention to the fact that the putting-out system is a way of organizing work that is not limited to any one-stage of economic development and industrialization but occurs as response to the need to establish conditions necessary for the process of accumulation in particular situations. In fact these forms of labour-organization, often considered to belong to the 18th century, are easily and abundantly encountered in back-street New York or Naples of to-day as well as in Prates' Montevideo.

Though Prates does not explicitly draw the theoretical conclusions of this it amounts to a questioning both of functionalist (modernization theory) and Marxist (the phases and stages of capitalism) lineal and evolutionist conceptualizations alike.

2. Esther Ceceña Martorella's work *Explotación de la Mujer y Fuerza de Trabajo*, Cuadernos CIDAMO 11 is an attempt to arrive at a materialist basis of women's oppression by the application of concepts and categories drawn from Marx' *Capital*. The Marxist concept of the industrial reserve army of labour is a key concept in the text under consideration. The notion of a pool of cheap and dispensable

labour created by the accumulation of capital and at the same time constituting an essential condition for its continuation is seen to have an immediate relevance for women's position in the economy.

Crucial to the author's case is the definition of work in the home as *domestic labour* which produces use-values necessary to maintain and reproduce the worker. It is not sold on the wage market. It is not, therefore, a commodity. Ceceña reasons from this that domestic labour lies outside productive labour but not outside capitalist relations of production, for domestic work is a necessary condition for the reproduction of labour-power and therefore, the reproduction of capital itself. According to Ceceña the well-known features of *women's work* including dispensability and low pay, derive from the determination of women as domestic labourers. This provides the condition for women to be used as part of the reserve army of labour, drawn into production and thrown back into the home in response to the needs of capital. As part of the reservoir of surplus labour, women workers come cheap and depress the wage levels of the working class as a whole.

Ceceña attempts to locate the material basis of women's oppression in the capitalist mode of production itself. Women's inferior position in the economy and their privatized toil in the home are said to be the products of capitalist social relations. What this amounts to is an attempt to: a. retain the classical definition of the reserve army as a permanent pool of unemployed labour; b. establish that the determinant of that army, as far as women are concerned is domestic labour; and c. claim that both are necessary effects of capitalist accumulation. The concept of *domestic labour* and its function in the reproduction of labour-power is introduced by Ceceña to explain the structure of sex-differentiated tasks within the household and to integrate it into the sexual division of labour in production — so that both appear to be necessary conditions for capitalism itself.

The problem, however, with this explanation of women's subordination is that it undermines the very conceptualisation of women as a reserve army of labour, which was the starting point. The more it is argued that it is women's position within the family which renders them attractive as labour to capital, the less it can be claimed that they constitute the reserve army, since the most coherent exposition of that concept in *Capital* (to which Ceceña constantly refers) identify it with the unemployed. So long as it is argued, as Ceceña does, that women will be drawn increasingly into employment, it is somewhat difficult to say at the same time that they increasingly swell the ranks of the industrial reserve army.

The status of the concept itself of the reserve army of labour is not unproblematic. The source of its ambiguity cannot be simply located in some misguided interpretation of Ceceña but in Marx' own discussion of that concept. Ceceña's fault lies in failing to deal with the non-correspondence between Marx' abstract analysis of the notion of capital which brings about the industrial reserve army, his conceptualization of the function of the army, i.e. to provide a permanent pool of cheap labour for individual capitals in specific social formations and his specifications of the sources of that reserve in a particular historical period in economic development.

These conceptual difficulties — the imperceptible slips from one level of analysis to another, the internal contradictions, indefiniteness and ambiguities generated by them — are sufficient to throw doubt on the value of the concept of the reserve

army of labour and on the soundness of Ceceña's attempt to make *Capital* the cornerstone in the analysis of the subordination of women.

3. María del Carmen Feijóo and Hilda Sábato, *Las Mujeres Frente al Servicio Militar, Todo es Historia*, enero 1983.

María del Carmen Feijóo and Hilda Sábato examine the forms of feminist agitation in Argentina within the context of the campaign in the beginning of this century against obligatory military service for men. They want to argue for the significance of this movement on the basis of the feminist impetus which, according to them, both mobilised and sustained effective opposition to the Act of obligatory military service for men. Feijóo and Sábato want to reclaim the importance of this participation on feminist grounds. The political thrust of this historical investigation is clearly motivated by contemporary debates after the War of the Malvinas. Feijóo and Sábato argue that it is imperative for the current campaign against obligatory military service to take account of its historical predecessor.

In attempting to delineate the terms of this historical opposition the intention is to raise questions relevant to the present conjuncture of opposition to militarism. Consideration of feminist theory and strategy in political matters of this kind necessarily encounters the spectre of women's relationships to the state. Feijóo and Sábato do posit the state as a monolithic apparatus which single-handedly imposed and implemented the Acts of obligatory military service. Now, the distinctive achievement of Feijóo and Sábato is, not the discussion of the formulation and deployment of the Acts by the state apparatuses, but the documentation of a women's movement of resistance. This is done in a celebratory fashion.

Feijóo and Sábato seem to have forgotten Eric Hobsbawm's caveat to political and labour historians: "To dip into the past for inspiring examples of struggle or the like is to write history backwards and eclectically. It is not a very good way of writing it."

Feijóo and Sábato argue from "the position of women" and more specifically from "the position of mothers". Women are seen essentially as mothers and are attributed an inherent pacifism as part of their essential and procreative nature.

Struggle in this area is, in the discourse of Feijóo and Sábato, really defined in terms of women regaining from the patriarchal state their control over the result of their reproductive capacity, originally invested in the feminine body.

The particular site of experience is in this way located in the body which then takes on the function of an origin. It becomes the source of a true speech, a *women's discourse*. Now, when the position of women is explained in terms of such a point of origin of sexual difference, specific practices and politics are denied effectiveness, since women's position is an expression of a fixed and unchanging essence through history. The body thus stands for the experiential over and against the *rational*, the repressed against the repressive, the individual against the mechanisms of social control. It manages to retain intact its own integrity and authenticity which allow it to utter an effective political critique and to offer a starting point from which to claim naturally occurring rights.

What is implied in that argument is an absolute possession of the body and its product and rights and responsibilities conferred by nature. Now, rights and respon-

sibilities are conferred by through particular social practices in which possession is always constrained. All rights, even those claimed by Feijóo and Sábato as mothers, are not theirs through their individual and essential nature, but are part of the construction of social objects — which involves the recognition of the effectiveness of social definitions and social practices which have produced the category of motherhood.

4. This comment will be concerned with the work of **Julieta Kirkwood** of FLACSO. In particular we will consider the following studies: *Investigación de la mujer en Chile*, 1981; *Feminismo y participación política en Chile* (published in **Temas Socialistas**. Ed. E. Ortiz, Vector 1982); *Ser política en Chile: las feministas y los partidos*, FLACSO 1982.

J. Kirkwood's work is an extremely valuable contribution to the development of political and theoretical debate within what is loosely called the Women's Movement. There are several positive tenets to Kirkwood's work. She emphasizes that the demarcation of a definite area and means of feminist politics is a necessity if feminism shall resist being absorbed by other politics. She questions the subordination of the women's movement to the logic of the *class struggle*.

Kirkwood points out that traditionally, in Chile as in other countries, Marxist politics have stressed not only the organization of capitalist society in terms of class divisions, but also the primacy of the class division as the determinant of political action. It has also been argued that the transformation of this division will necessarily bring about significant changes for women. But the problem of women cuts across class divisions. Given this traditional definition of society in terms of class and politics, the problem of women is always seen as secondary to the problem of the class organization of society. Ranking the politics of women in this way has left feminists like Kirkwood in difficult political straits, since she has no desire to dissociate herself from a political stand which aims to erase the class basis of society. But neither can she accept the empty promise that the *transition to socialism* will in itself bring about a change in the relations between the sexes.

She affirms that:

“En efecto, el feminismo se constituye realmente en movimiento de liberación social en Chile, en tanto logra articular la lucha y consecuente creación ideológica, simultáneamente en contra de la opresión de clases y de la opresión patriarcal, sin priorizar ni sacrificar una lógica a la otra; sino planteando una nueva integración de esas antinomias aparentemente irreductibles.”

La Política del Feminismo en Chile, p. 9, FLACSO, 1983

Now there are problems with the notion of patriarchy employed by Kirkwood. Patriarchy has a loose definition. It is generally employed to designate a problem — a contradiction between men and women, the recognition of a gender division which implies power and demands explanation. The term patriarchal describes a form of power which does not do justice to the complexity of the problem of sexual division and society. It implies a model of power as interpersonal domination.

There are also serious problems with the attempted conjunction between the concept of patriarchy with its corresponding causality of cause as origin and, a Marxist concept of social totality and class structure with its corresponding causality of

determination in the last instance by the economic level. Insofar as they locate a different *material basis* and do so through a different concept of determination, they cannot be coherently sustained and being complementary.

Kirkwood conceives the family as an intersection between two processes, the needs of capitalism and the effects of patriarchy. The nuclear family, the object of their attention is conceived as that intersection, the economic and social form that serves capitalism and at the same time enslaves women as housewives and lock them in the *privacy* of the family.

Now, while it is of outmost importance to deal with many of the problems addressed in such analyses it seems more fruitful to do so in a way that changes the terms of such a debate. The account of familial and surrounding social forms should be done without recourse to essentialist conceptions of the family and subjectivist conceptions of the positions occupied within them.

Any political and theoretical argument which places itself within the Women's Movement commits itself to a concern with what is specific to women. But some theoretical formulations of women as a specific social group entail positions which are problematic. One such formulation is in terms of essential femininity. This can take two forms; either the idea of transhistorical oppression of women at all times, or the idea of an *original* femininity which is repressed or suppressed. Another approach is to assume that women are a social group, but one of those whose history has been suppressed. The reinstatement of this history is then assumed to be a sufficient political practice. These tendencies are not altogether absent from Kirkwood's work but she does not fall prey to the powerful tendency in the women's movement to evaluate its own past and present practices in a mode of celebration.

While Kirkwood's work must be seen as a very valuable contribution it is necessary for any effective evaluation of it to consider certain dangers of her position in which humanist theories of the subject, derived from Lukács and Sartre, are reproduced within feminism with effects on the formulation of feminist struggles.

As a category the subject does not consist of a fixed content but of a multiplicity and diversity of forms in which the subject is constructed. What is implied is not an absolute self possession of the subject of rights and responsibilities conferred by nature. Rights and responsibilities are conferred through particular social practices in which disposition is always constrained. **Individuals** are therefore the site of different rights and responsibilities which are concomitant with different forms of disposition. It becomes impossible to speak of a subject because it is not the same subject which is constructed in different practices. Therefore, there cannot be an essential subject whose control would secure a liberation of women and men.

There are also references in Kirkwood's works to Michel Foucault which represent a certain subversion of the predominant humanist discourse. While an influence by the work of Foucault should be judged as basically positive, one should also be aware of its limitations. The most relevant of these is the retention of the concept of the human subject, albeit as an object of historical investigation. Foucault *decentres* the subject but it remains a totality and hence exposed to the problems which arise for any theory in which such global concepts figure. What is at stake here is the possibility of a genealogy of the emergence of the female subject which does not assume an unconditional subject in the course of that account.

It is clear that to decentre the subject is not to detotalise it. If the subject is merely decentred, it is necessary to set up some other principle of unity. The object of the investigation remains the female subject in its totality. Since the totality is assumed *a priori*, there cannot be a theoretical specification of a set of social determinants for such a totality, for the *subject* must in this type of discourse necessarily transcend any particular social relationship, or determine combinations of relations.

To sum up:

Kirkwood's work raises issues of utmost importance. Serious consideration of the questions posed by her requires rethinking some of the most cherished prejudices about socialist politics and socialism itself. Indeed, the scope and importance of these questions is such that it is by no means clear that progressive politics which takes them seriously can unproblematically treat socialism as the organising principle of its strategies and objectives.

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