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Gender and Political Theory/ Advanced Topics in Feminist Theory:
What Remains of Freedom and Equality in an Age of Globalization and Development?

Introduction:

This graduate seminar will explore the ever-widening field of theoretical antagonisms between contemporary feminist theory and liberal political philosophy. We will consider freedom and equality not as unambiguous liberal and economic categories, but rather as transnational ideals and growing problems that inform much of the work done by feminist theorists, organizers, and anti-development activists. “[A] human being regarded as a *person*,” Immanuel Kant once famously declared, “... is exalted above any price; for as a person... he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them.” Our thinking will thus orient itself toward inhabiting the troubled distance between idealization and problematization.

A few years ago, Eduardo Galeano claimed that global capitalism had finally assumed a fully ontological cast. ‘I owe, therefore I am,’ he said. His point was that there is an indubitable experience of economic and financial indebtedness that almost every non-European nation today must accept as the ground of its singular existence. Indeed, the survival of most nations and national economies in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia now depends on their receiving aid and high-interest conditional loans from Western aggressor nations and the transnational financial institutions these nations created and ultimately imbued with unchecked sovereignty and total authority. “Is it not true,” Slavoj Žižek recently asked, “that the more... a state accepts IMF help, and obeys its conditions or takes its advice, the more it becomes dependent on the IMF, and the more help it needs?” Žižek’s interrogative gesture offers a kind of economic emendation to Michel Foucault’s argument that modern sovereignty works according to a political logic of self-referring circularity. “In every case,” wrote Foucault in his essay on governmentality, “what characterizes the end of sovereignty... is in sum nothing other than submission to sovereignty. This means that the end of sovereignty is circular: the end of sovereignty is the exercise of sovereignty.” Hence the pressing need, as Mahmood Mamdani suggests, for “making a clear distinction between the right of peoples to negotiate and to redefine sovereignty, and the obligation of states to respect [other] existing definitions of sovereignty.”

Part of our task, then, will be to envisage how some try to render such attempts at negotiating, redefining, and respecting sovereignty as a variegated political, economic, and cultural form of self-representation consistent with liberal ideas of ‘negotiation’, ‘redefinition’, and ‘respect’—ideas that still today privilege a broad conception of ‘compatibility’ or ‘reconciliation’ when it comes to the

questions of freedom and equality. According to John Rawls' hugely famous two principles of justice for institutions, "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of political liberty for all. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged... and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality and opportunity." Not too long before Rawls, Emmanuel Levinas wrote in a similar, albeit more sophisticated, liberal vein: "Political theory derives justice from the undiscussed value of spontaneity; its problem is to ensure, by way of knowledge of the world, the most complete exercise of spontaneity by reconciling my freedom with that of others.... Freedom is not realized outside of social and political institutions, which open to it the access to fresh air necessary for its expansion, its respiration, and even, perhaps, its spontaneous generation."

If Rawls and Levinas are correct in thinking that the realization of freedom cannot happen without the creation of social and political institutions and systems that protect all citizens equally as a basic matter of justice, then the question arises: How can feminist theorists, organizers, and anti-development activists today work together to create fair and just transnational organizations and institutions that help men and women in the developing world become freer; that protect them with the same measure of equality; that check the untrammelled global dominance of the IMF and the World Bank.

Such organization and institution building cannot occur in the abstract space wrought by the financialization of the world. Not can it simply take globalization for granted as everyone's desired or recognizable point of departure. "It may be more helpful," Randy Martin argues, "to appreciate that globalization is not something that has happened to us, a completeable project, type of world system, or society whose parts integrate with a whole. Rather, it is a complex of effects that shift the imaginary through which we think consolidation and dispersion, mutuality without sameness; namely, it is a condition of limitation.... The spectacle of capital unbound, free to pursue its own devices, constitutes the globalizing imaginary.... If globalization is most conventionally voiced in but never exhausted by the economic register, at least an approximation of the cultural politics of this emergent financial regime must be attempted. The language and practices of unfettered finance need to be addressed in their own terms. Doing so can remind us that the economic never appears alone. Its presence may be ubiquitous but ever accompanied by a mode of experience and a disciplinary regime meant to regulate a constitutional indiscipline, a culture and a politics intrinsic to globalization itself.... The countereffect of liberalization is to force on national and subnational communities a demand to develop their own intelligence about self-constitution. Such politics can only be imagined, however, once globalization loses its unanimity of purpose."

But imagining new communities, nations, and states into being cannot simply happen of its own accord in the developing and postcolonial world. Partha Chatterjee explains why: "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imagination must remain forever colonized.... Here lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms

of the modern community but in our surrender to the old forms of the modern state. If the nation is an imagined community and if nations must also take the form of states, then our theoretical language must allow us to talk about community and state at the same time.... The project then is to claim for us, the once-colonized, our freedom of imagination.”

Reading Schedule:

Week 1, 2, and 3: Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*

Week 4 and 5: Amartya Sen, “The Many Faces of Gender Inequality”; Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality*, chapters one and six; Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Development: The Capabilities Approach*

Week 6: Nussbaum’s and Sen’s essays in *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, eds. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover

Week 7 and 8: Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*; chapters three and four

Week 9 and 10: Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*

Week 11 and 12: M. Jacqui Alexander, “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Industry”; Ayesha M. Imam, “The Dynamics of WINing: An Analysis of Women in Nigeria (WIN)”; Gloria Wekker, “One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup: Afro-Surinamese Women and Critical Agency”; all essays are in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty

Week 13, 14 and 15: Homi Bhabba, “Nation and Narration” (xerox); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (xeroxed selections); Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, chapters to be announced; Martha Nussbaum, “Judging Other Cultures,” from *Sex and Social Justice*. Selected materials on South Africa, Nigeria, and the industrialization of Africa will also be distributed.