

COMMENTS ON ZARINA MAHARAJ'S 'SUBVERSIVE INTENT: A SOCIAL THEORY OF GENDER'

Cherryl Walker

I agree with Zarina Maharaj about the contribution that 'sound theory' can make to feminist politics. I also agree about the importance of viewing social structure as historically constructed, hence mutable, hence more amenable to human agency than hyper-determinists and functionalists allow - although I think social constructionism is more of a sociological commonplace than she recognises. However, I disagree with both the style and much of the substance of her analysis in 'Subversive intent: a social theory of gender' (*Transformation* 24, 1994).

In the interests of promoting debate, I offer the following critical comments. I begin with what I regard as significant conceptual and historical weaknesses in her analysis, and then address the not unrelated problem of style.

Firstly, there appears to be an unresolved tension between the post-modernist and the realist 'moments' in Maharaj's analysis, leading to what strikes me as major ambivalences, if not contradictions, in her argument. Thus in one section she uses post-modernism to support her dismissal of 1970s liberal, marxist and radical feminisms as monocausal and essentialist (also, in passing, racist, ethnocentric and middle-class) (47). Here she argues for a 'holistic view' of gender relations, which 'sees women's specific experiences as generated by intersecting structures which may derive from any social realm, be it the realm of culture, economics, politics, religion or ideology' (46). Here, there are no *a priori* assumptions about what structures are primary in any given society - all is historically and culturally specific intersection and context.

In this vein she quotes approvingly J Cocks on 'the multiple axes on which power in society inevitably turns':

This principle of power's fragmentation leaves us no reason to suppose that all of these axes are reducible to one or logically primary or a cause of others ... there is (no) single centre to the life of social power (47).

Two pages on, however, under the influence of RW Connell, she retreats from post-modernist pluralism to a sterner assertion of hierarchy in social structure. Here she endorses Connell's claim that gender analysis must *always* include an

analysis of labour, power and 'cathexis' (which I translate as the social practices through which emotional and sexual relationships between people are conducted and shaped). This is the route to understanding women's oppression, in all societies, at all times:

To say that structures of labour, power and cathexis are the major structural features of any gender regime and of any gender order is to specify a framework for the structural analysis of women's experience of oppression in any institution of any society at any time (49).

Perhaps Connell explains the relationship between a structural framework claiming validity for all societies at all times and the rejection of reductionist world views. Maharaj, however, does not. Should we, following her, take as given that labour, power and cathexis constitute the starting point for an analysis of gender relations in southern Africa - or should we steadfastly refuse to be locked into such pre-given analytical categories, ones which have, furthermore, been developed in quite different social, cultural and historical contexts from our own? And if the latter, how might we then order the multiple intersecting structures that the pluralist approach will undoubtedly throw up?

Maharaj is also ambivalent about the familiar theoretical dilemma of the relationship between structure and agency. In her account, structure seems to win out theoretically, although agency is proclaimed the victor politically. On the one hand structure is 'vulnerable' to practice and thus modified by practice; on the other hand, again quoting Connell, 'practice cannot escape structure' (43). Her conclusion quotes Connell on the political imperative of constructing 'majority groupings' which will be able to challenge the gender order on particular fronts and thus create new and more emancipatory social structures. However, Connell himself appears to fall back on a view of the gender order as an impersonal 'force' driven by an internal logic untouched by human hands; to me at least this is highly reminiscent of the 'logic of capitalism' theories that Maharaj earlier decries. Thus, after stressing the political importance of constructing political majorities to take advantage of what are described as 'crisis tendencies' in contemporary capitalist societies, Connell notes:

'Whether the gender order's tendencies towards crisis have gone far enough to provide a basis for majorities committed to major structural reform is perhaps the key strategic question radical politics now faces' (quoted on page 54, emphasis added).

Perhaps part of the problem lies in Maharaj's conception of 'practice', ie human behaviour which shapes but is also shaped by social institutions. She appears to identify practice with challenge to given social institutions - so that the assumption of 'practice' as constitutive of social structure becomes the presumption of

political action that is necessarily resisting or transformative.

It is this vulnerability of structure to practice that is what makes us agents of history. As structure becomes modified by human practice so the experiences and options for people these emergent structures generate, change ... (43).

What is not acknowledged is the way in which human behaviour may well affirm and reinforce dominant social structures: practice as conservation rather than transformation.

Secondly, I regard Maharaj's dismissive account of '1970s' western feminism as unhelpful and superficial. The appellation 'racist and ethnocentric' (47) is gratuitous, especially in view of her own use of the theoretical insights of, *inter alia*, Rubin, Young and Whitehead. Furthermore, her judgement that liberal, marxist and radical feminisms all failed to provide a 'rational' basis for political action is undermined by her endorsement of Connell's recognition that 'since ... gender is constructed simultaneously with a multiplicity of relations - such as class, race and ethnicity - each historical analysis may show that women perceive long-run gender interests differently and according to their own life experience' (51-52).

Of greater concern, however, is the narrowness of Maharaj's account of the debates and her lack of historical perspective on the development of ideas. She is at pains to present as radically new the theoretical framework derived from Connell's examination of the three 'major structural features' of any gender regime, ie labour, power and cathexis. What is striking, however, is how similar Connell's analytical framework is to that put forward in 1971 by Juliet Mitchell in her feminist classic, *Woman's Estate*. In this book, far from positing an ahistorical and monocausal explanation for women's oppression (Maharaj's summary of the theoretical thinking of this period), Mitchell argued for the historically specific interaction of four key structures, namely: production, reproduction (of children), sexuality and the socialisation of children. She wrote:

Past socialist theory has failed to differentiate woman's condition into its separate structures, which together form a complex - not a simple - unity. To do this will mean rejecting the idea that woman's condition can be deduced derivatively from the economy (Engels) or equated symbolically with society (early Marx). Rather, it must be seen as a *specific* structure, which is a unity of different elements. The variations of woman's condition throughout history will be the result of different combinations of these elements (1971:100).

My point here is not whether or not one agrees with Mitchell's or Connell's formulation of the key elements - or thinks they are both misguided. Rather, I wish to underscore the intellectual debt that Connell and others owe to the

theorists of the 1970s and to challenge the presumption that only in today's enlightened (or should I say post-enlightened?) era have feminists come to grips with cultural and historical 'specificity' in the construction of gender relations.

There is, in any case, a crucial flaw in Maharaj's claim that because 1970s feminists failed to understand social structure as historically constructed, they were incapable of providing a 'rational' basis for a politics of change. What is a 'rational' basis for social change? The fact is that radical, marxist and liberal feminists of the 1970s did engage politically. They drew on their different perspectives not simply to analyse but also to challenge particular institutions and norms and in the process they reshaped gender relations. Surely this is precisely what Connell is arguing when he states that structure cannot be 'abstracted from practice'? Whether or not the practice amounted to a fundamental restructuring of gender relations is another matter - but then, Connell's own account suggests the importance of the cumulative effect of multiple challenges to different aspects of the gender regime in order to create the 'crisis tendencies' which allow for 'major structural reform': 'Structures cannot be levered into new shapes without mutations of grassroots practice. But majorities do not fall from heaven. They have to be constructed' (53).

In the end, I am not clear how Maharaj's political agenda differs from that of 1970s liberal feminism. Her account of a transformative politics produces an agenda of action that could come straight from liberal feminism. It includes 'challenges to the legitimacy of the state posed by women's demands for fair and equal treatment before the law on the basis of equal citizenship, such as demands for equal pay and equal opportunities in education', 'state funding for women's education on a scale comparable with men's, the training of police for intervention in domestic violence, the framing of laws which give women greater control over their reproductive capacity, changing the provisions about property, taxation and pensions which treat a married woman in her own right, etc.' (52, 53). What, in practical and strategic terms, is the difference between such an agenda derived from a theoretical analysis of the relationship between structure and practice (Maharaj) and one deriving from the belief in equality, common citizenship and individual rights (classic liberalism)?

My final set of concerns relates to the way in which the argument is presented - in particular the difficulty of the language. It seems clear to me that no theory, no matter how brilliant, will be of much relevance to women's struggles for justice and equity so long as it is couched in obscure, academically overloaded terms. This is more than a plea for academics to 'simplify' their language and 'popularise' their concepts in order to make their analyses 'accessible to the masses'. At its most critical, it is a question about the relationship between theoretical rigour and linguistic obfuscation. Ideas that cannot be expressed

reasonably clearly are likely to be muddled in their conception. A related concern is that Maharaj's article perpetuates what is ultimately an elitist practice - it makes theorising appear esoteric and difficult, the preserve of a small group of insiders.

I really struggled to decode much of what was written. For instance, what is meant by the following:

The three major elements in the structural inventory of gendered experience in any specific institution can be found from among specific structures in each of the three categories of labour power and cathexis outlined above (51).

The best interpretation I could get is: 'Labour, power and cathexis can be found among specific structures in labour, power and cathexis', which did not make any sense to me. My interpretation may be quite wrong, but then that reinforces my original point. The language is often so tortuous and obscure that deriving meaning becomes a kind of guessing game of what might have been intended, given the theoretical flags flown, ie the illustrious authors and texts cited and the code phrases marking the text (for example, 'specific', 'essentialism', 'capillaries', 'inextricably interwoven'). Since Maharaj is interested in developing theory that can generate political action for change, I presume she is interested in communicating with her readers and does not wish to quarantine her argument behind the post-modernist claim that all meanings are relative and contextual.

Yes, we need theory. We need theory that explains rather than obscures social relationships, that decodes rather than encodes social institutions and practices, including intellectual ones. We also need theory that engages critically but fully with the history of ideas and especially the 'historical specificity' of where we live. In the end, it seems to me, only the intention of this article is subversive.