

## Feminisms in difference: between liberalism and decolonization

### Femminismi nella differenza: tra liberalismo e decolonizzazione

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the following work, based on an educational approach to contemporary cultural history, is to account for different issues of gender between the Global South and the Global North, briefly retracing the unequivocal contrast between the white academic vision of emancipation-liberation and the struggle strategies of Afro-descendant or ethnic American women. There are many misunderstandings, but specifically, we can see the difficulty cultured white women have in opening themselves up to a truly equal dialogue, not conditioned by prejudices relating to the backwardness or closed-mindedness of their interlocutors, alien to the dogma of progress in the vast South. The appearance on the cultural and political scene of postcolonial studies first and then decolonial studies has ended up raising significant questions about the permanence of persistent, even if often unaware, attitudes of neo-colonialism in Western culture, which seems little inclined to question its centrality in global development, thanks to science and technology, without taking into consideration other knowledge and its relevance in community life. Perhaps on the part of the feminine of the West, the more authentic meaning of freedom should be reviewed.

#### KEYWORDS

**Intersectionality, post-colonial feminism, epistemic pluralism, critic pedagogy, gender resistance.  
Intersezionalità, Femminismo postcoloniale, pluralismo epistemico, pedagogia critica, resistenza di genere.**

L'intento del seguente lavoro, sulla base di un approccio educativo alla storia culturale contemporanea, consiste nel rendere conto di differenti visioni delle problematiche di genere tra il Sud e il Nord del mondo, ripercorrendo in forma sintetica il contrasto inequivocabile tra la visione accademica Bianca dell'emancipazione-liberazione e le strategie di lotta delle donne afrodiscendenti o appartenenti alle etnie originarie americane. Le incomprensioni sono molteplici ma, nello specifico, si evince la difficoltà delle donne bianche colte di aprirsi a un dialogo realmente paritario, non condizionato da pregiudizi relativi alla arretratezza o chiusura mentale delle loro interlocutrici, estranee al dogma del progresso nello sterminato Sud. L'apparire sulla scena culturale e politica degli studi postcoloniali prima e decoloniali poi, ha finito per porre interrogativi non trascurabili sulla permanenza di atteggiamenti persistenti di neo-colonialismo, anche se spesso non consapevoli, nella cultura occidentale, che pare poco propensa a mettere in discussione la propria centralità nello sviluppo globale, grazie a scienza e tecnica, senza prendere in considerazione i saperi altri e la loro rilevanza nella vita comunitaria. Forse da parte del femminile dell'Occidente occorrerebbe rivedere il significato più autentico della libertà.

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## 1. The Darkness of Progress

When we talk about “liberal democracy” there is usually an undeclared implicit: the belief that the West has been the *light* of the world for a long time or, more precisely, since the so-called Modernity. The Global South, on the other hand, sees in the same period of time a *darkness* that has descended on its own history, influencing the existence of the most varied ethnic groups in the name of progress. This broad issue is not unrelated to positions on gender studies and, more generally, research on the status of women. The title of the paragraph was taken into consideration for its disturbing effectiveness, which is further evident in its precise contextualization: “The West has drawn with it the darkness of Progress, which had its greatest expression in indigenous ethno-genocide in America and in the trafficking of free men and women in Africa who were then enslaved in the New World” (Bidaseca, 2013, p. 16). A radical statement that many in the West would not agree with, yet it has its own specific *raison d'être*, especially today, in the awareness that progress brings with its serious contradictions both in relation to the relationship between man and nature, and in the asymmetrical relationship between North and South, and, finally, not only in the man-woman relationship, long debated in the last century, but also in the woman-woman relationship.

We can start from the concept of intersectionality developed within Afro-descendant feminism in the United States, with a charge of radical criticism of the system and a desire for autonomous emancipation. On the contrary, there is the questioning of its epistemic scope and critical originality by white female academicism. The concept, despite its differences in position, aims to be “revolutionary” as it intersects theory, methodology and politics around the themes of race, class, gender, sexuality. From this perspective, the gender issue is subordinated to racial, class, and anti-globalized capitalism tensions that are increasingly alien to human rights. The impression, entirely personal, is that the clash occurs more on issues of class than gender and, if the term “class” is not liked, it can be replaced with *social condition*. White female academics typically belong to the metropolitan upper-middle classes; Afro-descendants, even when engaged in intellectual work, typically come from below and often from non-metropolitan areas or ghetto neighborhoods. White epistemic criticism revolves around the descriptive limit of the often localist, excessively identity-based approach, which has little depth in structural coherence compared to that of established historical-theoretical feminism (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, pp. 1-14; May, 2014, pp. 94-112). On the other hand, contemptuous misrepresentation, criticism oriented towards “epistemic violence” with still colonial intentions of civilization, is considered persistent (Santa Cruz Feminist of Color Collective 2014, pp. 23-40).

Many considerations can be made about the value of intersectionality and also about its limits. It may be useful to consider the following consideration: “In the US context, intersectionality served not only to make visible the dimensions of black woman oppression that had been hidden within the unitary category of woman in white feminist theory, but also called into question the paradigmatic concepts of race used within critical black male-dominated race theory” (Mendoza, Scudieri, 2023, pp. 379-380). In essence, there is no shortage of positions towards male domination, including that of color, but there is a priority to note an attitude of little consideration on the part of white feminism in its claim to one-way unity. There is also a loss of consciousness and the denunciation of a “systemic racism” that insinuates itself into the theories and practices of formal equality; but the political project does not question membership in a state that maintains, in practice, a situation of global domination and control of peoples. Of course, there has been no shortage of studies on the slave-owning production system of plantations, on phenomena of urban segregation, on racial exploitation within the prison system, however: “Some aspects of the politics of intersectionality are then comparable to the liberal policies of inclusion, a fact which weakens its decolonizing potential” (Mendoza, Scudieri, p. 381). The insistence on the need for inclusion, equality of rights, the principle of full citizenship, seems to be going in search of those “blessings of freedom” that have been missed by Afro-descendants and are still lacking beyond a fully democratic appearance.

Aspects of intersectionality can be grasped in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak but with a different perspective cut that harks back to Marxism and deconstructivism, so much so that it is considered “heretical” by the same Group of Subaltern Studies of which it was a member: “Blaming subalternists who ignore gender and sexuality in their writings, Spivak analyzes the role of gender in relation to the social division of labor in capitalism, criticizes Eurocentrism in Western literature, questions the epistemic and political limits imposed by global neoliberal capitalism, and addresses incisive criticisms of Western liberal and radical feminist thought” (Ibid., p. 384). The intersection here seems to us to be revolutionary, so much so that the Indian scholar asks in one of her emblematic essays: *Can the subordinate speak?* (1988) and, in particular, the “poor Third World woman” as she appears to us after she has passed through the cultural filter of the dominant West? The clash with the theorists of the subordinate occurs on the fact that they defuse in every way the decolonial office of those they are supposed to represent. Chandra Talpade Mohanty goes further with her *Under the Eyes of the West* (1991, p. 56) when she asserts that in drawing a parallel between women of the First World and the Third, the image of two opposites emerges: the first appear “educated, modern, with the ability to control their bodies and sexuality” while the others remain “ignorant, poor, uneducated, traditionalist, domesticated”. Eurocentrism is still oppressive, with the aggravating circumstance that it wants to take over the task of redemptive work. If Spivak had pointed out that neocolonialists liked to portray themselves as advocates of emancipation: “white men save coffee-colored women from coffee-colored men”, Mohanty, who dislikes nuance, has no qualms about arguing that white women operate the same way. And here, from our point of view, a further element of differentiation emerges: if the difference between black and white women, who nevertheless

belong to the same state, is based on political and social factors, a distance emerges with Third World women that is primarily cultural, as we will try to highlight in the second part. For now we remain on the fact that Spivak considers herself a Marxist and deconstructionist feminist; on this basis she criticizes *French feminism* (1981) for the way the relationship between Western and Eastern women is posed. For her, there is a mere “occasional interest” in transalpine intellectuals, and in those women from another world they see only “nameless” human beings; moreover, Julia Kristeva, in her 1977 work *On Women in China*, observed in them a sense of belonging to a community with which we Westerners can exchange nothing. Mohanty (2012, pp. 29-62), focusing on Third World feminism, believes that there must be two: projects: the first consists of a firm critique of Western hegemonism, while the second must be based on strategies oriented towards autonomy and, implicitly, on the plurality of approaches, given the different geographies, individual and collective histories, as well as cultural diversity. In particular, she believes it's essential to pursue epistemologies that decolonize knowledge, unlike the Western feminist model, which views women far from their parameters as if they were external to social relations, failing to grasp their ability to give meaning to life precisely within the structures of their communities. There is much more *resistance* than can appear in Third World women, starting with a daily life that constantly challenges, given the poverty, the lack of public health, job insecurity, and the persistence of exploitation. We must be able to insist on a fundamental concept: “[...] think about how to translate experiences from our place of enunciation, the South; think about the power of border scripts as theoretical-discursive operations that can subvert the *pacts of hegemonic reading* to divert them towards local resignifications, with our feet firmly in the real conditions of our existence” (Bidaseca, 2013, p. 25, with reference to Richard 2007). It is in these terms that the strategic expression “Our America” begins to be employed in Latin American decolonial studies. A figure of particular interest from this perspective is undoubtedly Catherine Walsh, a white American who followed an unusual path arriving in Ecuador, where she taught at the Andina Simón Bolívar University in Quito, and was coordinator of the Doctorate of Latin American Cultural Studies. In an essay from a few years ago the scholar places some autobiographical traces (2007, p. 25), which may be interesting for our purposes. Having lived in a difficult situation, as a young woman she had dreamed of revolution and then, for reasons of necessity, she committed herself to temporary teaching at nursery school. Thus, she discovered “childhood openness”, “freshness” and “creativity” that tended to go astray in adulthood and came to an alarming deduction: “However, they frequently reproduced the same relations of the dominant power – of race, class and gender – and, clearly, the curriculum contributed to them, sometimes in direct form, other times much more rarefied (what is called the *occult curriculum*)” (Ibid., p. 26). The subaltern condition continued, therefore, to reproduce itself within that institution that was supposed to foster emancipation and, precisely, power continued to use the three elements *race, class and gender*, to classify human beings and separate them.

In a sort of “obsession” generated by the awareness of anti-democratic injustice, she came to build a path of critical pedagogy, also thanks to his meeting and collaboration with Paulo Freire in the 1980s. In the essay she reported, Walsh asks herself three questions: what should be understood by interculturality? What should be understood by coloniality? What do these guidelines propose to think about a different education? In the end, however, he becomes convinced that the primary question must be another: “what are everyone’s perspectives, beliefs, hopes, and visions on society, education, and in the face of socio-educational change?” (Ibidem). Certainly, the subjective responses will differ, depending on membership: those who live in well-being see education as a process of peaceful growth within a democratic institution; but those who live on the margins feel the burden of discrimination and their own inadequacy, thus sensing a destiny of subjection. At this point the need for a challenge emerges which manifests itself in a radical decision “a posture and an attitude, a political, epistemic and ethical responsibility” (Ibid., p. 27), not only individual but collective. This is an unequivocal choice of field, where attitude and posture come before *political responsibility*, indeed they orient it almost with the force of an original instinct of rebellion that feels which side it is on. Only then do we arrive at *ethics* and epistemic disobedience, an incisive expression of the Argentine philosopher Walter Mignolo (2017). The outcome can only be represented by an alternative education, freed from the domination of a West that still claims to exercise neo-colonial power over culture. Only on this road is it hoped that Ciudad Juárez - more than a city, a prison for innocents on the borders between Mexico and the United States - can silence the horrendous outcry of so many femicides of *maquiladoras*, poor nameless and faceless women who work in the *maquillas*, centers of inhuman exploitation without any rights, where the large industrial groups of the North subcontract to local companies, not unrelated to crime, production activities for low-cost objects. Their life is worth even less and so we too ask ourselves Karina Bidaseca’s questions that date back more than ten years: “Why is women converting into a visible sign of contemporary problems related to nationality, race and religion? How to explain the violence in the South?” (2013, p. 30). In our time the darkness of progress seems to have taken on the contours of a nightmare.

## 2. Like the echo of silence

The beautiful poetic expression we have chosen is by the Mapuche poet Liliana Ancalao (2010, p. 14). It’s an image referring to herself as a woman, in the name of indigenous women who were excluded from social participation in their homeland, Argentina, and were unable to tell their own stories, which still leave white, Western, and metropolitan feminism indifferent today. Yet this is not an *absence*, on the contrary her memoirs written in the interplay bet-

ween the original language (*mapuzungun*) and Spanish do a good job of conveying the metaphor of Women in the Weather: the cold/*Wutre*, the rain/*Mawüin*, the wind/*Kürüf*. The three natural elements correspond to the first stage of life, fertility and, in the last, death, the supernatural, beyond. We cannot go into the merits of Mapuche culture, except to recall the significant holistic element present in their religious vision: "For Mapuche the original idea of god is the confluence of the four founding elements of the universe, without which there would be no life" (Ñanculef Huaiquinao, 2020, p. 14). Cosmic foundations (earth, water, air, fire) coexist in one part of the Earth, the far South of the Latin American continent, in a scenery of extreme conflict that makes life difficult, between earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and floods; but the elements of female life depend above all on the human world: "invisible women, whose unlistenable voices have become trapped in the labyrinths of gender coloniality, in the alliance between colonizing and colonized men, where the former have transferred power to the latter" (Ancalao, p. 30). With respect to this living condition, there was often a "saving" intent on the part of white Western feminism: the women of the "Third World", still pre-modern, had to be accompanied on the path of civil progress according to an emancipatory mink that retraced the European path. Unknowingly, we believe, a colonial-style civilizing mode was being implemented. In a book from way back in 1986, the Indian intellectual Chandra Mohanty outlined the traits of an anti-racist, anti-capitalist and transnational feminism, oriented towards a female solidarity that was able to overcome the barriers of mutual distrust, we read it in the Spanish version: *Bajo los Ojos de Occidente: Academia Feminista y Discursos Coloniales* (2008). This is a real indictment, particularly of the Anglo-Saxon academic feminists who resented it, underlining their precise intent in the emancipatory direction of that feminine forced to live in an archaic world dominated by backward traditions. In this regard, Hernández considered: "the feminists who wanted to save them did not understand their problems, did not listen to them and therefore did not include their *major concerns* in their own political agendas" (2014, p. 183). And on the question of the greatest concerns we must return since it's on this ground that we find the "epistemic violence" (Miliàn, 2014) of Western culture, including that of the progressive feminine. The universalistic dimension of Western science as the "truth" of knowledge, and the uniqueness of the epistemological model, conflict with the cosmovisions of native ethnicities, which are *local* and have no all-encompassing claims. It is a culture linked to the values of the community to which one belongs, which does not understand the sense of Western linearity of time nor the desire to excel in global history. The West continues to hierarchize ethnic groups according to the pseudoscience of race and the "civilizing mission" - actually colonizing - and continues its path of denial of the other, not only towards the indigenous reality, but also the peasant and popular reality of vast areas of Latin America (See De Sousa Santos, 2010). Having had the opportunity to interact with Guaraní women in Brazil in our research, we discovered that for them the meaning of human rights has much more to do with the community than with the individual. For this reason, the re-appropriation of ancestral lands invaded by the neo-colonizers represents an undeniable value and is the linchpin of political struggle, just as for Mapuche women, for whom the *sacred land* of their ancestors cannot be exchanged for any *profane land*, even if it were economically advantageous. At the same time, our strongly antagonistic feminism often fails to understand the perceived natural need for male-female complementarity, which is strongly felt within the Amerindian feminine. The reproductive task, as part of the transmission of lineage, represents a value beyond question and in the Guaraní community, even today, the belief remains firm that what a woman *can* and *must* do cannot be the competence of a man. The cultural battle for women, then, occurs in other terms: rejection of closure within the family and greater participation in social life, in the awareness that indigenous women must fight on three fronts of discrimination: racial, class, and gender. In the State of Paraguay, since 2012, a Ministry of Women has been established, with a view to a Convention that has moved to eliminate discrimination against women in family life as well as in public life. The choice was commendable but not very fruitful with regard to the poorest classes of society, particularly indigenous women's groups who see neither their talents nor their aspirations recognized, including that of accompanying husbands and children in the struggle for recognition: a challenge that must require everyone's commitment as it is not a matter for men alone. The relevance of the topic in Brazil cannot be overlooked, given that women had already obtained the right to vote since 1932 and, during the 1970s, the first feminist groups were forming in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Even more important, for our arguments, was the birth of the National Feminist Meetings during 1979, which made circumstantial criticisms of widespread machismo, the sexist mentality and, more generally, the immovable patriarchal model. Even indigenous women, about twenty years later, began to organize, starting from the Amazon, still considered by landowners to be a land of conquest. The difficult situation continued over time, with loss of human lives, up to Mato Grosso in the South, where in 2017 the assembly of Guaraní and Kaiowá women denounced in a document the violent occupation of their *traditional lands*, expulsion from them and the obligation "to live confined in Indigenous Reserves with limited space" unbearable for those accustomed to moving across large territories for gathering and hunting. It may be useful, to continue, to refer to a reflection by Bonfil Batalla, who outlines four types of resources indispensable for the purpose of carrying out a social project appropriate to the native populations: "material", "organizational", "intellectual", "symbolic" (1995, pp. 469 - 472). The presence of women in political struggle has highlighted a qualitative leap in the organization and preservation of symbolic values; but it has also increased the complexity of the tensions between tradition and innovation. Indigenous Kaiowá Alda Silva-Nhandecy has given us a highly significant image of female socio-political commitment: "We, the Guaraní Kaiowá women, live like a chrysalis hanging from the tree trunk. For a long time, we remain still and voiceless. But today, awakening our conscience towards the path of transformation until we reach the kindness and freedom of the but-

terfly” (2013, p. 25). If we want to confront this different universe, we believe from experience that it is essential to overcome stereotypes of indigenous reality that have remained imprinted in our experiences until we reach the weight of prejudice. The indigenous can no longer be represented according to the Enlightenment vision of natural freedom and even less according to the pathetic image of endangered tribes. In a harsh but convincing tone Oliveira (1999) invites us not to consider them *living fossils* but, rather, to listen while leaving aside our usual keys to reading. The discovery we least expect lies in their ability to manage the relationship between *traditional* and *innovative*, without contrasting them in a clear or oppositional way. Despite appearances, indigenous ethnic groups are renewed in everyday life, according to a plan of political, cultural, and ethnic resistance; women in particular are an example of a resurgent female ethnic identity that finds in the multifaceted expression of resistance a desire for self-realization, far beyond the models that Western feminist culture has attempted to propose and, at times, impose. Back in 1979, Edward Said, a rebellious Palestinian, began postcolonial studies with his work *Orientalism* (See Italian translation 2001), a new way of investigating imperialism and colonialism, in the condition of intellectual exile, given belonging to a people victim of victims, recalling the Holocaust but also the political expression of Israel as a colonial state. However, in his work he does not accept the thesis of the clash of civilizations, but expresses himself in favor of the *interdependence of cultures*, particularly of the South. It is interesting to note how the Subaltern Studies, which arose in Southeast Asia, landed in Latin America, giving rise to the South-South dialogue. From this perspective, the anthology edited in Bolivia by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Rossana Barragán: *Debates postcoloniales* is paradigmatic. An introduction to the studies of subalternity (1997), where the two social science scholars state: “When observing such phenomena from a country like Bolivia, it is paradoxical to discover that the echo of many debates generated in the South is mediated by academic reflection from the North” (p. 15). And it is this *mediation* that is unwelcome, since what really matters is the horizontal dialogue within the South, with a critical clarification that is not negligible compared to the epistemic intransigence of the North: “Certainly the language of science will not be one, they will be various. I’m not talking about a certain relativism. I am rather suggesting that the meaning of the language of social science will be different. And this will have to compete and fight against hegemonic models” (Ibid., pp. 17-18). Two cultured, academic women from the Global South distance themselves from the single, consolidated and dominant model of the North, espousing the thesis of an epistemological shift destined to grow and present itself in different forms, in the transition between postcolonial and decolonial, which will see Latin American intellectuality as the protagonist, alongside the original ethnic groups, with a significant female presence.

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