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SYMPOSIUM: "THE MISSING FEMINIST REVOLUTION IN SOCIOLOGY" TWENTY YEARS LATER: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS

"The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology" Twenty Years Later: Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Social Problems has published many papers that have become classics in their field. Among them is Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne's 1985 article, "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology" (vol. 32, pp. 301–316). Published just over twenty years ago, Stacey and Thorne argued that mainstream sociology—in contrast to other social science disciplines, like anthropology—had warded off attempts by feminist scholars to transform the field's theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Stacey and Thorne attributed this lack of success to several factors, including the legacy of functionalism, quantitative sociologists' treatment of gender as a variable, and the sexism of Marxist scholarship.

The papers in this symposium began as a set of invited presentations at the 2005 meetings of the American Sociological Association. The occasion was the twenty-year anniversary of the publication of Stacey and Thorne's article. Like the conference session from which these papers derived, this symposium provides an opportunity to commemorate, revisit, and generally reassess the "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology." This paper was published the year after I received my Ph.D., and I can still remember how much intellectual excitement it generated and how vigorously it was debated among feminist sociologists of my generation. Along with a look back, this symposium also provides us with an opportunity to look forward—to consider the state of feminist sociology today and begin a conversation about the future.

Even in 1985, sociology had produced a critical mass of feminist scholars. Since then, new generations of feminists have emerged both within sociology and throughout the academy. This symposium contains essays by several influential feminist scholars. Judith Lorber, Raka Ray, Christine Williams, and Leila Rupp consider the significance of "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology" from different vantage points and perspectives. In the spirit of the conversations that this paper has engendered over the years, the symposium opens with an introduction and commentary by Joan Acker and concludes with responses and reflection from Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne. Collectively, the symposium's contributors offer *Social Problems* readers an opportunity to reflect on how feminism has transformed sociology and how sociology has transformed feminism. *Keywords: feminism, sociology.*

Is the Revolution Missing or Are We Looking in the Wrong Places?

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In 2004, when I was asked to contribute a short piece to *Perspectives: ASA Theory Section Newsletter* on the state of feminist theorizing within sociology, I found myself connecting immediately to the (shall we say “germinal”?) essay co-authored by Barrie Thorne and Judith Stacey, the “Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology,” published in *Social Problems* in 1985, a piece that I have often taught, and then followed up with their very insightful though less optimistic 1996 *Perspectives* article, “Is Sociology Still Missing its Feminist Revolution?”. However, in the same issue of *Perspectives*, Michael Burawoy (1996) celebrated feminism’s ability to retain its revolutionary edge (more so than Marxism) within sociology. Now, a decade after that, and 20 years after the original essay, what can we say about the profound epistemological and political ramifications of thirty years of feminist theory and its relationship to the discipline of sociology? What of the revolution? Did it ever appear, did it slide away unnoticed, or did feminism indeed retain its revolutionary edge within sociology?

Before proceeding, I want to acknowledge my deep debt to the many feminist scholars before me for their pathbreaking scholarship, their relentless pursuit of political and theoretical justice, and their steadfast mentorship. One of the truly remarkable elements of the entrance of feminism into the academy has been the quality of caretaking and encouragement that those who are already in have bestowed on succeeding generations. We are privileged indeed to be able to have this conversation.

Feminist theory had clearly been around for a while though it had not found a happy home in sociology when Thorne and Stacey wrote their essay in 1985. It was still missing five years later when I was halfway through my graduate school career at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. This was a time when feminist sociologists and theorists were writing and being taken seriously, yet the study of gender and feminist theory had not been institutionalized in sociology, at least not at the University of Wisconsin. Indeed, I remember being part of a group of advanced students who taught ourselves feminist theory and who helped craft questions for the first qualifying exams in the new field of sociology of gender. While we were interested in various empirical questions regarding gender, it was feminist theory that motivated us and feminist theory that we wanted incorporated into the corpus that was handed to us as sociological theory. We came to realize that the problem did not lie in the institutionalization of the field of gender in terms of the empirical study of men and women in society as such, but rather in the inclusion of feminist theory as valid sociological theory.¹

Some of the ideas in the article appear in an earlier form in “Feminist Theory: Two Decades after the Missing Revolution” in *Perspectives* 27(3). The author wishes to thank the panelists at the 2005 American Sociological Association session on the “Missing Revolution,” and her research assistant Nazanin Shahroki for her bibliographic assistance. Direct correspondence to: Raka Ray, University of California–Berkeley, Department of Sociology, Berkeley, CA 94720. E-mail: rakaray@berkeley.edu.

1. For a review of feminist efforts to mainstream feminism within sociology see Chafetz (1997).

The problem of seeing feminist theory as sociological theory is still with us despite clear wins in the institutionalization of gender as a field.² From the recent work of Myra Marx Ferree and her colleagues (Ferree, Khan, and Morimoto forthcoming) it is also apparent that academic production within sociology reflects the gender differences that have hitherto constituted the field. Thus citational practices are still sex segregated (Ward, Gast, and Grant 1992) such that “women are more likely to cite women’s work and gender-focused articles than men are and relative to the population of articles and researchers in an area, men under cite women’s work” (Ferree, Khan, and Morimoto forthcoming).

Between 1990 and today however, a shifting feminist canon within sociology has formed, if by canon we mean the presence of an agreed upon body of work that a community of scholars can study, share, learn from, and critique. Perhaps because feminist theory came to sociology late, the field has shifted with remarkable rapidity over the past decade and a half. Of the many shifts that have taken place in the past thirty years of feminist theory, I suggest that two have been most significant to (and within) sociology: (1) from universalizing to particularizing and contextualizing women’s experiences, and (2) from conceptualizing men and women as categories and focusing on the category “women” to questioning the content of that category and shifting to the exploration of gendered practices.³

Early feminists such as Gayle Rubin (1975) and Catherine MacKinnon (1988) tried to isolate gender from other social forces, to analyze its specificity—as different from class and race—while marking gender as *the* core contradiction of society, indeed of all societies. Of the assumptions made here, the first to be challenged was that there was something unique to women and shared by all women—the assumption of universality. This is, of course, a classically sociological challenge, that arose, at least in the United States and Europe, out of the recognition of working class women and women of color that the assumptions made about women’s shared experiences were not in fact shared by all women. What was being considered universal to women was in fact a U.S. and England-based white middle class specificity. Thus, the first theoretical move was the rejection of middle class white womanhood as the *normatively universal* category and an acceptance that it was a *particular* category. Gender came to be seen as a major structuring principle of society whose effects and meanings came about within specific contexts. Further, gender came to be seen as a force whose effects were best understood in intersection with other elements (race, sexuality, etc). Within sociology, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) is perhaps best known for her articulation of the intersection of race and gender. In the area of the sociology of work, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) was one of the first to highlight how occupational sex segregation took different forms depending upon the ethnic category of the women and men in question.⁴ Sociology textbooks also reflected the importance of this shift.⁵ Outside sociology, the work of legal scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1996), to whom the term “intersectionality” is attributed, and cultural theorists such as Bell Hooks (2000), is influential.

Gender, then, is not an independent social relation (no more than is class or race), but is embedded in a field of other relations, which include class, age, sexuality, race, and geo-politics. Those inspired by poststructuralists such as Joan Scott (1999) take this one step further and emphasize not just the interactive or intersectional effects of race, class and gender, but the discursive and material *co-constitution* of gender, race, sexuality, and class within different contexts.

2. For a wonderful analysis of the institutionalization of the field see Ferree et al (forthcoming).

3. There are several ways one might characterize these shifts, and indeed much has been written about them. I focus on the two I find most significant.

4. For an excellent analysis of the empirical use of intersectionality in sociology see a recent article by McCall (2005). In this article, McCall makes a case for three different conceptions of intersectionality; my separation of intersectionality from co-constitution would represent the intra-categorical and anti-categorical versions of intersectionality for McCall.

5. See for example Andersen and Collins (2004) and Rothenberg (1992).

In this version, the forces of gender, race, and class do not occur independently and then intersect, but rather, take their meaning and form as they interact with each other.

The second major shift occurred in the object of study from *women* (seen as a group or a category with shared traits) to the production and construction of gendered practices where masculinity(ies) and femininity(ies) exist in relation to one another. Thus, women and men are interesting in as much as they usually (but not always—the slippages and alternative possibilities are important here) embody different sets of gendered practices. These clusters of practices, named masculinity and femininity, get their power from being constructed in opposition to each other. The theoretical task here is to think through the ways gender difference is constructed through everyday practice. This is also the shift that legitimizes the study of men through the study of practices of masculinity. Sociologists such as Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), R.W. Connell (1987), and Barrie Thorne (1993) were at the forefront of this attention to gendered practices.⁶ The shift from studying categories of people to practices also enabled studies of sexuality and queer theory to flourish.⁷ This second shift has worked particularly well in sociology because studying practices is what we do.

There are however three types of resistances to feminist theory from within sociology that remain and that I would like to explore here. They are: (1) the relationship of poststructuralism to sociology; (2) the relationship of postcolonialism or transnationalism to American sociology; and (3) the relationship of theory generation to geographic location. I suggest that these resistances, which stem not only from the discipline at large, but also from the study of gender within sociology, are what prevent the furthering of the feminist revolution.

Poststructuralism

As Stacey and Thorne (1996), as well as others such as KumKum Bhavnani (1996), quite rightly pointed out in the ten year anniversary discussion of the “Missing Feminist Revolution” article in *Perspectives*, feminist ideas have been a transdisciplinary force in academia. By virtue of this, they challenge disciplinary boundaries. But we who are the practitioners of feminist theory are ourselves located in disciplines, and even as we acknowledge the strength of transdisciplinarity we attempt to discipline it. For many feminist sociologists then, the move to poststructuralist and postcolonial theorizing is uncomfortable.

The increasing presence of Judith Butler (1999), Nancy Fraser (1989), Joan Scott (1999), and often Gayatri Spivak (1988) in the syllabi of younger scholars has created unease among many, partly because of what is perceived to be their lack of a clearly definable feminist political project (as Dorothy Smith [1996] articulated in *Perspectives*), and partly because sociology is such a science of modernity that there is a common belief, expressed succinctly by a senior sociologist, that “Foucault is incompatible with sociology.” Of course there is nothing fundamentally un-sociological about Foucauldian notions of power, or about queer theory’s focus on normalization. What is striking, in fact, is the extent to which the best young sociologists that I have had the privilege of teaching and learning from deeply engage with these theorists, sociologizing them even as they deploy them to expand sociology.

There is also little evidence of depoliticization linked to poststructuralism. Indeed, Michael Burawoy (1996) is right in seeing feminist theory as a field in which clear theoretical advances have been made without sacrificing a critical political agenda. Perhaps because it is so linked with the concept of political change, feminist theory has remained vigilant, and has been willing to shift *even its understanding of its own foundational terms*—women, gender, liberation—in order to maintain a critical edge that continues to inspire both scholarship and social movements of all kinds.

6. While sociologists focus on practice, the study of multiple discursive constructions of masculinities and femininities form a core element of both feminist theory and cultural studies today. See for example Gardiner (2002) or historian Bederman (1995).

7. See Seidman (1997).

Postcolonialism and Transnationalism

As a discipline, sociology suffers from a weakness that early feminist scholarship did not suffer from—but does now—and that is the following: sociology in the United States is a parochial and U.S.-centric discipline. While certain subfields such as comparative historical sociology do enable studying and learning from other countries, core fields such as criminology and stratification (with notable exceptions) do not. If other countries are included for comparative purposes, they are almost always western European. Sociology, the quintessentially modernist discipline, simply has not made room for learning from (and I make a distinction between learning about and learning from) other societies ordained to be pre- or less modern from the perspective of America. But feminism was different. Borrowing from anthropology, feminism understood that, as Marilyn Strathern (1987) put it, cross cultural data are good to think with. Feminism learned from a study of other societies that alternative futures could be imagined for gender relations in this country, that the particular forms of gender inequality embedded in institutions in the United States were not inevitable. I fear that we have lost some of that ability. The humility and urgency with which feminists approached the study of other societies has been replaced with a liberal guilt approach to those societies. The initial debunking of claims of universality I have referred to above led to scholarship that focused on women in particular countries rather than on larger and more generalizable claims (in the United States, most feminist scholars think about and work on the United States). Today, while feminist studies' syllabi, within and without sociology, may include the study of gender in other countries, they tend not to explore the actual connections between women's lives or the constitution of gender in different countries.⁸ This version of what I call "included marginality" goes like this:

One ought to talk about the rest of the world because it would imply that we are the imperial hegemon of the world if we do not. What we do not need to do, however, is incorporate our knowledge about other societies into our core understandings of our own world. And what we certainly do not need to do is to incorporate global political analysis that might have great bearing on the issues we are studying. Thus, we can teach about women in Afghanistan as a case of a patriarchal Muslim regime but we do not have to talk about the United States or the Cold War when we talk about gender in Afghanistan.

Hidden, by and large, still remain the connections between gendered ideas and practices and asymmetrical power relations in the world.⁹ Today, we need a feminist theory that pays more attention to the flows of power, ideas, and resources between rich and poor nations of the world. We need a theory that pays attention to global connections, understanding that the actions of one nation affect gender relations in another. What is now called transnational theorizing is fundamentally different from earlier attention to women in the third world, when radical feminists declared foot binding in China, the Salem witch trials, and the wearing of high heels to be manifestations of the same universal principle of patriarchy. It is also different from when feminist scholars of development paid attention to other parts of the world because women were particularly poor or oppressed there. It includes a deeper understanding of the co-constitution of culture, colonialism, and nationalism—not just the way their institutions work—in order to appreciate why women's agency might look so different in various corners of the globe.¹⁰ In the context of the world today, that surely, is just good sociology.

8. As I talk about my work to sociological audiences around this country, I am constantly perplexed when otherwise sophisticated and erudite people instinctively limit the implications of my argument to India and are unwilling to search for similar patterns or to draw lessons from that research to the United States ("so you are really talking about caste, right?").

9. For exceptions to this within sociology see Parrenas (2001), Salzinger (2003), and Thayer (2000).

10. See for example Grewal and Kaplan (1994), Mahmood (2004), and Mohanty (1988, 1996).

Where Can Theorists Live?

Doing feminist sociology in an increasingly globalized world must include not just the ability to learn from the social institutions and cultures of other parts of the world, but also the ability to learn from scholars who live and work there—and now I really mean outside the United States and Western Europe. It means realizing with humility that there are smart people in other parts of the world who think deeply and write eloquently about issues we fundamentally care about, and introducing our students to them.

Take four examples of work that would positively benefit the thinking of those of who study gender within sociology. (1) The work of Martiniquan psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1986) should be considered compulsory reading for anyone interested in the anguish of subaltern masculinity and the question of the co-constitution or intersection of race and gender. And yet, while he appears in a handful of sociology syllabi, he is rarely included in any sociological analyses of masculinity. (2) Some of the most innovative work on different types of power—religious power, colonial power, the particular power of marginal groups—emerged, for example, in the eighties from the subaltern historians in India.¹¹ Historians in the United States have incorporated them into their syllabi, as have anthropologists, but not, by and large, sociologists. (3) The Indian sociologist and feminist Veena Das (1990) has teams of people doing work in areas that have suffered trauma (civil war, massacres, etc.) and we can learn from her work about the way societies put themselves together (or fail to do so) after traumatic events, and in particular about their gendered impacts. And, (4) scholars from countries that became independent in the latter half of the twentieth century have written about gender and nationalism (see Yuval Davis 1997; Jayawardena 1986; Lazreg 1994; Lughod 1998; Sharoni 1995), but we have by and large failed to learn from them how ideologies of nationalism intersect profoundly with gender ideologies in the United States.

These are but four examples of work that we should attend to if we are to expand the parameters of our knowledge claims and theorizing. The very disciplines that Stacey and Thorne (1985) marked as more receptive to feminist theorizing twenty years ago are the ones that are more receptive to the work referred to above. Thus, it is not that there are no disciplines in this country in which such work is being included, just that it is not being done within sociology.

The initial objective of feminist theory was to explain the seemingly universal asymmetries between men and women in the world. Thus early theorizing was not interested in explaining *all* social problems but rather the specific problematic of gender inequality. However, feminist theory has long evolved into a complex body of knowledge through which to comprehend many social facts about the world, even those that appear on the surface to be un-gendered, such as war or famine.¹²

I do think that there has been a revolution—at times quiet, and at other times rather more noisy. It is clear that more and more sociologists are interested in gender, and that feminist theories and epistemologies have slipped into sociology in multiple ways. In addition to bringing analyses of gender into sociology, feminist theory has changed the way sociology thinks about the operation of power in society, and has successfully challenged naturalized assumptions about the separation of private and public spheres. Yet, at this very moment, questions that push us beyond the boundaries of what we comfortably accept as legitimate forms of theory, epistemology, and methodology that were once so effectively raised by feminist theory are being raised again. They are being raised, however, largely outside the parameters of U.S. sociology, in poststructuralist, postcolonial and transnational analysis and by sociologists elsewhere. Those are the places to which we need go, as sociologists and feminists,

11. Key subaltern texts include Amin 1997, Chakrabarty 1989, Chatterjee 1995, and Guha 1997.

12. For war, see Enloe (2001). For famine, see Sen (1981).

to find new ideas to think with. Those of us who have been formed by feminist theories should be at the forefront of this new theoretically rich and interdisciplinary work and surely not be seen as the resistant old guard.

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