

Gendered Feelings About Our National Issue(s)

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ABSTRACT

This paper was presented as a keynote address to the Canadian Women's Studies Association in a SSHRCC sponsored session entitled "Resisting the Neo-Conservative Agenda Globally and Locally: Economy, Representation and Feminist Praxis." The author speaks as a Quebec feminist as she argues for serious feminist participation in the political restructuring of Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé a été présenté en guise de discours-programme à l'Association canadienne d'Études sur les femmes lors d'une session parrainée par le Conseil de recherches en Sciences humaines du Canada intitulée "Résister au programme Néo-conservateur à l'échelle globale et locale: Économie, Représentation et Praxis féministe". L'auteure parle en tant que féministe québécoise lorsqu'elle discute de l'importance de la participation féministe dans la restructuration politique du Canada.

Our country is at risk. Our unending constitutional debate is a divisive issue where differences between women as citizens, belonging to the Anglo-Canadian majority or identifying themselves with national minorities, such as the Native or the Québécoise ones, have become painfully apparent. I intend to stress thereafter, why I do not agree with a restrictive definition of women's issues which would leave male citizens undisturbed when the configuration of the gender of the nation(s) we belong to is at stake. I totally agree, however, that this does not diminish the importance of more immediate issues that confront us. Our economy is also at risk and the restructuring now underway finds us on the same wavelength in our common attempt to counter the negative effects of a gender blind approach to development.

The fading of the welfare state in the general context of the globalization of economic exchanges has special hardships in reserve for women. The receding of the state means that women are once more mobilised to fill the gaps at home to care for the elders, for instance, or secure the convalescence of those who experience in the flesh the consequences of the ambulatory u-turn imposed on the health system. People sent home almost right away from surgery cannot be expected to care for themselves. The new system may appear more efficient only because it relies on the availability of mostly unpaid

domestic help. Privatization of services previously rendered by the state means also that, once again, grassroots organizations, which are mostly animated by women, have to manage to offer child care, for instance, or to open law clinics, popular restaurants, youth or women centers with less funding, and meet with the demands of a growing number of patrons. As these services are commercialized, women also have to fight for their rights to equal treatment in a context where salaries are shrinking and a claim in the context of general cuts of public expenses.

Poverty has still a sex and it is female: most affected are single-parent families, mostly headed by women, and women workers underpaid in relation to men--immigrant women still receive around half the revenue of immigrant men in Quebec, for example (CSF, 1993: 25). The situation of welfare recipients is not any better: while three-quarters of them were deemed unfit to work in 1975, in the 1990's, three-quarters of them are now classified fit to work. These people, though, cannot find regular jobs because of the general lack of employment in their region or because they are too poorly equipped or unadapted to fill the jobs offered on the market.

Women are especially aware of this situation in Quebec, one of the areas most hard hit by the economic crisis. In June 1995, a women's groups coalition took an initiative that would be resumed the following year by a march on Ottawa of women from

across Canada. Several hundred women walked 200 kilometres in what was called the March of Bread and Roses (David, 1996). Their march ended in front of the provincial parliament where too timid promises by the Minister of Work, Louise Harel, a feminist politician, were met by some boos. One year later, the first of June, it is thousands of women who, once again, circled Quebec National Parliament. They bore bags full of bread crumbs to symbolize their will not to accept a few crumbs from the table as a fair response to their demands (minimal wage increase, more child care facilities, a freeze on students fees, more and better services for immigrant women, suitable funding for women's organizations, to name but the principal). This time, no politicians were there to greet them and the media did not grant them more attention than would be awarded to Canadian women mobilized in their own march around the federal Parliament two weeks later.

Women's issues are first and foremost perceived as economic issues in this phase of restructuring and women are clearly active designing new means to cope with the receding of the state, by developing the sector referred to as the "*économie solidaire*", a communal sector, which fits between the private commercialised operations and the public sector proper (Aubry and Charest, 1995). But even if these issues are important, they are but consequences of a reframing that is decided upon at another level, the political one. Rules and policies concerning our everyday life do not come from mere adjustments of the invisible law of the market. They follow decisions taken between political actors who define the rules of the world we live in, be it under the law of the North American Treaty on Free Trade or the constitutional rules that determine who will exercise power of various sorts.

Are we as active on this political level as we are on specific issues more commonly defined as women's issues? Before I develop my argument on the most sensitive issue of our respective national identities, let me inform you that I am a Quebecker, and, as you may guess, a francophone one, which is the case of 83% of the population of what some still refuse to figure as a distinctly French province. (Though the proportion of English-Canadians is less

than 80%, few bother to specify that they are Anglophones when they name themselves Canadian. Members of minorities or of non-hegemonic majorities, be they featured according to gender, race or ethnicity, are those who are summoned to state their identity. Members of the majority, embodying the norm, may quietly forget their own particularisms to play the part of the correct, cool referee). In a country which rightly dreads a third referendum on Quebec's sovereignty, let me rely on a diplomatic device that was in use by the Mohawk or Huron nations when dealing with outsiders, notably the settlers' representatives from the French regime, two centuries before Canada existed.

Rémi Savard, a reputed anthropologist, recalled this treaty ritual in an interview given to *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec* (25, 4, 1995). The "At the edge of the forest" ritual initiated ceremonies to receive allied delegations when a Native chief was buried. If the aboriginals were not "at the edge of the forest" to receive their visitors, it meant that war was imminent. If they were "at the edge of the forest", to greet their "allies", it meant that peace could be hoped for. The "weeping your tears ceremony" would begin and the following sentences would be pronounced:

Do you want to dry the tears of your eyes?
Do you want to unblock your ears?
Do you want to clear your larynx?

As reports Savard:

The objective was to control the anger that misfortune carries with it and that is why - to move away the danger of war - the situation demanded to see, listen and speak with one's allies (Savard, 1995: 47).

In the aftermath of a Quebec referendum that shocked Canada by a result that is too narrow to be safe, such a ritual could help us to deal with the potential tearings ahead of us before we can draft a new compact satisfying to all of the "allies" involved.

Since the beginning of the eighties, Canadian women have been very keen in their fight for article 28 and the enshrining in the Canadian Constitution of provisions on equality between men and women as a

fundamental right to shield and protect. It is legitimate to want to shield also the right of native women to be equally protected by the Canadian Charter, or under an equivalently compelling native or international declaration of rights, if they are to come under a new political rule. My purpose is not here to debate the means by which distinct arrangements can or not better suit the purposes of specific national minorities such as the First Nations or Quebec's citizens, men and women alike. This task would need much more space than the few pages I can use here. Suffice it to state that, though Canadians think their Charter of rights is the best there is, it is not the only one of its kind. The Quebec Charter of rights, for instance, is equally mindful to shield the rights of women and secure the legitimacy of access to equality programs. Likewise, democratic native governments could be expected to draft similar declarations of rights if women's voices were heard in the negotiating sessions where these most important texts are discussed and decided upon.

My discomfort is elsewhere. I have the bad feeling that we missed the point. Stressing specific women's issues in the constitutional debate was totally legitimate. But, somewhere on the road, we let fall other centerground political issues as if they were not gendered or as if they were less women's business. As a feminist, I want the world to be mine all the way through. My concerns as a citizen of a specific constituency, be it Canada, as is the case now, or be it Quebec, as could be the case in a few years, are colored by my national identity. Being such, they are not de-gendered. The First Nations demands and Quebec's refusal to enter a Constitution that was repatriated and ratified in 1982 without its consent must be dealt with if Canadian women are to have equal access to citizenship and to collective cultural recognition. I sometimes feel that, as women, we still act as if national issues were not rightly ours and that we women, even the feminist ones among us, act as if those global preoccupations could be left to the 'boys' to look after.

Nine years ago, when Meech Lake Accord was at stake, English Canadian feminists justly protested the way the negotiations were handled by male politicians. Women from outside Quebec

protested against the rushed pace that was imposed upon them and rightfully denounced the undemocratic structure of a ratification process that did not permit any amendment in what was supposed to be the last stage of reconciliation between Quebec and the Rest of Canada (The initials ROC correspond to the french word *roc*, or in english, *rock*). Women citizens wanted to be heard and to assert their right to lay down the foundations for a transformed Canadian political community (Bashevkin, 1995; Dumont, 1996; Jenson, 1993; Vickers, 1993). Media focused on women's groups statements about female-male relationships and tended to discard their positions when organizations (such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women or the *Fédération des femmes du Québec*) pronounced themselves on global political issues. Nonetheless, I think we were not as present as we said we would be and wanted to be when national issues came on the foreground almost a decade ago (De Sève, 1992). I know resources are limited and that we must get our priorities straight if we want to keep some efficiency. Yet, to let the patriotic fibre surface, to take responsibility as a citizen should be no less stranger to feminism than to fight against pornography and violence against women, or wanting to put an end to discrimination related to sexual orientation or standing up for any other women's issue proper.

My point is to stress that the gender of the nation we live in is worth our full involvement too. Judy Rebick, with her stand on asymmetrical federalism, and a few others entered this debate around Charlottetown as around Meech Lake. But, a few interventions on the global aspects of the national question cannot mask the general wavering of women to enter this debate at the level where the general frame of polity is discussed. We are very good at pressure politics but are we so much involved, as feminists, in citizen's politics as such?

Our hesitation to enter all aspects of this global debate from our specific gendered perspective is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to get rid of the model of the nation-state, a model centered around a homogenized concept of interchangeable standard white-male citizens. This political structure befitted societies where women as well as national

minorities were kept outside a hierarchical model of patriarchal polity. It does not suit the needs of contemporaneous regimes where ethnic, gender and cultural differences are to be coped with on an equal footing devoid of paternalism and domination (Minha, 1989; Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995; West, 1992).

Consider power games, plan A or plan B concocted by federal agencies, for instance, where the old political ways take precedence over the new ways of bringing gender and cultural differences from the margin to the center. One of the achievements of the women's movement, Canadian, Native or Quebecker alike, is to have succeeded in putting women on the agenda (Backhouse and Flaherty, 1992). Along Jill Vickers's formula, to tackle "politics as if women mattered", we have to go further and stress our duty as citizens to participate in framing the polity of the land into reflecting our own experiences and wants, exactly as men citizens now do (Vickers, 1997). We have to ensure that both genders are present when the configuration of nationhood and statehood is at stake, which means that we have to get over our reluctance to assume power and to take full responsibility for drawing up the rules by which we are to abide.

Citizenship is more than a matter of being able to claim rights. It is about a capacity to generate power, for that is the only way that things get established in the world. And it is about a capacity to share in power, to cooperate in it, for that is how institutions and practices are sustained (Wolin, 1992: 250).

The concrete other approach advocated by Seyla Benhabib, the ethics of care outlined by Carol Gilligan or the considerations of Iris Marion Young on the politics of difference offer us some guidance on the way to bring a feminist perspective to state politics. We cannot confide in only men defining the rules of citizenship and heading civic agency. We are concerned both by issues such as the fading away of the Welfare state, and by the reframing of a polity inclusive of our gendered perspectives as specific concrete others, to draw new constitutional arrangements suited to a multinational as well as multilayered society (Kymlicka, 1995; Phillips, 1993:

Tilly, 1995; Young, 1993).

Our national problem has to become a top priority women's issue if we do not want the women's burden to increase. Societies deaf to minorities demands are usually prone to dismiss women's specific needs in the name of the requested unity of thought and action (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). A pluralist approach receptive to difference is needed, one that trespasses the narrow limits of the classic nation-state referent, even under its federated form where the separated ingredients are supposed to give a wonderful mayonnaise dressing by the magical intervention of national norms (Bashevkin, 1991; Cairns, 1995). The false unity of treatment could very well mask the persistent domination of the hegemonic post-colonial white-anglo-canadian culture.

A politics centered on the recognition of collective as well as individual rights is not easy to devise but it would be easier to come by if we could rely on political representatives that agreed on a process which:

...aims for an understanding of group difference as indeed ambiguous, relational, shifting, without clear borders that keep people straight--as entailing neither amorphous unity nor pure individuality--Difference now comes to mean not otherness, exclusive opposition, but specificity, variations, heterogeneity. Difference names relations of similarity and dissimilarity that can be reduced to neither coextensive identity nor overlapping otherness

(Young, 1990: 171)

Arendt's approach, for one, could be helpful here. It has the advantage of emphasizing the importance of a unified political intervention at the heart of the affairs of state but through plurality; that is, neither with blind partisan loyalty nor by rallying to a unitary mode of thought. She calls for the opening up of political life and for concrete choices decided upon through assemblies encouraging conscious polemical debate. The actors who thereby confront each other have no intention of abdicating

their free will, but strive mutually to understand their diverse viewpoints, and to enter into relationships of alliance and reciprocity between equals, before agreeing on common decisions. Their actions are thus based on the rules underlying their will to form a given community together.

Arendt's vision of politics is of multiple voices interlocked in a dialogue to construct a common ground where citizens can act as free and equals. Her thinking is totally alien to a unified conception of a world government where all nations would come under a common rule, all specific differences being engrossed and merged in the abstraction of mankind. She stresses that:

...the more there are peoples in the world, the more there will be world created between them and the more this world will be great and rich. The more viewpoints there are in a people, from where it is possible to consider the same world they inhabit jointly, the more the nation will be great and open.

If on the contrary, we were, after a full catastrophe to see a single people surviving on earth, and if all its members were to perceive and understand the world from a unique viewpoint, living under a full consensus, the world, intended as historical-political would be doomed...

In other words, there cannot be men (and women) proper but where there is a world, and there cannot be world properly stated but where the plurality of humankind is not reduced to the mere multiplication of so many copies of a same species.

(Qu'est-ce que la politique?

1995:112-113. Our translation)

I deeply feel that if women were to lead that kind of multivoiced politics, we would stand a better chance to find a way out of our constitutional mess and if not, at least, after a "*divorce à l'amiable*", an amicable arrangement of some sort, we would become good neighbours instead of political foes.

Arendt posits a politics of alliance between equals, instead of handing over the responsibility for deciding affairs of State to an oligarchic elite. This is eminently appropriate under the present circumstances. The fathers of Confederation were mindful of a state grounded on two founding nations, even if they failed to implement this model in a dehierarchized way. It is time not only to enlarge this pattern to fit the needs of Quebec and the First Nations, but also to cement new political relationships free of a single gender perspective on citizenship, which is most certainly "*dépassée*"--a useless remnant of the past--and most certainly harmful to the good fame of Canada as being a tolerant and peaceful country. Let me sincerely hope that the women's movement all over Canada will not be content with leaving the door ajar and will fully enter a debate that constitutes a unique opportunity to draft the outlines of the type of social and political regime we demand for us, both as women of various extraction and as gendered citizens of the land to be.

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