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Feminism/Feminisms

WHAT IS FEMINISM today? Why are we pluralizing it more and more? Why do we talk about feminisms? These questions might seem elementary, or even superfluous, but they confer a certain sense to a conglomerate of debates and positions linked to the multiple dimensions of a worldwide political and philosophical formulation.

In broad terms, it is assumed that feminisms emerge as critical responses to hegemonic feminist positions. Laura Masson (2007, 216), commenting on a study she carried out with Argentine feminists, noted that "...Feminisms constitute the way devised by feminists to integrate the differences which emerge in confrontation...", and this supposition can be extended to other contexts. However, we need to examine the issue more closely to understand that it goes beyond antagonistic points of view and is, above all, a series of theoretical elaborations and political postulations that give credence to the idea that feminism is a radical critique of one's own culture. In this sense, feminisms emerge, too, as theoretical approaches spawned by analyses of the particular conditions in which the lives of women and other subordinate subjects develop in specific social frameworks. The combination of these circumstances has allowed certain individuals to flourish, after being underrated both by public awareness and academic analyses. Meanwhile, the need to count on conceptual frameworks, and comprehensive and sophisticated categories stimulates those who undertake feminist research to be bold in the construction of innovative forms, capable of revealing the complex mesh of relationships between social conditions that had so far been studied singly or in binary form. But perhaps one of the most remarkable traits of present day feminism is its capacity to embrace, with which it proposes to achieve ever deeper levels of understanding of the multiple forms of interaction between sex, gender, class, race, ethnic origin and other social conditions/organizing traits which become articulated into forms of social organization, cultures and localized ideologies. In the course of this search they have exhibited the creativity, imagination, transgression, the will to live, the

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history, the powers, the ways of acting politically, the conceptions of the world of oppressed people in their struggle for emancipation.¹

Faced with this starburst of individuals, theoretical positions and political purposes, the defining of limits between different feminisms would be a useless task,² so I propose, rather, to think about the different sources from which each one of these feminisms takes shape, on its own and in interaction with others, taking into account that these are guidelines, and not fixed, immovable, positions. Thus, we are able to identify some of the many sources that give rise to these trends:

- Emphasis on the subjects who ponder
- The theoretical schools they subscribe to
- The emphasis on identities
- The central role adscribed to bodies and sexuality
- Positions *vis à vis* hetero-normative hegemony
- Epistemic positions
- The place assigned to history
- The analysis of the historical trajectories of feminisms located
- The relevance accorded to subjective matters
- The relationship with the State, development and human rights
- Critical position *vis à vis* nation states
- Geopolitical localization
- The languages in which they appear, write and disseminate feminist demands
- Denunciation of different processes of domination and subordination
- Deconstruction and subsequent visibilization of racialization processes
- Dismantling of colonialist processes, both in terms of mindset and socialization or social organization
- The self definition of those who enunciate them
- The artistic manifestations to which they subscribe

1 On this point, I closely follow Chela Sandoval (2015), who proposes a non-unitarian category of subject-citizen, defined by different combinations of sex, gender, class, race, culture and power, from which she profiles multiple subjects who share one goal: opposition to the powers of domain.

2 At this point I agree with Cristina Vega Solís (2011, 17) when she states that around feminisms numerous labels have been applied in many cases “cloud” discussion, therefore it proposes to analyze the practices before engaging in denominations, since “...should concentrate efforts on making some notes just sewn on mutations of forms of domination of gender, class and race in the global context and feminist interventions that they have been raising over the past decades and as might not be otherwise originate, at least partially, in previous feminist contributions...”

- Their relationship with science and technology
- The emancipating project they advocate

At the heart of the distinctions between different feminisms lie the critiques of gender in its static, performative and “decoy” role (Zillah Eisenstein, 2008). In recent decades, gender has moved on from being “a useful category for analyses”, in the manner of Joan W. Scott, to become a point of inflection to criticize its facets of heteronormativity implied in the allocation of hetero-assigned identities. This debate has led to polarization, but also to the elaboration of increasingly complex and critical interpretations of gender, especially when we approach its multiple enmeshments with other social organizing factors, especially class, ethnic origin and race, due to the deep relationship each one of these elements has with conditions of subordination and inequality. The detailed study of these relationships has led us to a better documented knowledge of their social and anthropological dimensions on different scales (individual, group and collective), as well as a more rigorous analysis of the dialectic aspects that link these enmeshments with the historic, economic, political and ideological processes that intervene at the macro-structural level.

Given its deep historical, philosophical and political roots, we define feminism—in its conceptual dimension—as a critical theory.³ However, the omnipresence of gender, hand in hand with its many meanings, but especially with the connotation that Marcela Lagarde (2006) calls “aseptic” or “reformist” (that is, descriptive, supposedly neutral, extracted artificially from its feminist origin), has provided a point of departure to a conservative glorification of women which simultaneously has opened a breach between feminism and womenism,⁴

3 According to Razmig Keucheyan (2013,11), a critical theory is that which “...reflects not only on what is, but also on what is desirable and, in this case, acquires a political dimension. Theories are *critical* when they question the existing order on a global scale... Independently from whether new theories are radical or moderate, their critical dimension lies in the generality of their questioning of the contemporary social world”.

4 Amelia Valcárcel (2009, 224) uses the term “womenism” as opposed to feminism, to describe a discourse that makes an issue out of women, yet evades any commitment to “improving or innovating in the situations in which many women exist, without taking into account that some people have developed a way of life spinning varied discourses which are empty of any content referred to this issue...” And she continues: “We must draw a very clear line between feminism and discourse about women, because they are very different things. To talk about women, what they are, or what they have been, or what they should be, is something that can be accomplished easily without having adopted feminist points of view. This is a discourse which can develop along traditional lines: ‘women have these and those irrenouncible traits’, or they can try something apparently new: ‘women move large quantities of resources on the planet Earth’. In both cases, the reference to women does not convert the discourse into a feminist tract, just the same as a repeated allusion to

together with the confusion between emancipating feminism and State feminism, to which Zillah Eisenstein (2008, 151) calls our attention when she writes about the risks posed by "...the dangerous imperial/neoliberal feminism in the United States, as well as right wing nationalist feminisms in certain areas of the Third World..." For this reason we need to return constantly to the meaning of feminism as "...critical and resistant lenses applied to the implications of gender to which our sexual body is submitted..." (Ibid).

Considerations such as these lead us, in my view, to avoid the mechanical substitution of "feminism" by "feminisms", to preserve the political force of the first term, when needed, and to stress the plurality/heterogeneity of the concept, avoiding the pitfall of uncritical relativism. The latter is particularly important to prevent, in the name of feminist plurality/diversity/heterogeneity, the introduction into society of a series of masked antifeminist propositions.

It has become a truism that the more plural and diverse feminisms there are, all the better. No doubt, this proliferation responds to the evidence that "there are feminists everywhere", as Laura Masson puts it (2015).⁵ Each of these feminisms implies a political and cultural project to transform some substantial aspect of the existing forms of human existence. Their potential for generating radical changes depends upon themselves and, simultaneously, on their articulation among themselves. As Zillah Eisenstein posits: "...we must question and politically radicalize the rights of women by means of adopting a program of radically pluralist sexual and gender actions. This simultaneously confuses and clarifies what is at stake for feminisms..." (2008, 154).

In the academic sphere, the proliferation of feminisms has brought about the subsequent broadening of research topics and problems, that have enriched feminist perspectives considerably, especially in social sciences and the humanities. Simultaneously, the approach to emerging or recurrent topics from a

the people doesn't mean that a given text is part of the theory of democracy."

⁵ The author points out that this expression "...appears on a flag that some feminists from the city and province of Buenos Aires made and carry with them to many of the places they go. Given that 'being feminist' includes an interiorized version of identity, there is no such thing as a privileged place in which *feminist* practices are undertaken. While being *feminist* is described as a world vision or an attitude towards life, it is also about modifying the social rules in the places in which each one who calls herself feminist acts. Thus, it is possible to be a feminist at school, in the home, with the children, with one's mother, in professional practice, as a militant in a political party, or occupying a post in a governmental office. Over a number of years and due to the actions of *feminists*, these venues have become diversified and include many more women. Taking this into account, the slogan *Feminists everywhere* appears as an inevitable point of departure to understand *feminism* as a fragmented, heterogeneous and complex social space." (Laura Masson, 2007, 223).

novel point of view, exploring lines of inquiry that had not been recognized previously, has enabled innovation in procedures for generating knowledge, so that we are witnessing a diversification of methods which has dynamized the way we do research in the different fields in which feminisms have developed.

But the theoretical field has also faced the challenges posed by this feminist expansion. Since the early days of academic feminism, the critical (re)reading of foundational texts of the social, philosophical, political and artistic theories settled in as a basic epistemological procedure. With the passage of time, the consolidation of feminist theoretical currents (linked in almost every case with academic discussions and the demands of social movements, particularly feminist movements and those expressing women's issues) have resulted in the possibility of establishing dialogues with non feminist theoretical positions. Gradually, certain authors have become mandatory references in the discussion of certain subjects. However, the full acceptance by Academia of feminist contributions is still in the works.

Different moments in the construction of feminisms

Internal criticism to feminist universalism is practically consubstantial with the construction of contemporary feminism. The standpoints that separated culturalists from biologicists in attempting to explain the elements that radically differentiate men from women started to emerge in the sixties. Built around a dichotomic notion of the distinction between sex and gender, before long positions started to diverge even more as they delved not only into that which separated women from men but, above all, what radically differentiated some women from others. In this direction, various feminisms defined their positions: equality or sexual difference; black or white; from the First or the Third worlds; Western or decolonial; hegemonic or subaltern...

However, these positionings are not in themselves binary. In reality, they become established, then reconstitute on the basis of constant self-critique, and lean to an extraordinary network that radically questions power of domain in all its expressions, and the deep social inequalities specifically experienced by sex-generic subjects that make up each class, ethnic or racial group, or, in general, each particular social division. From these divisions, new points of view emerge, centered on philosophy and questioning individualism and universalism, and stressing the importance of the community/communality. Taken as examples, these positions allow us to understand that each one has a non linear critical dynamics, because it unmasks the oppressive mechanisms supported by sex-gender but, as these mechanisms become entrenched in historic, economic, political and cultural configurations, they carry within themselves severe chal-

lenges to local and global modes of organization, and to the domination establishments in all their levels.

At the center of the differentiation between feminisms we must deal with two major questions: What is feminism, and who is the political subject of feminism? The possible responses are multiple, but we could say that Francesca Gargallo (2014, 11) summarizes current feelings best when she states that feminism is "...The concrete search undertaken by women for the wellbeing of women, and in dialogue among women, to unweave the social symbols and practices that place them on a secondary level, with less rights and an inferior valuation *vis à vis* men", which provides the base for "as many feminisms as forms of political construction by women exist".

However, some authoresses argue against the idea that women should be the only political subject of feminism, partly because the term itself is an overgeneralization and, at once, its emancipating proposals have given other subordinate subjects enough critical elements to build a libertarian perspective for themselves, turning them into another group of feminist political subjects. Concerning this, I agree with Zillah Eisenstein when she reflects:

If context—historical and of the moment—always matters, then I must locate today's feminisms in ways that respect their many differences and varieties, across time, geographical space, and culture, along with race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference. But language is not helpful here. I think feminism is always plural and always has been. Yet, when I write feminisms and refer to them as one, I risk people thinking that I am writing of a homogeneous politics. Yet if I refer to feminisms and write of them as plural, it appears that I see many different kinds of feminism rather than their co-equal pluralism and singularity. So I will sometimes refer to feminisms as singular—it—and other times as plural—they—because it/they is/are both. Multiplicity and cohesion exist simultaneously. (2004, 181)

This duality for using both terms has a clear political intention: vindicate feminism's political project without ignoring the different feminist points of view that have been developing practically since it became a political proposition.⁶ A significant example of the suitability of resorting to both feminisms can be found in the writings of Teresa Maldonado Barahona when, in 2003, she pointed

6 Karen Offen, the history of feminism is above all a political history itself and as it is interwoven with the broader political processes. In this context, "The feminist demands are primarily political, not philosophical. Never arise in a vacuum sociopolitical—nor they respond to such a thing—. They are presented in concrete frames and pose explicit political demands for change..." (2015, 13). They are precisely those frames concrete which give rise to feminisms in its various configurations.

out the relevance of feminism debating with other trends concerning multiculturalism, particularly on how radicalization can lead to denying the rights of women in the name of an androcentric and patriarchal culture. But, she added, it was also indispensable to establish a discussion among the feminists themselves to decentralize many universalist suppositions and finesse those that leaned towards extreme relativism. However, ten years later, she warned: "The intense debate between diverse feminist positions has become the trademark of a movement which, for a good many years, spends more time on internal discussions than on refuting antifeminist schemes."⁷ This warning is of key importance because, in our time, as feminisms grow stronger, so too antifeminist positions come to the surface, often masked by the application of feminist terminology. For this reason it is of capital importance that any person who deems him/herself a feminist should look to theory and political experience for the resources to identify antifeminism and act accordingly.

The horizons of topism

The questioning of power covers a broad spectrum, that includes those powers that are exercised on bodies and sexualities, to those that inspire wars, ecological injustice and the different expressions of the current economic model. For this reason, we can say that practically all feminisms seek to expose specific forms of domination and submission, with the aim of showing possible ways to elude abjection, plundering, exploitation, humiliation, the violation of basic rights or the extreme denial of the human condition of a person.

We live in a time of deep contradictions. Simultaneously with the gravest expressions of despoilment and disrespect for life, capitalist greed and social fragmentation, we find experiences of construction of the common good, the redistribution of riches, the generation of scientific knowledge that pursues the wellbeing of humanity as a whole, without distinctions by sex, race, ethnic group or class. Forms of political organization are tested that exclude hierarchical considerations; social relationships are established that preclude violence; each person's right to decide who or what she/he wants to be is explicitly recognized. Each feminist position has contributed to the creation of these and many other alternatives.

Each feminism implies the huge potential of its creative capacity, its capacity to imagine that which is different, which is radically other; the possibility that humans can move beyond that which we know so far, and that the body

7 <http://www.pikaramagazine.com/2013/03/feminismos-jerarquias-y-contradicciones/>

should not be a pretext to enslave anyone (Rosi Braidotti 2005). The topic sense of feminisms is always present both in their conceptual arguments and their proposals for the future. The different possibilities of life they offer encompass the broad spectrum of development of every human capacity but, above all, they are rooted in the dismantling of the powers of domain that a person or group can exert on another, in such a way that the critical reflection that women are involved with these powers has been basic for the formulation of non-essentialist and non-binary feminist positions.

Feminist research and interdiscipline

Contemporary development of feminist positions cannot be understood without their numerous political manifestations and theoretical evolutions. In its gnoseological source, feminist thought has been defined as critical, complex and interdisciplinary, international and internationalist.⁸ In the academic sphere, it has been the point of departure for an ample production of theoretical elaborations and a notable expansion of institutional venues in which the undertaking of research with a feminist perspective is stimulated, both for generating original knowledge and for training specialists. Thanks to all this, there is a palpable presence of this perspective in diverse fields of knowledge (social sciences, life sciences, experimental sciences, abstract thought, the humanities). In the theoretical field, feminist positions debate with other theories; where research is concerned, the feminisms have contributed with a broadening and enrichment of methodological procedures. Concerning epistemology, feminisms have refreshed the discussions about the role the sex-generic subject plays in the generation of knowledge (Norma Blazquez Graf 2012).

In a parallel way to what has occurred with feminism as a social movement, academic feminism has developed a genealogy of knowledge that can be traced and documented. In different Latin American institutions, for example, even if feminist studies are considered to be on the margins of hegemonic or canonical trends, they have gradually become a reference that cannot be ignored when it comes to inquiring into local realities. This constant dynamics, that dates back to about five decades ago, has allowed several generations of specialists to live together, with differing forms and academic experiences, but with committed relationships of dialogue in which, once again, present and past, specific and general, come together.

8 There are many authors who have subscribed to this characterization. Here I would refer at least some of which I mentioned right here as a guide: Nancy Fraser (2015), Marcela Lagarde (1996), Karen Offen (2015) and Francesca Gargallo (2004).

Thus, the fundamental purpose of this edition of *INTERdisciplina* dedicated to feminisms is to present the work of young researchers whose experiences in life, Academia and activism have placed them in historical situations in which feminism/feminisms have played a role that has allowed these feminisms to pass from dicotomic discussions between different perspectives to analyses and elaborations in which the plurality of positions is recognized, validated and sanctioned by epistemic authority. Each chapter reflects some of the motifs of contemporary interest or concern about issues that have been “classics”, or those that emerge from the *glocal* dynamics that characterize the “simultaneity of contemporary worlds”, as Marc Augé so neatly put it (1995). Taken as a whole, these works approach problems centered on a broad variety of subjects, explorations of the body and sexuality, of politics, of subjective experience and of searches for categories. They are samples of the importance of the contributions made by feminisms incorporated subjectively and intellectually to the solution of specific problems.

All these contributions revive, under one guise or another, a series of vindications which might seem out of fashion, but that cannot be underestimated, because their deficit is still the best expression of the debts of contemporary societies with women and other subordinate sex-generic subjects, such as liberty, justice, equality or human equivalence. Keeping in mind the pluralism of feminisms, perhaps we should maintain on the list of debatable conceptions the notions of equality and democracy; but I sustain that liberty and justice are at present, unquestionable, both in the philosophical and political planes, and in theoretical and research guidelines. We hope, then, that this volume will represent a frank invitation to delve deeper into the innumerable questions that, happily, still remain to be asked.

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