

## What a Difference Political Economy Makes: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era



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# WHAT A DIFFERENCE POLITICAL ECONOMY MAKES: FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

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*While the postmodern turn in anthropology has largely ignored political economy, gender analysis, and its own theoretical antecedents, it does signal an important shift in attention. The post-structuralist/postmodern perspective alerts us to the problematics of one arena of cultural production, namely, that of ethnographic texts. This perspective, however, can be fruitfully applied not only inwardly, but also outwardly, in investigations of our informants' cultural production. This essay highlights the need for political-economic frames to make sense of such post-structuralist insights. [political economy, feminism, postmodernism, new ethnography, gender]*

This essay could be described as a telegram from the loyal opposition. It is a telegram because it is a short commentary and summary, and I define my stance as loyal opposition because, in the context of these special issues, where we assume friendliness to feminist anthropology and post-structuralism/postmodernism in writers and reading audience alike, I must adopt the Cold War radicals' oxymoronic line towards Communist regimes—critical support. In what follows, then, I articulate some problems I perceive in both the “postmodern turn” in anthropology and in some feminist uses of it. In so doing, I address in particular the key intellectual perspective submerged, elided, misdefined—take your pick, depending on author—by postmodern anthropologists: political economy. I end, pragmatically and illustratively, with a hypothetical ethnographic case: how I would approach my current fieldwork among black working-class women in New Haven, Connecticut, with a post-structuralist frame alone, in contrast to the frame many of us now label “culture and political economy.”

First of all, let me sketch my interpretation of post-structuralism/postmodernism (see also Di Leonardo 1991). Post-structuralism is a movement deriving largely from literary criticism that foregrounds language over all other social phenomena and that particularly foregrounds textual art. It construes all texts—whether private letters, op-ed pieces, *Das Kapital*, or scientific reports—as more or less persuasive fictions. This iconoclastic stance advances our understanding of relations among seemingly unrelated genres of writing, throws presumptions of realist representation into a cocked hat, allows us to apply the analytic tools of literary

criticism to non-literary productions, and decenters pious certainties concerning artistic and “high cultural” canons.

In anthropology in particular the school I have labelled “ethnography as text” after the article of that title by Marcus and Cushman (1982) has fruitfully analyzed the rhetorical strategies ethnographers use to lend themselves authorial privilege in order to claim the right to describe the lifeways and cultural worlds of other human populations. Ethnography as text writers have compellingly discerned our “fables of rapport,” selection of “common denominator people,” and use of allegorical tropes. As well, they (particularly James Clifford and Renato Rosaldo, and the earlier work of Talal Asad) have focused on the ways in which the textualization of the lives of Third-World Others has been and is part of the process of colonization and now neocolonialism. They have also, of course, notoriously ignored the ways in which this analysis applies to the textualization of women's lives worldwide, as Fran Mascia-Lees, Pat Sharpe, and Colleen Cohen have contended (1989). I would add that ethnography as text writers have also tended to avoid analysis of their own race, class, and gender placements, and their implications, in the academy and in American society.

Postmodernism is often used interchangeably with post-structuralism. The term originally referred to particular architectural innovations that mixed stylistic elements from different eras, muddying formerly clean modernist lines. It has expanded to refer to any example of cultural production that violates modernist conventions, particularly those of linearity and realist representation. Thus ethnography as text writers, chiming

ironically with and apparently in total ignorance of *l'écriture féminine*, have advocated "postmodernist" ethnographic writing that would textually subvert ethnographic authority through interlayering informants' and ethnographers' voices and other experimental writing techniques. Postmodernism also refers to the historical era in which we are living, which has apparently obliterated all modernist conceptions of linear evolutionary change.

Thus we arrive at social constructionism as the natural but largely unrecognized isomorphism between postmodern anthropology and feminism, as Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen (1989) contend. Certainly it is the case that major feminist texts have analyzed women's inscription as Other, just as ethnography as text writers have been concerned with colonized male Others, and the latter group of writers has astonishingly ignored this obvious parallel. Donna Haraway, in her recent, very admirable study *Primate visions* (1989), evokes the "four temptations"—positivism or relativism, post-structuralism or social constructionism, marxism, and feminism/antiracism—that she sees as forces to be accepted and held in tension with one another, equally important intellectual lenses that can be equally deplorable traps if relied on singly. Mascia-Lees *et al.* and many other feminists would, I think, construe post-structuralism and feminism/antiracism as a single overlapping frame and jettison—or never take on board in the first place—realism and marxism. Realism can speak for itself. Let me now argue, in two different ways, for marxism's place on the feminist craft.

First, to honor the literary-critical source of post-structuralism, let me make use of the classical rhetorical term "synecdoche." Western feminism has for more than a century continuously committed the synecdochic fallacy of claiming to represent the lives of all women, rather than those of Western, white, and privileged women. Some Western and non-Western feminists have also continuously protested this hegemonic rhetorical framing. But feminism's use of part-for-whole logic does not end there. Many of us have also continuously ignored strands of feminist thought and action not our own. While contemporary liberal feminism certainly relies, for example, on the social constructionist distinction between sex and gender, it relies equally on positivist presuppositions that are anathema to post-structuralism. Cultural feminism, certainly the strongest strand of contemporary non-academic

feminism, is notoriously essentialist and communitarian, hostile both to positivism, which it brands as male thought, and post-structuralism, which it sees as both jargon-ridden and, in its endless relativisms, denying the innate moral superiority of women. Finally, marxist-feminism has a venerable history inside feminism and within anthropology itself, going back at least to Engels' publication of *The origin of the family, private property and the state* in 1884, just after Marx's death. And while some forms of marxist-feminism, particularly the evolutionary work of the 1970s, have had close ties to positivism, others, in their attention to historical contingency, show their kinship to post-structuralism as well. But my larger point here is that marxist-feminism cannot be ignored. It is a major strand of feminism both inside and outside anthropology.

If we open up our understanding of the scope of feminist theory, allowing for the many feminisms that have existed and do exist, we can look more accurately at postmodern anthropology and its implications for feminist ethnographic practice. Let me now harness this opening to my second argument for marxism's place on the feminist ark. Mascia-Lees *et al.* and many others have commented on the ethnography as text school's ignorance and misconstructions of feminism. But few, with the partial exception of Nicole Polier and William Roseberry (1989), have attended to the same writers' ignorance and misconstructions of marxism or political economy. George Marcus, for example, claims that marxism "provides a ready-made classic and familiar means of evoking the macrosocial order" (1986: 186), a description that would come as a considerable surprise to marxists who disagree vehemently with one another's "classic" visions. Marcus defines political economy, equally wildly and wrongly, as a "continuing commentary on world conditions in terms most relevant to Western officialdom and statecraft" (p. 167).

What is political economy really and what difference does it make? According to William Roseberry, historical political economy is both the "attempt to understand the emergence of particular peoples at the conjunction of local and global histories, to place local populations in the larger currents of world history," and "the attempt to constantly place culture in time, to see a constant interplay between experience and meaning in a context in which both experience and meaning are shaped by inequality and domination" (1989: 49). Just as there are many feminisms, of course, so

there are many political economies. The term was codified in the eighteenth century to describe the unified subject that concerned Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx. Later academic developments split this subject into the partially separable purviews of economics, political science, sociology, history—and anthropology. In recent decades political economy has been revived as a label for interdisciplinary but economically-based marxist and radical work, for social science investigation of the empirical interactions between governmental and other social forces, and for an extremely conservative branch of neoclassical economics. Among the radicals, scholars have disagreed on the relations between economic forces and other areas of social life, on the perception of the importance of human agency, and on the acceptance or rejection of various strands of social theory. In anthropology in particular, political economic work has been bedeviled by economic reductionism and evolutionism. But the existence of these flaws does not excuse the idealist reductionisms of too many anthropologists. Certainly economies are culturally constructed, but so are cultures economically channeled. To chop off and discard investigation of political and economic life with the excuse that our informants have varying cultural constructions of these phenomena is to trade in false dichotomies rather than to transcend them.

Thus we arrive at one difference historical political economy makes. In the “culture and political economy” form that Roseberry and many others practice, it prevents the commission of synecdochic fallacies, whether of the non-feminist or feminist variety. When we insist on seeing individuals “at the conjunction of local and global histories,” and always consider for both ends of the ethnographic encounter “the interplay between experience and meaning,” it becomes difficult to erase particular populations or their influence on events. Thus we cannot solve the “difference” problem in feminist studies through some sort of holistic, intersubjective feminist methodology, as Ann Oakley and others have contended. Their methodological suggestions, in any event, derive from phenomenology, not feminism. Nor will the imposition of a contemporary feminist Procrustean bed constructed through the lens of conflict in the feminist academy serve to illuminate difference. Such a perspective currently essentializes American racial differences, recognizes sexual preference, but ignores American class differences altogether. Only recognizing the

actual shifting intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual preference, region, and the like in evolving American populations, and the ways in which they are construed in various contexts—that is, only doing “culture and political economy”—gives us an historically contingent, but nonetheless real Archimedean lever on difference.

To make my critique as clear as possible, let me approach the issue from a slightly different direction. We can envision post-structuralism/postmodernism in institutional terms, as a form of disciplinary colonization: the literary-criticization of the academy. (There are now outposts in history, political science, sociology, and economics, as well as anthropology.) There is no question that elements of this imperial venture are positive, the equivalent of Roman or British-built infrastructure. After all, we can only be *for* interdisciplinary work. But I want to suggest that this trope, unlike the road to Rome, runs both ways. The late Raymond Williams’ literary criticism was an example of a deeply political economic vision of artistic production, and many practitioners of the new historicism are as concerned as he was with the facts that literary texts are produced inside and are part of ongoing political economies, and that artists are historical social actors. The parallels for anthropology are obvious.

Finally, there is the question of connection to pragmatic politics. I have already played the dozens on ethnography as text writers in print, pointing out that we cannot “escape our political and economic placement at home.” It is significant that ethnography as text scholars tend to be most concerned with former French colonies, whose present conditions have little relevance for the evolving American empire, while culture and political economy scholarship flourishes in the United States’ “backyard,” the Caribbean and Latin America.

The French connection makes sense, given the theoretical foundations of the school. But it can entail, for an American, a lack of self-reflection, as intellectual and citizen, about one’s own material and ideological connections to current imperial enterprises (di Leonardo 1989: 352).

I believe that the same argument applies to feminist anthropologists. We need to consider gendered realities in historical political-economic contexts, even when our fundamental concerns are what used to be called “superstructure.” Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, does precisely this in her recent article, “The Romance of Resistance” (1990).

Part of this criticism, ironically, is far from new. Two decades ago, the eminent leftist sociologist Alvin Gouldner castigated the then-trendy schools of ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism for fleeing politics for the study of micro-interaction. (The irony is that these schools of thought are some of the unacknowledged intellectual precursors of the ethnography as text school.) But micro-interactions are in fact laden with political implications. I would not say, with Gouldner, "abandon the study of rhetorics or symbolism." I would instead counsel, with E.M. Forster, "only connect." There is no need to jettison new or newly articulated post-structuralist insights. But neither is there justification for using them as substitutes for historical political economy.

Now we come to ethnographic illustration. Adolph Reed and I are engaged in long-term research among working and middle-class and black and white Americans in New Haven, Connecticut, focusing particularly on women's economic and kinship lives and their rhetorical constructions of those lives. New Haven is a medium-sized deindustrialized city with more than one-third black and approximately ten percent Puerto Rican population. It is heavily segregated on the classic New England pattern, and its black population is almost entirely working-class or impoverished. We have met individuals through our five-year residence in a mixed neighborhood abutting two of the city's three poor black areas, through contacts in neighborhood stores and bars, Little League connections, and through my volunteer tutoring in a local adult basic education class. I am beginning to collect life histories of individual women, and we have attended a series of public events such as parades and street fairs.

Here is the hypothetical case. If I were to conduct postmodern ethnography on the model of Crapanzano's *Tuhami* or Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*, with only the obvious corrections for gender bias, I would focus on my interactions with my informants and the rhetorical structures of their narratives. The fact that a middle-aged public librarian originally showed interest in me because she suspected that Adolph Reed's origins were Cape Verdean (as are hers) would be of interest. I would note carefully the way in which the natural conversation of my older, Southern-born students in adult basic education courses elides mention of race; I would also note their pleasure in and approbation of my signifi-

ing—using terms like geechee and indicating familiarity with the black popular music of their youth. And I would consider highly important local graffiti such as "The Ville is like Compton"—linking a black neighborhood now made notorious through the two-part series in *The New Yorker* (1990) with the Southern California home of the rap group NWA.

The vignette in which Adolph Reed and I were stuck in traffic on Dixwell Avenue after the Freddy Fixer Parade, in an entirely black and largely young crowd blaring rap and dancing in cars and on the street, and a young man yelled at me from the sidewalk, "Bensonhurst—roll up that window," would be prime grist for the ethnographic mill. The narrative structures and key themes of my women informants' life histories would be of great interest. The librarian, for example, spontaneously headlined her first long conversation with me with the remark, "Women don't like me," which I was able to interpret contextually to mean, "other black women don't like me." I later managed to locate this assertion in a *Weltanschauung* involving her sense of isolation in black New Haven because of her non-United States background, and her location between what she saw as "dangerous, terrible people" and the "better class of black people." My elderly neighbor has worked with me on several life history interviews whose rhetorical shape is clearly the allegorical triumph of the righteous.

And in fact I do believe that all of these interactional vignettes are highly important. Who our informants construe us to be is central to what they say in our company. The "garrulous, overdetermined, cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross purposes," as James Clifford (1983: 120) described ethnographic practice, itself must be described. I have learned as well from postmodern practice to think harder about the issue of textualization and to have strategies for involving my informants in that process.

But it is equally important that I understand the historical political economy of New Haven and of black populations in New Haven and in the United States as a whole. In fact, all of the vignettes that I have just sketched can be understood only in that context. The librarian, the elderly neighbor, the fly boys who write graffiti and who shout ironies to the passing white anthropologist exist within a deindustrialized region kept on military-spending life support through the 1980s, in a city ruled until recently by a white ethnic Demo-

cratic machine in bed with its major industry, a tax-avoiding Ivy League university. As a result of the sweetheart tax abatements, crony hiring practices, and corrupt management, the new black mayor administers a city on the verge of bankruptcy. The librarian constantly fears a layoff. The elderly neighbor is secure with her pension but may lose her black working-class tenants to the downturn—there are now two empty apartments on our block. One of the Southern adult education students works for an industrial firm that has not yet shut down, as its neighbor just did, summarily laying off thousands. His sister works, after years as a domestic, as a private duty nurse for local elderly whites. Her service sector employment, like service work nationally, is low paid but stable. The ways in which these individuals construe their lives are directly connected to these economic patterns, inflected by gender and generation, as well as to their very different familial histories of migration to the region, varying from unlettered Southern sharecroppers to young newlywed high school graduates from northern New England, arriving from the 1920s to the near present. As well, gender bulks

large in family life histories and contemporary accounts, not only in terms of shifting sexual divisions in occupational opportunities, but also in terms of key women's and men's narrative themes, such as female gentility. The librarian, a former cocktail waitress, holds gentility at arm's length, while the elderly neighbor, a former social worker, embraces it with fervor. I am continuing to probe the class and racial implications for my informants of this key Western, gendered construct of the past two centuries.

Historical political economy makes a difference. It is the only practice that enables us to work adequately with varying and opposing cultural constructions, whether those of our informants or our own. Political-economic considerations do not allow us to "read out" from base to superstructure, the claim that many ethnography as text writers wish to identify synecdochically with all marxist thought. They do allow us to interpret, to make sense, to contextualize ideologies, just as ideologies interpret, make sense of and contextualize political economy. We feminists should not leave home without it.

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