UNRAVELING CHERRYL WALKER'S CONFUSION

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I welcome Cherryl Walker's response to my article despite its acerbic tone.

In the interests of a productive debate let us keep a firm hold on the purpose of my article. In the introduction to 'Subversive intent: a social theory of gender' I state that the main purpose 'is to capture the sense of [Connell's] theory, and the impact of its transformative potential'(40). Furthermore, precisely because I do not regard any theory as complete, I claim that 'such a social theory of gender is currently in the making' (ibid).

Walker claims that there is 'an unresolved tension ... leading to ... major ambivalences, if not contradictions, in her [my] argument' (88). If this is correct, the views expressed in my article need major revision. I do not think so.

Let us take this aspect of Walker's criticism step by step. Can we agree that any feminism which is founded on essentialism is fatally flawed? That what is required is an holistic view of gender relations which sees women's specific experiences as generated by intersecting structures which may derive from any social realm?

This proposition is linked to the insights of postmodernism. If we stop at this point, we stand at the edge of the abyss where postmodernism leaves us stranded: it invites the abandonment of theory. How do we avoid falling into this abyss?

This is a critical question which warrants separate attention. The answer lies in the crucial distinction between postmodernism and postmodern feminism. In my article 'Subversive intent ...' I state that I deal with this in a separate paper (45). This paper is to appear in a forthcoming anthology entitled 'Knowledge, Method and the Public Good' edited by Jo Muller (UCT) and Johann Mouton (Stellenbosch).

In order to help Walker out of her confusion, we need to deal with this distinction at this point of my rejoinder. In my view, the way out and the way forward lies in postmodern feminism. Accepting that reality is relentlessly plural and heterogeneous, postmodern feminism argues that social theory is nevertheless possible.

What criteria must such a postmodern feminist theory meet? This issue is examined rigorously by Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990) in their

seminal article 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism'. They conclude:

> Theory would be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods, and to that of different groups within societies and periods. Thus, ... categories ... would be inflected by temporality, with historically specific institutional categories ... taking precedence over ahistorical ... categories like reproduction and mothering. Where categories of the latter sort were not eschewed altogether, they would be ... framed by a historical narrative and rendered temporally and culturally specific ... When its focus became cross-cultural or transepochal, its mode of attention would be comparativist rather than universalising ... (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990:34 my emphasis).

Connell's theory passes this test. It meets the requirements of postmodern feminist theory precisely because his categories of labour, power and cathexis are not ahistorical. They underpin a structural framework which is 'cross-cultural or transepochal' and become 'inflected with temporality' in attempting to account for gender relations in specific societies. This is the meaning of the statement I make that:

> Connell's framework for the social analysis of gender amounts to a metatheoretical framework: it suggests identifying the culturally specific structures of labour, power and cathexis at play in order to understand and analyse the gender relations in any institution in any socio-historical context (49).

Earlier, I say 'Connell:

> ... attempts to account for gender relations in terms of historically specific social structures, dismissing as misleading unanswerable questions about origins, roots, causes or final analyses, questions rooted in essentialist assumptions. His attempt poses instead the answerable question albeit a very difficult one of how gender relations are organised as a going concern (45).

So when Walker asks:

> Should we, following her [Maharaj] take as given that labour, power and cathexis constitute the starting points 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? (89 my emphasis)

she confuses analytic categories which underpin cross-cultural theoretical frameworks with those ahistorical categories that are the hallmark of essentialism. The categories of the postmodern feminist Connell in no way resurrect

the Enlightenment project.

Categories are needed because, paraphrasing Bordo (1990), whilst reality itself may be relentlessly plural and heterogeneous, human understanding and interest cannot be. Categories which have to be fleshed out within a specific society and within the framework of its history are tools of analysis which can actually encourage difference to reveal itself. Labour, power and cathexis are such tools.

To change the metaphor: they are route-markers on a map which enable a researcher/analyst/theorist to traverse the gender terrain of a particular society. If, in the course of the journey they do not provide adequate pointers, additional route-markers will have to be inserted. Connell's view is that they are the major, but not the only structures, conditioning gendered experience. We have to start the journey at some point if we are to avoid falling into the postmodernist rejection of theory and with nothing more than a plethora of empirical studies. Walker acknowledges this when she says that if we reject Connell's 'pre-given analytical categories ... how might we then order the multiple intersecting structures that the pluralist approach will undoubtedly throw up?' (89 my emphasis). I am not aware that Walker has an answer. I do contend that Connell has.

Walker agrees that we need theory (92). But it is clear she has not begun to understand how such theory would be reconcilable with and would build on the insights of postmodern pluralism. We cannot escape the fact that such reconciliation is a difficult and intellectual exercise. Her confusion permeates her response. One symptom is her charge that there is an inconsistency in my approving of J Cocks on 'the multiple axes on which power in society inevitably turns' and the use of labour, power and cathexis as analytical categories (88/89). She fails to see that the structures within each of these categories may have their roots within the realms of ideology, politics, religion, economics or culture.

Walker criticises me for failing to see the conservation aspect in the relationship between structure and agency, and for focusing only on the transformation aspect of this relationship. However difficult she may find my style, she has failed to note my categoric assertion that 'it is in the interests of dominant social groups to create the conditions for cyclical practice' (43). She similarly chooses to ignore the example which describes a matrifocal kinship structure in a working class London family, an example of 'a structure being shown in its very process of constitution, constantly being made and re-made in a very active social practice' (42). (Such selective reading of my article underlies much of her criticism and is a symptom of her confusion). Conservation and the potential for transformation co-exist in the same social structure. I assumed this as an agreed starting point for all sociologists; that what distinguishes feminists who wish to change the status quo is that we are looking to the transformative capacity in social

structure which we as agents can exploit to bring about change.

She has difficulty in understanding what I mean by 'rational' action for social change. When practice is consistent with theory, it is 'rational'. Any social theory which does not rest on an understanding of 'practice as the substance of social structure' (41/42), on a 'thoroughgoing historicity in social structure' (43), cannot be consistent with practice aimed at changing structure. It is a lack of consistency between theory and practice, manifested in different ways in each of Giddens and the 70s Marxist, liberal and radical feminisms, that makes their politics of transformation irrational (43/44). I should have thought that very little decoding was necessary to understand the concept.

Her reaction to my assessment of 70s feminisms is also confused. I distinguish between socialist and other feminisms (43/44) and reject those that are founded on essentialism or/and which fail to provide a rational political strategy for change (44/45). My dismissal of 70s radical, liberal and Marxist feminisms on these grounds does not in any way mean that they have played no role in the feminist struggles of that period or that they have made no contributions towards the theoretical insights that we hold today. At all times historicity requires that we be clear about what we dismiss and what we appropriate. In my paper I actually acknowledge Connell's debt (47). But I do maintain that 'what makes his contribution original is the way he has combined these insights with his own to realise such a theory' (ibid).

I welcome Walker's reference to the work of Juliet Mitchell. I believe that 'Woman's Estate' was pathbreaking in the sense that Mitchell tried to construct a practice-related structural theory of gender. But while Juliet Mitchell helped open the door, it is Connell who leads us through that door. The charge that I fail to acknowledge the enormous debt that current theory owes to past thinkers is superficial, misleading and unfair, especially given that the main purpose of my article, which is insistent on the need for gender theory to be grounded on historicity and specificity, concepts dating back to Foucault and others, was 'to capture the sense of [Connell's] theory and the impact of its transformative potential'(40).

Given this as the main purpose of my article, Walker's criticism that I do not catalogue those whose thinking constituted the building blocks of Connell's theory is nit-picking. What I am arguing is that Connell's theory is (a) a postmodern feminist theory, (b) a socialist feminist theory (c) aimed at transformation rational in its own terms in a way that no other social theory of gender to date can claim, and (d) constitutes a step-change from all thinking hitherto on the question of theorising gender, or to be more precise, on the question of a sociology of gender that is an integral part of, and not just an add-on to, mainstream sociology.

I concede that my outline did not explicitly place Rubin, Whitehead and Young in the socialist feminist camp, which they are. Hence there is nothing inconsistent in using their theoretical insights. In this regard I also agree that my dismissal of 70s feminisms as 'racist, ethnocentric and middle class' is gratuitous because it is unsubstantiated in the article. However essentialism, which abstracts from a particular society and claims universal validity for its proposition/s, is implicitly racist and ethnocentric.

Perhaps Walker misreads my criticism of 70s radical, Marxist and liberal feminisms because, whether under the influence of postmodernism or not, there is a reluctance on the part of many feminists, who played a very important part in the women's struggle in South Africa, to grapple with analytic theory.

Part of the reason for this lies in her criticism of my style. The question of gender relations is a complex one. Writing on this matter at the level of theorising is also complex. It is in the nature of this intellectual debate that we should engage with all such writers no matter how complicated their presentations may be. We should not use anti-elitism as an excuse to propagate the view that theorising is a simple task which would be easily comprehensible to all. We need to distinguish between theorising and popularising the output of such labours. Indeed, if there is no such distinction, then there would be no need for a publication such as *Transformation*.

The centrality of praxis underlines the enormous importance of popularising theory. One should always strive for clarity of ideas and unambiguous formulation. I hope that Walker does not hide her recognition of the legitimacy of the need to produce theory under the guise of elitism. My article was directed at a particular audience and based on my perception that there is a critical need for South African feminists to debate a social theory of gender with a view to making political action for change more effective and bringing about a fundamental transformation.

I agree there are some high-flown formulations in my article. And the particular sentence which she cites is tautological. As to whether the bulk of the article required such painful decoding by her, I believe that there is hardly an article in *Transformation*, including her comment, which would be understood by anyone else other than a 'small group'. I would like to think that side by side with the intellectual task with which we are engaged, we would all seek to engage with a wider circle. The purpose of publishing my article was to generate an intellectual debate in search of a consensus which we would then seek to popularise.

As for my political agenda being no different from that of a liberal feminist, the fact that Connell recognises the importance of the cumulative effect of multiple changes must not deflect our attention from the need for a theory which enables action to bring about a fundamental restructuring of gender relations.

That is the central aim of Connell's theory. That is where the 70s feminists we are talking about failed. Walker's claim that these feminists 'reshaped gender relations' is a judgment not validated by the present-day conditions of the societies where they operated. Unless all that Walker wants to do is to applaud the changes that take place on the same plane of a particular step without giving account to the need for a theory which keeps us on track to a step-change. The issue is to recognise all the inputs in a particular society at a given time, including liberal reforms, which are helping to create 'crisis tendencies' and exploit these to construct majorities to achieve a radical restructuring of gender relations.

This is what distinguishes my political agenda a la Connell from that of liberal feminists. The fact that many items on our respective shopping lists may coincide should not obscure the strategic goal of consciously bringing about a step-change.

The fact of the matter is that democratic South Africa is in a state of intense movement to change gender relations. Different forces with different philosophical underpinnings and therefore different strategic goals (whether articulated or not) are engaged in constructing alliances which are in a state of flux. While we work assiduously to gather together all these forces within the women's sector as well as beyond it, it is as critical that those who are committed to bringing about a transformation in gender relations should not abandon developing a theoretical framework so that the current changes do indeed lead to a fundamental restructuring of gender relations in South Africa, the type of restructuring which has not yet been realised anywhere to date.

REFERENCES

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