

Feminism and racism: what is at stake?

Author:

Thompson, Denise

Event details:

Australian Women's Studies Association conference
Deakin University, Geelong

Publication Date:

1994

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/674>

License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/43830> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-25

Feminism and racism: what is at stake?

[January 2004: I gave this paper at the Australian Women's Studies Association conference at Deakin University in December 1994. It created a furore, but I had expected it would so I wasn't greatly fussed. I managed to answer all the questions with equanimity and deflect the accusations without getting angry. And at least one woman loudly defended, not only my *right* to say what I was saying, but also the substance of the paper. She, too, was highly critical of the tenor of the 'race' debate.]

(A paper prepared for the Women's Studies Conference, Deakin University, Geelong, 4-6 December 1994).

What I have to say about feminism and racism is motivated in the first place by my own moral and political opposition to racism, i.e. to anything which defines people as inferior because of their race, or ethnic or cultural identity. This is a commitment I have had for the whole of my adult life, even prior to the advent of 'second wave' feminism, and one which will last for as long as the evil of racism does. It is a commitment which I regard as intrinsically my own, one which I have chosen for the way I live my own life because not to oppose racism is, for me, unthinkable.

At first sight, it seems to me obvious that feminism and racism are incompatible for a number of reasons. Racism is a form of male domination, of the domination of men by men, and hence one aspect of what feminism is struggling *against*. Feminism is the struggle for a human status for women which can only be achieved at the expense of no one else at all, and certainly not at the expense of other women. It is also a commitment to building connections between women despite the barriers that divide us. So for feminism to be racist would mean feminism destroying itself. This does not mean that women, or feminists, cannot be racist. It simply means that the racism does not stem from their feminism, and to the extent that they are being racist they are not being feminist. Nonetheless, the accusation--for it is an accusation, and a

harsh one--that feminism (or aspects of it) is 'racist' or 'white and middle-class' is endlessly reiterated in feminist writings. So despite my initial sense that feminism and racism were logically, morally and politically incompatible, I decided to re-open the question of feminism and racism, and investigate the 'white, middle-class' charge in detail.

I started by asking what was the evidence for the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminism. Given what is at stake--nothing less than the future of feminism itself--it seemed to me that assertions like this required substantiation, with concrete examples and arguments which can be evaluated. I have found, however, that examples are rarely given, and that when they are, they are either not examples of feminism, or not clearly examples of racism. In the longer work from which this paper is taken, I give a number of examples of the assertion, and go on to discuss the ways in which they avoid providing evidence. I also discuss a number of examples of arguments which purport to demonstrate the 'racism' or 'white, middle-class' nature of particular feminist texts. I have not, to date, found those arguments convincing. (I give an example of one such argument below).

I also found that the accusation involved a number of misinterpretations and mislocations of feminism. If it is asserted that feminism is 'white', Western, middle-class, or only for the privileged or those with tertiary education, then it is also being asserted that feminism is not located with women who are none of these. What does it mean for a woman who is not 'white and middle-class', for example, to call feminism 'white and middle-class'? If she herself is a feminist, then that is where feminism is, wherever else it might be as well. If, on the other hand, feminism is a political and moral commitment available to all, then it cannot be confined to any particular category of women. If, however, what is being alleged is that it is only some aspects of feminism which are 'white and middle-class', then this needs to be spelled out.

What is usually said in this context is that certain feminist writings exclude the experiences of black, indigenous or third world women, or women of ethnic and

racial minorities.¹ But there are problems with this criticism. As a criticism of feminism in general it is not true. Feminism has from the beginning provided a forum (in a way in which the male left has not) for the voices of women of colour and women of cultural minorities, because it has provided a forum for the voices of women. As a criticism of particular feminist texts it is unreasonable. If what is being demanded is that every feminist text without exception include the experiences of women of colour or women of ethnic or racial minorities, what is being demanded is impossible. How many races, cultures, ethnicities, and which ones, must be included if one is to avoid excluding someone? No one can include them all, because no one can ever be in a position to know them all, even supposing there is an 'all' to know. As well, none of us can avoid writing from her own particular cultural and historical context, since we are cultural and historical creatures. How can those of us who are not black or indigenous or third world women, or women of colour, or women of ethnic or racial minorities, include experiences which are not ours? On the other hand, as feminists, we are all writing against our cultures because those cultures are male supremacist. To the extent that a culture is male dominated, structured around the valuing of what men want, say and do, and the devaluing of women, feminists are profoundly alienated from culture as we struggle for the human rights of women. That is not to say that feminism is somewhere 'outside' culture. (What would such a statement mean anyway?) It is simply to say that feminism is a voice raised in protest against the harm done to women by the social constructions of male supremacy. If this protest is relevant to all women, then so is the feminism which raises it, whatever the cultural origins of the one protesting.

But the chief problem with so much of the anti-racist debate within feminism is its failure to recognise male domination as the main enemy. This happens in two ways,

1. I am aware that there are problems with all of these terms. They imply a homogeneity among those so categorised, which is not only not the case, but can lead to its own form of domination and exclusion. Once women's interests are characterised in terms of different cultural realities, the inclusion of some will inevitably occur at the expense of others. That this is so is evidenced by the way in which the debate has been dominated by the concerns of US black women, concerns which are certainly pressing and important, but which are different in crucial ways from the interests of, say, Australian Aboriginal women. The terms also imply a non-existent homogeneity among those who fall outside the categories, those usually designated 'white'. I am reluctant to embrace the category 'white', unless it is necessary for a particular strategic purpose, because it is a category of domination and I am struggling to oppose domination, not embrace it. I am also reluctant to categorise any group of women as 'other' than me. My feminist commitment means that I see the commonalities among women rather than the differences. Nonetheless, addressing questions of racism requires the continued use of these terms or variants of them, given the absence of any adequate alternative.

by failing to recognise that racism is itself a form of male domination, and by defining feminism only in terms of 'women' or 'women's experiences'. By being defined only in terms of 'women', feminism is reduced to nothing but a series of different and essentially antagonistic categories of women who have nothing in common, because the privileges of some are gained at the expense of others. That is not to say that differences of privilege and access to human rights and dignity among women are not feminist issues. They are. The problem is locating them *only* in differences among women, rather than locating them in the first place with the meanings and values of the social system which is male supremacy. Inequalities among women reflect inequalities among men. They are a function of the invidious hierarchical divisions among categories of people which are required for the maintenance and continuation of male supremacy. Those divisions are not peculiar to women, but exist among men too. To restrict the discussion of these divisions to their manifestations among women, is to ignore the fact that they originate with male supremacy. Such a restriction threatens, not only to distort feminist politics, but to distort anti-racist politics as well. Focusing an anti-racist gaze only on women, is to miss crucial aspects of the evil that is racism.

For the accusation that feminism is 'white and middle-class' is no help in the anti-racist struggle either. It ignores the crucial element of masculinity embedded in racism, an element which appears only when racism is viewed from a feminist standpoint. There is, for example, the existential dilemma created for the men of a racial group defined as 'inferior' by the meanings and values of white supremacy. This dilemma involves a contradiction between the 'human' status those men are promised because they are men, and the human status they are denied because they are not men of the dominant racial group, because they are not white men, and hence not really men at all. This is a dilemma which black or indigenous women, and women of ethnic, cultural and racial minorities escape, at least insofar as the dimension of race is concerned. Because they are not men, they are not given the tacit promise of 'human' status in the first place, and at least at that level, they are not faced with its withdrawal. Of course, all women are faced with a denial of their humanity under conditions of male supremacy which define only men as 'human'. And it is that male supremacist belief which enables the use of such phrases as 'women and blacks and other oppressed groups'. The problem with such usages is

that it obliterates the existence of women who are black or who are oppressed in ways other than on the basis of their sex. The problem is succinctly expressed in the title of an anthology of writings on Black Women's Studies: 'All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men'. (Hull, Bell Scott and Smith, eds., 1986) But the problem is, first and foremost, a failure of feminist commitment, because it involves ignoring the feminist insight that all 'human' categories are automatically male unless care is taken to focus attention on women.

In saying this, I am not saying that racism does not exist among feminists. I am aware that racism is not always violent, blatant and overt, that it can be subtle, devious and sometimes ambiguous, and hence difficult to identify and describe. I am not arguing that a feminist commitment means that women cannot behave in racist ways; nor would I argue that anything and everything said in the name of feminism is automatically excluded from criticism on the grounds of racism. The on-going possibility of internal criticism, of self-criticism and criticism of each other, is vitally important if feminism is to continue as a viable politics. But criticisms must be substantiated and argued for, and must leave the way open for disagreement, if they are not to degenerate into sloganeering, name-calling and guilt-stricken silence.

I would like now to provide one example of the kind of thing I am criticising. In a paper called 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', Chandra Mohanty criticises a number of examples of '(Western) feminist texts' for their 'colonization' of women in the third world. Mohanty argues that these texts engage in a 'homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world'. They do this, she says, through 'the production of the "Third World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject', an ideological construct which results in the 'suppression ... of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question'.

But those examples of 'Western feminist scholarship' which she finds guilty of 'appropriating' and 'colonizing' the experiences and struggles of third world women, are writings which explicitly identify male domination. The texts she finds at fault are those which discuss various forms of male violence against women, which address the various ways in which women's subordination to men is

institutionalised, and which assert women's common interest in opposing male domination.

Her criticism involves a number of strategies. She characterises discussions of male violence and power and the institutionalised subordination of women, as the portrayal of third world women as nothing but 'the *victims* of male control' (p.339—her emphasis), and as an account of 'gender difference' which divides the sexes into 'two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive groups, the victims and the oppressors' (p.340). She insists a number of times that writings on third world women must confine themselves to 'description' and refrain from explanation and analysis. And she uses contemptuous and pejorative language to forestall any discussion of male domination. At one point she says: 'There is ... no universal patriarchal framework ...--unless one posits an international male conspiracy or a monolithic, ahistorical power hierarchy'. (Mohanty, 1988: 335) Her use of such dismissive and exaggerated terminology as 'universal', 'conspiracy', 'monolithic' and 'ahistorical' enables her to finesse questions about male domination. These terms serve the purpose of demonstrating the supposed absurdity of using the concept of male domination as an analytical and political strategy, without actually providing any argument or evidence. These strategies enable her to portray the Western feminist writings she criticises as complicit with Western domination of the third world.

What she is attacking in these texts is their feminism, to the extent that feminism is construed as the struggle against male domination (as I have argued at length in the longer work mentioned above). What she is interpreting as a form of Western domination is any attempt to bring feminist insights to bear on the situations of third world women. In doing so, however, she abolishes the possibility of acknowledging, and hence struggling against, any form of domination at all. It is not possible to give an account of domination, however it is characterised, *without* identifying both its victims and its beneficiaries. To disqualify talk of victims is also to disqualify talking about oppression. But there is also a sense in which to talk about domination is not at all to talk about victims. Rather, it allows people the opportunity to make decisions they would not otherwise have been able to make, because seeing domination and the forms it takes provides them with alternatives they would not

otherwise have had. To prohibit discussion of domination is to place a ban on this provision of alternative ways of seeing the world and one's place in it. As well, to disqualify explanation and analysis is to disqualify theory and politics, because both theory and politics are ways of understanding systematic regularities. Forms of domination cannot be challenged unless those regularities are made explicit by a theory and a politics which reaches beyond mere 'description'. To demand that feminist accounts restrict themselves to 'description' is to demand that they abandon theory and politics. It is a demand that they leave the status quo intact, and refrain from challenging those regularities which already structure conditions as oppressive. It is a demand which ensures a retreat from political engagement. If male domination cannot even be acknowledged, wherever it is to be found, however varied its subtle or brutal manifestations may be, it cannot be challenged and opposed, and feminism ceases to exist.

A feminist anti-racist politics must involve more than the uncritical acceptance and meek reiteration of anything and everything said by or on behalf of women of ethnic, cultural and racial minorities. Any accusation that feminism is 'white and middle-class' or 'colonising' or 'imperialistic' must be carefully assessed, and not taken on face value as some kind of self-evident truth. That assessment must involve giving priority to challenging male domination, in all its different cultural manifestations, especially those with which are closest to home.

Although feminism is certainly concerned with women, we need to keep in mind the reason why 'women' are problematic, i.e. because male domination means that women are excluded from 'human' status. Because that male supremacist exclusion of women from human rights and dignities is inhuman, feminism needs to speak in the name of a common humanity. In a paper called 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', (Lazreg, 1990) Marnia Lazreg criticises US feminist writings on women in the Middle East for their reliance on the prevailing paradigm of 'difference', because it is too often used, she argues, to assert 'their' difference from 'us'. It has led to 'an essentialism of otherhood' (p.338), she says. Instead of 'difference', she argues, we need to be insisting on our common humanity. She goes on to say that: 'The rejection of humanism and its universalistic character deprives the proponents of difference of any basis for understanding the

relationship between the varieties of modes of being different in the world' (p.339). She points out that, with all its faults, 'old-style' humanism, with its appeal to 'a more reasonable rationalism or a more egalitarian universalism', provided colonised peoples with the tools required to argue for their freedom.

Antihumanism, in contrast, locks powerless peoples into 'the prison house of race, color, ... religion ... and nationality' (p.340). The acknowledging of a common human bond provides, says Lazreg, 'a relative safeguard against the objectification of others', and 'a reminder that the other is just as entitled as I am to her/his own humanity expressed in his/her own cultural mode' (p.339). I will conclude on that note, leaving with you the ethical notion of a common humanity.

References

- Lazreg, Marnia (1990) 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. (1990) *Conflicts in Feminism* New York and London: Routledge, pp.326-48
- Mohanty, Chandra (1988) 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse' *Feminist Review* 30, pp.333-58

© Denise Thompson, December 1994