

Searching for Gender: Reminiscences from Yale in the 1970s

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1. It is a late winter afternoon on a Friday, the year 1974, and philosophy graduate students are meeting in one of the charmingly dilapidated rooms of Connecticut Hall. For weeks there has been a buzz in the corridors of this ancient building that two of our classmates will “take Hegel on.” The title of their presentation is something like “Sex and Gender in Hegel.” It may have been the first time that anyone had used “sex” in the venerable halls of that building—certainly in public, even if not in private. Along with twenty-five other colleagues I crowd into the second floor seminar room of Connecticut Hall, and watch as Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore, two of the more eminent academics of my generation, cite paragraphs # 165 to 169 of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, on the nuclear family. In these paragraphs Hegel argues that the mind divides itself necessarily and not accidentally into two kinds: the male who is active, who knows conflict, labor, war and struggle; and the female who is passive, intuitive, and who does not labor and struggle but lives in the “immediacy of the

concept”—as the Hegelian lingo goes. And now comes the *coup de grace*—the blow of death—to all of us interested in European thought:

Women may well be educated but they are not made for the higher sciences, for philosophy and artistic productions which require a “universal element.” Women may have insights, taste and delicacy, but they do not possess the ideal. The difference between man and woman is the difference between animal and plant; the animal is closer in character to man, the plant to woman. (G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. by T.M. Knox, #166 Addition)

The small seminar room is warm; warmer than usual, I feel. My classmates are roaring with laughter: they always knew that Hegel was an idiot anyway. As the presentation ends amidst great mirth and laughter, the discussion period begins. Hands go up: “Of course,” says a woman’s voice, “it is easy to tear Hegel out of his historical context and to parody him, the way you have done. But it would have been much more interesting for you to analyze why it even occurred to Hegel to include a chapter on the family in his philosophy of the modern state, when with the exception of Rousseau, no one before him had; furthermore, remember Kant’s definition of marriage—“the consensual agreement to the mutual use of each others’ sexual organs.” Can you say that Hegel is more ridiculous than Kant when it comes to the family? Besides which, you do not really address the metaphysical question of the relationship between empirical reality—i.e. sexual difference—and the philosophical concept . . . ” and so on and so forth.

By now you will have guessed that that squirming young woman in the corner was myself, attempting to salvage my philosophical hero from the infamous attacks of that afternoon. I wanted to save Hegel—no matter what his views on gender were, for it seemed to me, as to many others of my generation, that without knowing your Hegel, Kant, Rousseau, as precursors to Marx, not only would you not be able to understand Freud, Marcuse, Benjamin, Arendt and Habermas, but you would not be able to

engage in a radical critique of society either. We were right and wrong: we were right that one had to know Hegel, and wrong that either knowing or not knowing him would have enabled us to save the world. An Italian feminist, Adrianna Cavarrero, would write much later “Spittiamo sobre Hegel”—“Let us spit on Hegel.” No, that afternoon I was not about to spit on Hegel and would not even allow the gender question to detract from my allegiances.

Twenty years later, in 1991, as the gender question had become part of my scholarly work, I revisited these paragraphs in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and wrote an essay called “On Hegel, Women and Irony.”¹ This time I did not try to save Hegel, instead I attempted to hear the voices of those women in his circle whose lives and personalities were part of the historical and philosophical prejudices which underlined the text. I reclaimed the voices of women like Caroline Schlegel Schelling, and wrote: “The vision of Hegelian reconciliation has long ceased to convince: the otherness of the other is that moment of irony, reversal and inversion with which we must live. What women can do today is to restore irony to the dialectic, by deflating the pompous march of historical necessity . . . ” (256)

I recall this episode for two reasons: first, it reveals something about the graduate student culture of Yale in the 1970s; second, and more importantly, it makes vivid that the gender question enters into our scholarly work and preoccupations at different times in our lives and at different speeds. Just as there are different temporalities in each discipline for the gender question to become relevant in that discipline—think of history and literature here in contrast to philosophy and biology—so too there is an individual time for hearing the gender question. My own epiphany as a feminist came much later, when I heard the psychoanalyst and social theorist, Jessica Benjamin, discuss women’s psychosexual development. In a lecture given in Munich in 1979, where I had gone to study with Juergen Habermas, Benjamin lectured on the consequences that neglecting different gender patterns of relating to authority had had for Frankfurt School theories on the

authoritarian personality. That was my moment of epistemic conversion to gender as a category of analysis.

At Yale in the 1970s, there were three to four women admitted to the incoming graduate philosophy classes every year. We were blissfully ignorant of the fact that Yale College had started admitting women only in 1969; we were removed from the concerns of undergraduate women just as we were removed from the struggles of the first junior women faculty who were hired in my department. The first senior woman joined the Yale philosophy department in 1973. For us, graduate student women, professional survival in a predominantly male discipline—philosophy—was paramount. However, there were tears as well as moments of depression, feelings of defeat as well as great loneliness along the way, but it never occurred to us that we could overcome these woes or do something about them by organizing as women. I had been a member of the student movement since 1968, and when measured up to the struggle against global imperialism and capitalism, the gender question appeared trivial.

By the time I received my Ph.D. in 1977 and was hired as an Assistant Professor in the Philosophy department, things were changing. We heard through our undergraduates that colleagues in the history department were teaching courses on women, gender and the family; that Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man were taking apart Rousseau, Hegel, and Kant in their lectures. The intellectual foment that was to be known much later as the postmodernist, feminist, and multiculturalist attack on the tradition had begun. But I was struggling with Hegel, Habermas and Arendt, whose lectures I had heard at the New School for Social Research, and who had inspired as well as intimidated me. When one of my brilliant undergraduate students, whose admission to the graduate program in 1978 I had supported—Judith Butler—told me about “take back the night” marches in Wooster Square and about organizations like “Women Against Rape,” I felt like I had more important things to worry about: late capitalism, totalitarianism, the Freudo-Marxist theory of the failure of the working class to resist fascism, etc. You all know the list.

When I think back upon those days, I am grateful to this institution for one thing: the philosophical education I received at Yale provided me with a space of “Aufklaerung,” of Enlightenment in the two senses of the German word—of illumination and a clearing. This institution not only introduced me to Hegel as well as Aristotle, Kant as well as John Dewey, Charles Sanders Pierce as well as Josiah Royce, but it also gave me the “clearing”—the space and the location—from which to unfold and to think my own eccentric thoughts. Yale’s famous quirkiness in scholarship, the appreciation of those who follow the paths of the mind which seemingly lead nowhere fast; the encouragement to pursue one’s vocation even if it seems ridiculous and useless to others, and above all, the belief that human history mattered and that in the humanities the text was to be taken more seriously than even the author herself—these silent principles of a Yale education have deeply influenced me. But that was then. What about today?

II. I want to recall a distinction known to many of you between the “women’s question” and the “question of gender.” Asking the women’s question means making women the subject and object of our scholarly, artistic, and scientific endeavors. These can range from reconstructing the history of women’s midwifery and knowledge of medicine to analyzing the epidemiology of various diseases as they affect women of different colors and cultural groups, as has been done recently, for example, about the occurrence of breast cancer and other diseases among black as opposed to white women, or among women of European Jewish versus women of oriental Jewish descent.

Making women the subject of our inquiries involves then reclaiming women’s achievements and contributions as philosophers, scientists, composers and artists. Such endeavors aim at rendering women “visible,” as the title of one of the earliest collections of women’s history was named.² Perhaps less generously, this approach can also be called “the mix and stir” approach. By adding women to the disciplines, we are not really changing their assumptions, theories or hypotheses; we are just putting women

into the mix. This approach has been successfully practiced in history as well as literature, in sociology as well as medicine, in political science as well as musicology.

The gender question is different. To be guided by “gender” as a category of analysis means interrogating those socio-cultural, historical and institutional practices through which human beings become sexed bodies, and are endowed with a certain psycho-sexual gender constitution. In the early days of feminist theory, the gender question was focused on the binarisms of “male and female.” Since then the rise of gay, lesbian, and queer studies has considerably complicated this framework.

While most disciplines in the university can accommodate the “women’s question” without much restructuring of the terms of inquiry, it is much more difficult to accommodate the gender question without subverting fundamental assumptions, theories, and premises. Those disciplines which aspire to speak on behalf of a universal subject—the rational self; man as the *zoon politikon*—are the ones most deeply affected. I am thinking here of philosophy, jurisprudence, the law, economics, political theory, linguistics, and the natural sciences, as opposed to history, anthropology, literature, and sociology. Gender emerged as a category of inquiry in these latter disciplines earlier, and was integrated into the central framework more quickly than in the former. In the case of all disciplines, to raise the gender question means creating moments of epistemological clearing—in the double sense of *illumination* and a *new location*. At such points the inclusion of gender opens new venues of inquiry; and we become aware that its prior omission had closed the field and distorted the truth of its assertions. I call the emergence of new questions, vistas, and research agendas through the inclusion of gender, the work of “feminist reconstruction,” and the critique of the field, because of its exclusion of gender, that of “feminist deconstruction.”

An example from my field of political philosophy may clarify the difference between these two procedures. Most modern political thought begins with a complex metaphor called the “state of nature.” This ahistorical condition is said to describe human nature;

it is also added that without government, “men” would be found in such a condition as described by the theorists. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, their fate would be “nasty, brutish and short” or “they would roam around like a happy savage,” according to Rousseau. Civil government emerges through a social contract among individuals who experience the untenable condition of the state of nature. Political legitimacy results from this original act of consent.

Feminist political theorists pointed out that women and children seemed invisible in the state of nature; this mythical condition was populated by adult men alone. Where were the women and the children? How did their absence affect the logic of these theories of political legitimacy, consent, and obligation? The feminist work of *deconstruction* of the social contract tradition—as exercised for example by Carole Pateman, Hannah Pitkin, Susan Okin, Jean Elshtain, Wendy Brown, and many others³—revealed that the categories of early bourgeois liberalism, like equality, autonomy, property, consent, were all gender-coded, and that in fact the social contract was underlined by an inarticulated gender contract. The feminist work of *reconstruction*, by contrast, would not restrict itself to demystifying the claims of the tradition but to answering the question, how must we rethink political legitimacy and obligation if our model of the citizen is not the male warrior who is also the head of household but the wage-earning mother of dependent children? How must we rethink democracy, normatively as well as institutionally, if we want the working mother to be a full citizen?

The work of feminist reconstruction and deconstruction continues in each of our disciplines, at different speeds and intervals. Yet some of the early epistemic dynamism behind this work has been lost. Partly through the rise of cultural studies, the gender question has been displaced. One of the issues which I would like to see addressed as we look ahead is how the rise of cultural studies and the diffusion of the gender question into the multi-plex identity questions of “race, class, ethnicity, sexuality” has affected the task of feminist reconstruction and deconstruction.

In the light of the events of September 11 and the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it is also clear that much of our thinking has been parochial and trapped by concepts of culture and identity that had emerged in the heyday of identity politics in the United States. We have now entered a new era in which the identity question is on the agenda of the globe, and the study of culture has to become the study of cultural contrasts and comparisons, of the interpenetration of cultures and religions, of the complex and difficult dialogue of cultures across a global civilization. The woman question and the gender question will play a crucial role at this juncture. Samuel Huntington delivered the *bon mot* of “the coming clash of civilizations.”⁴ Certainly at the surface the events of September 11 seemed like a “Jihad against civilization.” I think this is wrong. These categories are too blunt, too homogenizing; they flatten contrasts and divert from the interpenetration, dialogue, as well as confrontation of cultures, which is our lot in today’s world. “Sexual difference and collective identities”—this is the new global constellation which we must rethink.⁵

The contradictory pulls of globalization, even before their murderous manifestation during the fall of 2001, had been visible for some time. As globalization proceeds at a dizzying rate, as a material global civilization encompasses the earth from Hong Kong to Lima, from Istanbul to Helsinki, worldwide integration of the economic, military, technological, and communications media, has been accompanied by cultural and collective disintegration. Religious and ethnic conflicts have affected some of the oldest democracies in the Third World, like India and Turkey. Need one mention the civil wars in the Balkans, the nationality conflicts in Macedonia, Adzerbaijan, Chechnya, and Rwanda? Spinning a dynamic which we have hardly begun to understand, globalization has been accompanied by socio-cultural fragmentation of old nation-states; the rise of ethnic, national, and gender violence; and of course of fundamentalisms. As the markers of certainty have declined, “new” signifiers which present identities (as if they were racially, anthropologically or confessionally

deep-seated distinctions) have reemerged. Essentialism has raised its ugly head, with predictable consequences.

When cultures and civilizations meet, the status of women and children is the most contested aspect of their encounters. “The traffic in women,” or the exchange of women through barter and marriage, war and conquest, has been a firm feature of most known human societies everywhere. The private sphere, broadly conceived as it includes women and children and the regulation of sex, birth, and death, leads and will continue to lead to some of the most bitter and deeply fraught cultural struggles in our own days. We see these in the contemporary multiculturalism and feminism debates. What should liberal democracies do about the practices of clitoridectomy—criminalize those who practice it, tolerate them, ignore them? What about arranged marriages? What about the wearing of head scarves? As globalization brings with it the increased and rapid encounters of cultures, faiths, ethnicities, and nationalities, these questions face us with urgency. Negotiating, debating, reformulating the rights of women and children across cultures and to do this without hectoring, humiliating, and dismissing the culture of other women and children; to understand the momentous changes that globalization has brought in the status of women in many parts of the world, from computer chip workers in southeast Asia, to textile workers in Bangladesh; to the pleasure workers of the newly emergent economies of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, these are the tasks of transnational or global feminism. The “global traffic in women” is underway.

Let me conclude by reminding you that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had consolidated its power by declaring war on its own women: it denied them public education; it has imprisoned them in the home and has sent many professional women like teachers, doctors, and lawyers to prisons or hospitals; it has denied women basic health care. The war against civilization began at home, with the war against women. I have often asked myself why in effect, much before the events of September 11, 2001, this regime was not accused of crimes against humanity

on account of what they had done to their own women. Is the woman question not also a human question? What can we do as women in the coming hard days such as to create social movements, NGOs, and spaces in civil societies in order to keep transnational channels of communication open, to help one another, to understand our differences, and to make sure that the rights of women and children are always on the agenda of international debates and negotiations?

- 1 S. Benhabib, "On Hegel, Women and Irony," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York and London: Routledge and Polity, 1992), 242–260.
- 2 *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard, eds., Second edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).
- 3 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Hannah Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Jean Bethke Elhstain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983); Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988).
- 4 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
- 5 See S. Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities. The New Constellations," *Signs*. 24.2 (1999), 335–361.