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Analysis of Feminism V

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Title: Analysis of Feminism V

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This is the last in a 5-part series on an analysis of feminism based on the research of Yvon Provençal. Dr. Provençal has been teaching philosophy at the Cégep de Granby (Québec) for nine years. He received his PhD in philosophy from the Université de Montréal in 1979. Dr. Provençal is the founder of the Respect Project. The Project focuses on research related to the integral respect of cultures and persons, is the source of Dr. Provençal's work on feminism, and is located at http://pages.infinit.net/provyvon/index_eng.html. Dr. Provençal can be reached at yprov@videotron.ca. What follows is a slightly edited version of his work on feminism.

Principles for a New Social Criticism

Introduction

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan describes a "problem that has no name"--a kind of malaise that attacks female American housekeepers. These housekeepers feel an unceasing fatigue. They have the sensation of not existing and the feeling that their everyday life is useless and nonsensical. They have difficulty in motivating themselves in order to achieve their everyday tasks. Physicians themselves are puzzled. They speak about the "housekeeper syndrome" and prescribe tranquillizing remedies.

The problem so described by Friedan is real and, in fact, seems very wide-spread in modern times. Several writers have described the general condition of human beings in very similar terms. In the case of women, the problem is emphasized because there is a crisis of identity that is linked to the practice of their traditional role. However, I think that one can show that the same kind of malaise attacks not only women, but also many men who are a prey to feeling that things don't make sense. Moreover, feminist thought allows for a diagnosis applicable to every human being and, implicitly, principles for a new social criticism applicable to humanity in general.

There are three such basic principles. First, the Principle of ignorance entails that present human society is much more ignorant and incompetent than what one generally thinks. What society has accomplished until now has been only in a somewhat conscious and autonomous way. Second, the Principle of confidence entails that humanity will reach other stages of development in the future, if development continues in a normal way. Third, the Principle of acknowledgment entails respect for existing moral cultures, existing possibilities, and also new possibilities that will be opened by the future stages of humanity's development.

The most well-known thinkers of social criticism have systematically failed to consider certain cultures--like the women culture and most of the smallest cultures. The very notion of moral culture has failed them until now. The latter fact explains the former one to a great extent. It follows that this kind of social criticism has a totalizing pretension--i.e., what is valuable for the unique dominating culture should be valuable for the whole of groups and cultures. The totalizing pretension is tantamount to a kind of rationalism that denies identities or impugns them as irrational. The ignorance of the very notion

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of "moral culture" affects the whole of contemporary social criticism. Even when this kind of social criticism is trying to acknowledge and respect cultures and groups, it passes over most of them.

The Principle of Ignorance

The principle of ignorance alludes to the acknowledgment of a profound immaturity of present humanity, especially in its scientific and technological knowledge. This immaturity is all the more profound because humanity is unconscious of it.

The present state of social criticism gives evidence of this situation. For example, criticism inspired by Marxism claims the suppression and the domination of man-by-man. Marxist thinkers affirm that they know the means to deliver humanity from its alienation or enslavement and to allow it to manage its history.

Marxism has inspired the main developments of social criticism such as it is today. However, because of its pretension to be able to make a scientific critique--thoroughly trustworthy and self-responsible--this criticism shows a profound immaturity of the present humanity. Let me clarify that the main obstacle here is not the reducing side of Marxism--viz., its claim that only production relationships are responsible for that which stands in the way of human progress. Rather, the main obstacle is essentially its pretension to a kind of knowledge and ability that present humanity does not possess yet, even regarding social criticism.

Our present knowledge, as a thinking humanity, is practically null regarding the causes of the generalized disrespect between human beings--whether this disrespect be interpreted in terms of alienation, exploitation or hatred against those who differs from oneself. Moreover, we are also ignorant in the means to remedy this situation. The "progress" that we have made, as important as it may be in certain respects has let almost everyone unsatisfied--at least those who express themselves.

Present humanity has no genuine technological mastery. It is incapable of solving the problems that seem the most consequential to it. Moreover, it is incapable of foreseeing the results of the usage of its new technologies or social programmes. In addition, the ethical capacity of humanity is still very weak. The latter is most often satisfied with political managing, tactics, and intrigues. When one believes that one has an ethical knowledge, one establishes it in an absolute doctrine and tends to prescribe it willy-nilly to every other moral culture. The history of the twentieth century eloquently evinces the misdeeds of this kind of attitude--especially in totalitarianism and in the "universalistic" rationalism of certain "humanists." This incompetence in ethics that affects present humanity is still more significant than its incompetence in technology--in as much as one can consider the results of Stalinism or Western cultural imperialism worse than the effects of accidents such as those of Chernobyl or Three Mile Island.

In other respects, this situation of deep ignorance and incompetence does not only affect our social sciences, but also our so-called "exact" sciences because all our present rationality is defective.

The Principle of Confidence

The principle of confidence expresses something unusual in the domain of social criticism (as in the sciences in general). First, it consists of merely stating the existence of future stages of development in humanity. Consequently, our present stage of development is still relatively far from maturity. We should then attribute normality to our present state of relative ignorance and incompetence. This state

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allows us to see that social, economic, ecological, and other problems that are affecting humanity in modern times are not caused by a pathological condition, nor a moral perversion in humanity, but instead are provoked by "normal" features of a very complex development. Thus, it would be wrong to look for "remedies" or to try to "get" groups considered as "depraved" or "guilty of perverting" humanity. It also would be wrong to see those who are bringing the "remedies" or "justiciary" doctrines as "heroes" or "authors of genius." The latter would have seemingly inherited in a pure and simple way an inborn science--which can be applied by force.

Humanity is neither perverse nor pure. It can be considered as something very complex that is developing in a normal way. This word "normal" does not mean "harmonious" or "smooth" but the opposite. As in a young child, the development is chaotic, painful, full of risks. A "normal" development, like a "normal" birth, is something difficult, which one experiences in anguish.

Confidence in otherness. The other deserves a priori our confidence, not because the other is good or honest, but as the opportunity of a genuine encounter. Therefore, the integral respect of the other within moral cultures presupposes this attitude of confidence.

The feminists have acquired this confidence in their own way. To be a feminist today means to put confidence in other women or groups of women--i.e., in their deep otherness. They have put hope in the place of fear. Moreover, to be a feminist means to help women who are lacking self-confidence to have more.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes that women made nothing by themselves in the history of men: "When women intervened in world history, this was in accordance with men, in the men's view..."(1). This is true in the case of women in general. Moreover this is true in the case of all minor cultures--i.e., the small and micro-cultures. They have made nothing by themselves in the history of the dominating man (2). This situation strongly suggests that feminist thought could apply to the case of small cultures in general. In the same way as feminism can be considered like a school of freedom and respect, it could be considered like a school of confidence.

The principle of confidence has an essential signification in the field of social criticism. It should be understood as opposed to the mistrust that permeates the usual relations between moral cultures or groups. This mistrust is a consequence of the generalized tendency to reprobate others and to distort their respective images. The principle of confidence suggests that this mistrust should normally transform into confidence towards others. This should have deep consequences upon the whole of intergroup and interpersonal attitudes and contribute to solve conflicts. (See (1) Simone de Beauvoir. *Le deuxième sexe (The Second Sex)*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1971, p. XIX (Translated by H. M. Parshley); (2) It could also be stated that even the dominating culture did nothing by itself in as much as, being thoroughly ethocentric, it was not conscious of itself as a moral culture.)

The Principle of Acknowledgement

The principle of acknowledgment essentially consists of acknowledging that which is other. The first application is acknowledging moral cultures that are different from one's own. Human groups tend constantly to distort their respective images. Consequently, the principle of acknowledgment implies trying to re-form the images of the other moral cultures. It follows a principle of re-formation. The latter is fundamental in order to ensure a beginning of acknowledgment of the other moral cultures.

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Another application of the principle of acknowledgment consists of acknowledging the possible existence of future development stages of humanity. This application, at first sight, appears to be very different from the preceding one. It is in fact very akin to the preceding in as much as one agrees that the acknowledgment of moral cultures includes that of possible or future moral cultures. The latter are doubtlessly much more numerous than all those that are existing now. Certain of them will only exist or become possible in and by certain future development stages of humanity. These future stages can themselves be considered as constituting kinds of cultures--e.g., the present stage constitutes the "modern culture." However, the acknowledgment of future stages in humanity is a very special concept and produces unexpected and disconcerting effects upon our conceptions.

The acknowledgment of the possible existence of future stages in social criticism, in particular, means that the latter is at a certain development stage--i.e., the present stage--and several other stages will likely bring about a deep re-structuring of the thought, which is at the basis of this criticism. In other words, our present social criticism is ignorant of its subject matter and is not conscious of its own ignorance. It is ignorant of its subject matter because it ignores that this subject matter is only a development stage in critical thinking and not the critical thinking itself. In this sense, any social criticism that is presenting itself as "knowing that which is" and "knowing that which one must do" is showing its deep immaturity. In as much as one is describing this social criticism as a "science," the criticism is more like astrology or alchemy--i.e., a kind of pseudo-science that one would mistake for science.

Social criticism, such as it has been thought until now, has taken for granted that it can be a kind of science already come to maturity, or that it is a kind of discourse implicitly heralding that the next stage of humanity will be the very last one--viz., the genuine state of maturity. This critical discourse then opposes another kind of discourse that is non-critical, conservative, or traditionalist. The latter, for its part, has taken for granted that the maturity stage of humanity has already been reached in a more or less remote past. Therefore, there are two kinds of normative discourses about society. The one takes for granted that maturity is in the present time or in the near future. The other takes for granted that maturity is in the past time. No critical discourse has yet presupposed that the maturity stage of humanity will be reached only after several other future stages.

One should note, here, that the notion of "immaturity," in the case of humanity, and in particular in the case of its best critical discourse, does not only mean that something remains still to be discovered or to be thought. It supposes much more: that other deep re-structurings will arise, as deeply as the re-structurings caused by socialist and Marxist thought.

Marxism, just like Hegelianism in other respects, has been held as having reached the genuine science of human society. Hegel, in his own philosophy, claimed to have reached the "absolute knowledge." Likewise a young child prematurely believes that it has reached the adult stage. As soon as it becomes conscious that it is growing, it easily believes that it knows everything essential about what it is and should be. It tends to believe that it is "already grown up" and calls for being treated as such.

Hegel and Marx, in some way, portray the stage in which humanity is becoming conscious of existing and having a history. However, like a child less than two years old, who is still at the sensori-motor stages, this humanity is still very egocentric, incapable of imagining that it has still much to grow before it can know what it really is. Therefore, the "revolution," such as it is conceived in Marxism or any other existing doctrine, can only embody a mere "stage of revolution," whence the new idea of a "continued revolution."

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IBPP Commentary.

Provencal's series of articles has amply demonstrated the significance of feminism constructs for epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. In epistemology, feminism constructs challenge traditional and nontraditional routes to how we know what we know. In metaphysics, feminism constructs contend as substantiators to and for what we know. In ethics, feminism constructs serve as signposts to the True and The Good--even as they may subvert such ethical endpoints.

Provencal might have noted that Friedan's "problem that has no name" actually may have a long history with the name of neurasthenia. Interestingly, neurasthenia has been applied to men and women for it has sprung from the situatedness of the individual within the context of social, cultural, and historical forces.

Provencal's Principle of Ignorance provocatively suggests that feminism constructs may ultimately fail as routes to knowledge even as they provide knowledge about that failure. As with Marxism--and as can be expected since some feminism constructs are imbued with Marxist ideology--what remains are pretensions to a kind of knowledge and ability that present humanity does not yet possess.

Provencal's Confidence in otherness ironically reinforces a sexist dichotomy in human functioning wherein agency is linked with "maleness" and relatedness with "femaleness." For as Provencal notes, "the other" deserves our confidence a priori as the opportunity of a genuine encounter. The feminists have acquired this confidence through the genuine encounter with women. Yet feminists still risk making nothing of themselves in the history of men by making a herstory that attempts to help women lacking in self-esteem but actually ensures and signifies this lack.

Provencal's Principle of Acknowledgement seems to best be taken as a plea for avoiding any totalitization--any reification that belies the Principle of Ignorance. Given the atrocities committed in this century in the name of totalized systems, such acknowledgment is vital. But can feminism constructs free themselves from such a tendency or are they doomed by an intractable paradox to become what they challenge?

IBPP thanks Dr. Provencal for his provocative series and encourages other readers to read the material associated with his Respect Project and seek political psychological applications based on his work. (See Hawkesworth, M. (1997). Confounding gender. *Signs*, 22, 649-685; Silverstein, L.B. (1996). Fathering is a feminist Issue. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 20, 3-37; Thomas, J.E. (1999). "Everything about us is feminist": The significance of ideology in organizational change. *Gender and Society*, 13, 101-119; Zuriff, G.E. (1999). Ideology over reason. *American Psychologist*, 54, 71.) (Keywords: Feminism, Provencal, Respect Project.)