

Dialogic Feminism: “Other Women’s” Contributions to the Social Transformation of Gender Relations



Introduction

Like many other academic women, I was first introduced to feminist literature when I began attending university. On March 8, 1992, having recently graduated, I was fortunate enough to participate in an encounter of over 1000 rural women in El Bierzo (Leon, Spain). This trip had a decisive impact on both my personal and intellectual life.

I discovered the strength and transformative possibilities of these women who did not have a university education, their capacity for organization in women’s movements and their conviction that they could change the course of their lives. I learned that their reflections on the social transformation of gender relations were more profound than those I had had with other colleagues in the university. I was amazed by the procedures of their meetings and their tolerance for inclusion of everyone in the fight for common goals. I felt like an equal, talking and searching with them for shared victories.

I was invited on the trip by the women of the adult education center where I was collaborating and volunteering (Sánchez 1999). I had already begun experiencing the contrast between the feminist literature I had read and the problems of those “other women.” Their protests were about more than just wage

differences between businessmen and businesswomen. Their protests were about the inequalities and wage differences between businesspeople and "cleaning ladies."

When I returned home from El Bierzo, the women asked me not to forget their voices in my intellectual work. The women's movements that I had known and that I encountered subsequently in other places demonstrated to me that it is possible to work together to reorient the course of history toward an egalitarian perspective for the social transformation of gender relations; these women were already making it happen. I began to participate with enthusiasm and purpose in research in this field and in theoretical development and practical reflection through my involvement with some of these women's movements, with whom I continue to collaborate.

It was clear to me that it was necessary to set this analysis in the context of feminist theoretical work. It is through this social reality and from nonuniversity women and their movement that we are learning to develop, in academia, the dialogic feminist proposal that we present in this essay.

Feminism and the Achievements of Traditional Modernity

Prior to modernity, women were mere objects without a voice, incapable of being recognized as decision makers and always subject to the decisions that men (fathers, brothers, husbands) made for us. Along with the strong social hierarchies based on criteria of culture and economics (during the Middle Ages, attaining a dowry was one of the most frequent motives for financial assistance), women had to endure the added burden of gender discrimination. With women's obligation to be in the home, to care for their husband and children, an image of women as passive, obedient, and selfless was forged, which further impeded open access to public life, education, or any type of social, political, and economic participation. Social institutions not only silently observed this process, but in one way or another maintained it. For example, one can look at the relations between the church and courtly love. Monastic life was set along the guidelines that established an obvious parallel between love for a woman and faith in God. In monasteries, the image of woman, the object of

attraction, was transformed into the Virgin Mary. In the chivalric ideal, the body of the woman was always considered unyielding; in some poems it is compared to a fortress, which alluded to Celestial Jerusalem (Leroux-Dhuys 1998). Also conserved are the vivid descriptions of the feelings of faith, which closely resembled sexual desire.

The Enlightenment radically changed this situation, which was now presented with the ideas, well known, that marked the widespread use of knowledge and a confidence in reason that modified relations with nature, history, and reality. The Enlightenment was fertile ground for the creation of a new conception of the person, who became increasingly more capable of transforming his/her environment and articulating his/her demands in social movements. Normally, this genesis of social agency is seen as the result of enlightened thought. However, we would like to indicate a reading of this historic episode in reverse. The networks of solidarity were the ones responsible for the appearance of this subjectification process. Modernity began to develop parallel to the attainment of its demands and public participation.

In modern times, ideas were born that were related to the need for freeing mankind from superstition and irrational religious impositions. Groups began to demand autonomy and the opportunity for social collectives to provide feasible proposals for change. Many ideas emerged that aimed at finding the natural equality of all people. However, the ability for action for men and women in traditional modernity was asymmetrical. Thus, many women's movements organized to fight for this equality, even at the risk of their lives. The freedom and equality that these women wanted was also extended by them to other groups.¹ Reason and truth, regardless of where they surfaced from, should have been independent of gender questions.

However, other types of hierarchies were generated in these social movements, the feminist movement included. Modernity became an all-encompassing project in which a small minority believed they held the truth. Consequently, when decision-making power was in the hands of a select few who were the "guides" of the ideas and the movement, the capacity of everyone else was held in doubt. Thus, trust in the reasoning capacity to perceive the truth was solely in the hands of a few leaders who oftentimes forgot, or simply confused, important issues that affected all women.

We pose an example of this. In Spain, women gained the right to vote in 1931. Clara Campoamor of the Radical Party, Victoria Kent of the Socialist Party, and Margarita Nelken of the Spanish Socialist Labor Party (PSOE) were the only women who participated in the parliamentary debate on the passage of female suffrage in the Second Republic. However, only Campoamor defended women's right to vote. Although the other two defended female suffrage on an ideological level, they did not support it politically, arguing that the vote could not be given to women who were ignorant and lacking in culture. Clara Campoamor declared that if the right to vote was to be denied women for a lack of culture, the same had to be done in the case of men without studies. Since this was not going to happen, women did achieve the right to vote, regardless of socioeconomic background (Capel 1975, Fagoaga 1985).

When today's women's movement forgets nonuniversity women's discourses, we can say that they are making the same mistake made by Kent and Nelken. A large part of past feminism considered that not all individuals were able to interpret their own reality and propose measures for transformation. We must stop this from happening again. It is incompatible with the idea of freedom and emancipation that these movements supposedly profess. The dynamics that limit the participation of all women in the movements they represent, by relegating responsibility to a theoretical and political elite, tend toward discipline as the only road to common actions. Additionally, responsibility of the people in the movement weakens, which, as the bureaucratic machine grows, becomes less efficient. This is when popular participation turns into election of representatives who decide for everyone.

It was during the nineteenth century that women began to view as feasible the possibility of creating a society based on equality. Education was seen as the first step toward achieving this goal,² and, since then, access to education has been one of the most important claims that women have made.³ In traditional modernity, the academic woman appropriated the fight for all women, among them those who continue to be silent today. Thus, an elite generated interpretations of reality, defined strategies of action and decided who should participate and who was to be represented. The "feminism of equality" was born in this context, composed of feminist movements that emerged with a homogenizing vision in which only some women (the academics)

were considered bearers of progressive values that had to be defended, while they defined forms of action that the rest of the women had to adopt.

In light of the achievements of the women's movement in the modern era, we recognize that despite the profound problems that were forgotten and the erroneous decisions that were made, the balance tips to the positive. In fact, a greater level of emancipation and independence accompanied the appearance of the New Woman. In the context of women's studies, this has occurred along with the gradual emergence of the idea of social agency, capable of transforming contexts through reflection (this aspect is discussed further in the next section).

A feminist movement such as "No means no," born out of issues of date rape in the United States, is an example of how it is possible to actively fight against the oppression of women and their sexual freedom on the basis of values of solidarity and equality, while bringing a societal menace to the fore for the whole population. This movement has provided a number of arguments to fight against situations in which some men continue to justify their sexual aggressions against women with the excuse that "she wanted it," "even if they say no, I know they like it," "she provoked me," etc. It has raised women's awareness, helped those of us who want to report gender-based violence and harassment, and pressured the justice system to confront this issue in a courageous way.

Feminist movements have made certain demands of their own, such as those of the women abolitionists who were rejected by the London antislavery convention. It is not by chance that International Women's Day (March 8) has its origins in and continues to commemorate the women's labor movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which we all remember in the context of the devastating Triangle Shirtwaist Co. Fire in New York City in 1911, which killed 146 women textile workers. Although it is not clear exactly how the fire started, the owners of the company wanted to put an end to the women textile workers' protests and demands for better working conditions, an increase in salary, a reduction in work hours, and an end to exploitation, and were later charged with manslaughter. A victory for these women-led labor movements at hide tide and on the front lines of the industrial age would have been a tremendous achievement for mass society.

Time has shown us how, due to these initiatives, women have been able to access different political, social, and economic spheres, and we can say that relations between the genders are better today than they were in the past, which has been the legacy of pioneering feminism. With the advent of modernity, woman became an agent, and thereby acquired the capacity for action and transformation.⁴ Solidarity united with agency led us to organize ourselves in order to achieve all that had been taken from us. Thanks to the values of modernity (equality, freedom, and solidarity), the feminist movements demonstrated women's capacity to organize and claim our obvious rights, such as the right to vote, remuneration for domestic work, access to education, and the elimination of the "droit du seigneur" (the lord's right). It was social movements, among them feminism, that were the real catalysts of the Enlightenment, demanding and bringing into practice the values of modernity.

Feminism in the Face of the Crisis of Modernity

From here on we will trace the crisis of modernity and attempts to overcome it. The importance of this point is essential, since the different ways of overcoming modernity have had important implications in the course of feminist movements.

We have highlighted the process of modernization and illustrated the main lines that articulated its social agenda and its possibility for change. Accordingly, we have seen that in modernity important achievements were attained in women's lives. However, traditional modernity has also demonstrated a less friendly face. The modern institutions have been directed toward and by a privileged group of people, generating exclusion and injustices based on age, ethnicity, and gender (see Alcoba 2001 on art and museums). The masculinity of the system has been hegemonic in traditional modernity, as reflected in culture, politics, and in many other public spheres.

The confirmation of this reality provoked a very radical position against modernity in which the reasons for the failure of the Enlightenment were not analyzed. The movements that surfaced in reaction demolished anything that had any affiliation to modernity, its values, its principles, its foundation in reason. All that energy expended against modernity resulted in no alternatives

being proposed, since the transforming subject that traditional modernity presented us with had been destroyed along with it.

The paradox is that we understand this crisis of conscience as the result of modernity's reflections on itself, as a function of an unprecedented desire for self-awareness and of self-assurance. It was this self-reflection, culminating in the last quarter of the twentieth century, that provoked the urgency to overcome modernity.⁵ Thus, we find modernity submitted to the following astonishing dynamic: It has developed as it has dissolved, which means that attempts to move beyond it have come from its own self-awareness, which simultaneously generates estrangement. For instance, the questioning of the aspects of traditional modernity's "less friendly face," as mentioned above—gender roles and vestiges of the hierarchy that predated the modern era, which had to be transformed—was itself typically modern. It is in this vein that we can interpret the sexual ambiguity with which many literary authors and painters at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Lesbia Brandon (de Diego 1992), debated. Currently, there are different processes of overcoming traditional modernity and its philosophy centered on a subject as creator of meaning, which has revealed itself to be completely imperfect. On the one hand, postmodern positions acknowledge the failure of the principles and institutions of the Enlightenment, welcoming the death of the subject, dissolving the reference points established by reason, discrediting the role of human agency, and thus limiting the power of social change, which becomes constrained by the abstract will of the system (rather than the actions of individuals who compose it). Meanwhile, some authors defend the possibilities of modernity that remain unexplored and welcome a "second modernity," in which the processes that are unfinished and have brought many benefits for humanity are radicalized. These social achievements took place due to the modern appearance of a social subject capable of changing the course of history (Flecha, Gómez, and Puigvert 2001).

The thought of the Enlightenment, reflexive by nature, endows people with a capacity for action as social subjects. When reason is applied to the past, tradition, and history, we begin to suspect that we do not necessarily need to be their victims, that we can modify our relationship to them, and that social transformation is possible. We must interpret the first

women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth century in this sense. Therefore, even as we attribute importance to the need to redefine a thought centered on the subject, we believe that postmodern attempts to annul human agency have undesirable consequences for people. We cite the negative effects that the rise of postmodernism had in the 1980s, diminishing initiatives of women's groups and contributing to confrontations among them.⁶ Behind the apparent sexual transparency of postmodernism, we note, for example, the absence of female artists in the first exhibitions of postmodern art in London ("A New Spirit in Painting," the Royal Academy, 1981) and New York, where in 1984 there were feminist demonstrations in front of the MoMA denouncing this omission.⁷ Contemplating the social subject also entails contemplating the possibility of transforming reality. By upholding the disappearance of the subject, postmodernism plays into a paradigm that is not only futile with respect to social transformation, but also reactionary with respect to women.

Efforts to overcome a philosophy centered on the subject and the questioning of the traditional referents on which modernity was based have been grounded in the guidelines of the "linguistic turn," which gives preeminence to the *meaning* of the reference over the perspectives of the bases. Therefore, in its proclamation of the death of the subject and criticism of any attempt to establish universalistic and rational categories, the linguistic turn has emphasized that which is relative in thought, the absence of stable references, and therefore the impossibility of agreement and dialogue. To the contrary, we defend the principle of a "second modernity" or a "dialogic modernity," and we insist on the capacity of reason and reflection to construct what is social, articulating a program defined by the mechanisms of language and speech, but far from the sense in which these are meant by relativism. Instead, dialogue becomes the key element for a sustainable society in which differences are possible. For us, any suspicion of "essentialism" (Rorty 1989) is nullified by the principle of dialogue that rewrites the complex relations between theory and reality and defines concepts in a consensual, temporal, and gradual manner. In the following section, we will go deeply into the ample subject that we at the Center for Social and Educational Research (CREA) in Barcelona define as the "dialogic turn."

The crisis of subjectivity, inspired by the Nietzschean program and artistic modernism, led to structuralist and poststructuralist movements by way of the formulations of Lévi-Strauss, the linguistic turn, and Foucault. Certain implications of the primacy of language will contribute to the dissolution of the modern subject. If the annihilation in modern Foucauldian thought were to reach its zenith, we would conclude, as Foucault writes, that "man would erase himself." We cannot forget that the death of the subject, of its entity and identity, implies the impossibility of knowledge, dialogue, and action. In light of this, on what bases can women articulate their social demands? How can we gain spaces that up until now have been denied us? On the other hand, the Foucauldian alliance between knowledge and aspirations of power eliminates arguments of the legitimacy of many of the demands made by women, which can be viewed as "more of the same": merely an attempt at gaining a position of power that up until now has been for others. The disappearance of the notion of subjectivity is also central to Derrida, the most enthusiastic defender of the linguistic turn. In his criticism of phonocentrism and his defense of the written word, this author in effect destroys the possibility of expression and authorship. With the disappearance of intent and the end of reflexive conscience, social achievements become mere accidents, and progress an illusion. How does one interpret change without a *dual* interpretation of society, in which all women can influence the structures? For Bourdieu (2000), women have assumed, or internalized, a masculine domination, as transmitted through the social institutions of the Enlightenment (church, state, school), through language, and through a symbolic violence. From the standpoint of this deep submission, any resistance to masculine domination would be understood as the failure of the feminine or, even more, the nonexistence of the specifically feminine (while there are authors who, like Bourdieu, are capable of seeing something that we do not see). How can women escape from this cycle if what is masculine pervades everything? How can we control our own destiny if, once structuralism dismisses the subject, social change is a reflection only of the *structural* possibilities of our society? We conclude that structuralism paralyzes social transformations.

Foucault's thought opens itself to irrationality. Beginning with the end of modernity and subjectivity, language precedes any construction of the subject, since it orders our experience and builds our illusion of subjectivity. This idea of language, the arbitrariness of the Nietzschean-inspired moral order, the disdain for modern references, and siding with irrational experiences (dreams, madness) were used by Foucault as excuses to transgress and be as nonconformist as possible. Liberating thought from the prison of reason is simply very impractical for Afghani women who are trying to eliminate social barriers that oppress them. This poetic and undefined openness to irrationality being connected to the idea of transgression, Foucault is influenced by Sade and Bataille. How many women would aim to be objects of desire of the former and victims of heterogeneous impulse of the latter?

Every time that postmodern, deconstructionist, and genealogical thought have occupied a place in academia (to which it seemed to be opposed), in a sort of new exclusionary rationality, feminism has suffered, especially in its capacity to articulate viable proposals for social change. Some of the victories obtained in the past have been made relative by interpreting them as a turn toward the possession of power rather than as a fundamental debt restored to women's dignity as human beings. From this perspective, more egalitarian access to education or to the labor market can be viewed as a submission to the masculine vision of the world, with the objective of gaining power. Largely believing in the demolition of validity claims would imply a great weakening in the arguments through which the feminist movement has articulated its voice, which would always be under suspicion of obeying power strategies. The relativization of feminist objectives has even arrived at considering women's power as being precisely at the point that previously was a symptom of their own oppression. In this most sordid viewpoint, truth and lie, justice and injustice are matters of points of view, breaking from the tendency of feminism in modernity to demand that women's rights be extended to all people, independent of culture, sexual orientation, age, etc. (Irigaray 1994, Nicholson 1997). To this relativist feminist viewpoint, where dialogue is understood as the confrontation of aspirations of power, equality is not only impossible, but also undesirable.

This is from where the "feminism of difference" emerges, focused on revealing the characteristics that separate the genders

(on a physical, biological, cognitive level) and the impossibility of equality. This led to the negation of values and victories for which feminists had fought; to defend equality, solidarity, or the feelings of the subject was considered moralistic, repressive, antiliberating, and, consequently, antifeminist. Many of the followers of the feminism of difference collaborated in this, breaking the ties of solidarity that many other women had struggled for. They presented the rejection of the values of the Enlightenment as the alternative that would provide women a way out of patriarchal society.

Some linguistic studies biased regarding gender issues are full of generalizations and symbolic evidences that even in the most convincing cases are no more than just "assumptions." Some of these authors could very well believe that inequalities are inevitable and therefore the solution is not to put an end to them at all, but to invert the order with respect to men, to use an *other* conceptual hierarchy, opposed to the masculine (prostitution, castration). This may lead us to ask ourselves: What is the use of these ideas for overcoming the real oppression of millions of women? Their vagueness, unattainable nature, assimilation of inequality, defense of the impossibility of dialogue or social transformation (a denial based on the end of the social subject), etc., could lead only to indifference and anomie.

There has definitely been confusion between conceptions of liberation and proposals for transgression, which in practice have paralyzed the feminist movement's capacity for action and accentuated the hermeticism of feminist discourse for the majority of women. Confused with the expression of absolute freedom, transgression has been an ideal to which the left as well as the feminist movement have been strongly allied during many different historical moments. A rupture with the public order leaves the space open to the will of the one who transgresses and takes himself/herself as the sole purpose. In practice, the result has been considerably negative. Normally, totalitarian periods of the modern era (Italian fascism, the Nazi regime, etc.) have been preceded by such transgressive ideas (e.g., futurism), which are apparently defenders of freedom. With regard to women, we believe that it is a fallacy to defend pornography as a transgression of common moral values without considering it another manifestation of the reification of women that tends to reflect violent and humiliating behaviors to which we are still submitted.

***Ignored Contributions:
Women's Movements in Solidarity***

Today's societies are more and more dialogic (Flecha, Gómez, and Puigvert 2001). Information societies are the symbolic context in which dialogue is penetrating social, political, personal, and other relations. If formerly the king was inheritor of power by virtue of God, today it is the government by virtue of the votes of the citizenry. The same has occurred with personal relationships: If formerly we had to accept arranged marriages, nowadays an increasing number of couples talk about and negotiate the kind of relationship they want and the tasks that each person will take on.

Obviously, this dialogic movement has limitations imposed on it by dominant groups that build barriers and complicate dialogic transformations. There are women obligated to not vote or to vote by obligation, there are women who bear abuse and unjust treatment from their partners without any opportunity for dialogue. But this does not mean that we are moving toward less dialogic societies, but that the road is long and difficult and we must continue struggling so that dialogue is increasingly the prevailing practice. Dialogic modernity does not limit our alternatives; it offers more possibilities. It does not mean choosing between marriage or being alone, but raises all the possibilities decided upon by everyone who participates in dialogue on an egalitarian basis.

As we described earlier, the growth of feminist movements contributed to the development of numerous practices that transformed many women's lives and others' images of them as they became active agents in the course of history. However, although in this process we fought for achieving higher rates of women's participation in all spheres, these universal principles were articulated in very particular ways that forgot the needs of broad sectors of the very diverse women among them. These principles were imposed as the sole and universal truth, without including diversity. From this conception, as mentioned earlier, homogenizing practices were promoted that underestimated the social, cultural, and individual differences of women. Emancipation, the initial aim of the feminist struggle, was diverted from its ultimate goal, given that it gave way to imposing a model that aimed "to open the eyes" of the rest of women. If we listen to these women, however, we would hear them declaring:

Women with university degrees are not the only ones who hold the truth. . . . All truths must be listened to. . . . University graduates should not create a glass box and should come down and see that common women—those who are not university graduates—have the same problems, and at times they are very difficult problems, very big ones that university-graduate women need to know about as well. (From a nonacademic women's group)

Given the need for addressing the differences that had been ignored, a trend within feminism was born that was no longer concerned with equality. From that moment on, existing inequalities between women were "respected," and an egalitarian recognition of differences was not promoted. The arrival of post-modernism in social movements, explained in the second section, broke many ties of solidarity and confirmed an error: to believe that abandoning the positive values that were won by women was the only way to defend against the homogenization that traditional modernity presented.

However, nowadays many women's movements are demanding to be able to enjoy the victories achieved by their predecessors while simultaneously ensuring respect for and fostering of their differences. This is the case in the fight to end the suppression of voices of dissent in the name of the purity of a culture based in religion. In Afghanistan, the Taliban drove the whole civil population into a state of terrified silence that has since their downfall been denounced. During their reign, many women participated in RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), which fought so that access to education and health care could be extended to all women and did not have to be carried out precariously in clandestine ways. Thus, they shared their struggle with many women's movements from other countries while also reaffirming their aim and determination to be respected as followers of Islam.

In March 2001, when the political debate about the two millennial Buddhist statues in Afghanistan was raised, RAWA wanted to make women's situation visible. The decapitation and destruction of these statues, which belonged to the universal artistic patrimony, awoke greater international outrage than did the defense of social rights that are also the patrimony of all humanity. The artistic debate eclipsed and diverted attention from the rest of the savageries committed upon a completely silenced and forgotten population, among whom the women were the

most neglected. During the meeting in Islamabad between UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and the Afghani foreign minister to avoid the destruction of the statues, a large number of women were at the doors of the meeting with the clear intention of also including the Afghani women's situation into the debate and denouncing the systematic violation of human rights in Afghanistan. Taking a postmodern position, feminists would have defended nonintervention in Afghanistan as well as nonextension of the basic principles that guarantee respect, dignity, and the channels of expression for its women.

The "other women" are all those who have been left out of our discourses and feminist struggles because they are not academics or they belong to cultural minorities, that is to say, the immense majority of women are excluded from the formulation of priorities and themes selected by the movement that academics and Western women have created (Puigvert 2001). These "other women" reject at the grassroots level both those who decide what all women must do and those who criticize them for not doing what is imposed on them by a supposed liberation. They are making contributions that they insist must be included in our debates:

Women who fight to defend their rights from privileged situations have to affirm their solidarity for all women and situations of injustice. (Federation of Cultural and Adult Education Associations [FACEPA] women's group)

This is possible in the spaces of solidarity they create, in which they look for understanding based on the plurality of the existing voices, contrasting the differences and reflecting on how to lessen the inequalities that all women face. In this way, the options for liberation are not imposed by some women on others, but are defined and created communally through horizontal communication among everyone:

Maybe they [the feminists], since they believe that they have already overcome certain things, do not realize the other needs that we have. . . . The way to realize them is by talking, opening up dialogue—if not, then nothing. Then we can get what we lack, because maybe they think they have achieved some issues that they really have not. (A nonacademic woman)

From relationships based on respect and understanding of our diverse identities and experiences, many women who had historically been under submission to masculine forms of domination began to question their assumptions, to exchange meanings between each other, and analyze alternative messages and styles. Together they reflected on the nature of their role, questioned their experiences, and planned strategies for change. They turned from being women without any alternatives or mere observers of change into active protagonists of social transformation with regard to gender relations.

There are women who go to meetings and we get there thinking that we are not male chauvinist, but when we learn from the others, we realize that it is true, that my opinion is wrong, I am damaging myself with my ideas, and from others' ideas you discover that you are doing things that are damaging to yourself, you discover things that you hadn't realized that . . . this is happening to you and the other one is telling you that she is fed up with it . . . and you were assuming them as your own, as normal things, and when listening to her, by her complaining . . . well I think that is what I am doing, then I have to do and say something . . . to her. . . . (A nonacademic woman)

The common principles yet different realities of the "other women" bring up a contradiction in the very values of modernity. These women realize that access to public space traditionally monopolized by men is not enough to guide the transformation in gender relations. That is why they generate more egalitarian dynamics of communication and spaces for dialogue, in order to reach consensus about how they want to live so that the plurality of their voices is respected.

For example, the women participating in the Zapatista movement in Chiapas state in Mexico are at the same time critical of their inequalities. The Zapatista movement regained strength following the uprising on January 1, 1994, demanding the dignity and right to participate in Mexican society on an equal basis and on the basis of the indigenous particularity of the Maya people. In this context, indigenous women have also organized themselves in order to participate on an equal basis *within* the Zapatista movement.

In 1994, women of the Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Tojolabales, and Mames indigenous (Maya) groups met in San Cristóbal de las

Casas (Chiapas) in the workshop Rights of Women in Our Customs and Traditions. They demanded respect as indigenous people but also as women, and not only from the Mexican government, but from their partners in the guerrilla movement as well. Since childhood, they had been taught to obey and not to protest. They now decided not to keep quiet any longer and to demand equal participation in the elaboration of laws and in how to reformulate the articles of the Mexican Constitution, so that indigenous people, both men and women, would have a stake in the laws. In this meeting they also demanded participation in decision making by having positions in the community and in the existing organizations, as well as an increase in the number of schooled girls. All these claims were guided by the will to actively participate in the social transformation that the Zapatista struggle signified for the indigenous population.

Due largely to the struggle of grassroots women's groups, institutions within the labor, educational, and professional systems are forced to take new approaches in order to adapt themselves to a more flexible and dialogic society, where communication and dialogue are key elements for addressing current social changes and influencing the radicalization of democracy.

As we have said at other times, education is essential and we have to educate our children so that it is possible to imagine things differently than they have traditionally been. (FACEPA women's group)

These "other women" who have established more egalitarian dynamics for interaction state that they never set out for a feminist fight—they found themselves immersed in it. Although they did not have an example or rules to follow as a model, they did know clearly that they did not want to be relegated to second place as they had been until then. Their lives had changed, and not particularly because feminist theoreticians had opened alternatives to the lives they had been faced with earlier.

I thought I wasn't feminist. When I heard the radical feminists . . . and it turns out that, after thinking and thinking, I believe I have been a feminist since I was born. . . . Since I was young, there were things I didn't like . . . but I didn't know that this was feminist. Since I have been with this movement for transformation, I thought that I've always been a feminist. (A nonacademic woman)

There exist groups of nonacademic and academic women who have initiated jointly the creation of spaces of solidarity grown out of informal meetings among friends or classmates, who want to feel more supported and wish to share their concerns and ideas with other women like themselves in order to begin—from this complicity—the social transformation of gender relations. These experiences prove that "other women" are generating knowledge. A new feminist discourse comes from the dialogic turn and has led these women to create different spaces of solidarity that can guide academics as to where the feminism of the twenty-first century should be heading. Some other examples of these movements and women's groups are the following:

The Research Network: Popular Women and Education

The Research Network was born in 1999 with the aim of establishing an active cooperation among researchers who work in specific fields of adult education at their respective universities. Although composed of academic women, this group works with and for women with low academic levels, who do not have university degrees. It seeks to promote knowledge about new formulas for social participation for nonacademic women, recognizing—through research—their cultural diversity. It focuses on the development of radical theories that allow for the creation of channels of social participation and the radicalization of democracy through the extension of lifelong education and training for women with low academic levels or without any formal education.

FACEPA Women's Group

FACEPA is a federation of adult-education associations in Catalonia that manage their own projects. It seemed unfair to them that educators and politicians decided about their education and their future without even asking them for their opinion. They wanted to break away from the elitist idea that they "do not know" about these things. The women's group emerged from the federation to specifically address women's issues. It meets once a month, sharing experiences, information, and knowledge about

preselected issues: They want to break away from a low self-image, gain a voice, and prevent the appropriation of their feminism by women who would explain to them how they should act. Their meetings are based on spaces of egalitarian dialogue among women of different generations, cultures, and academic levels, grounded in their interests, knowledge, and experiences.

Drom Kotar Mestipen (Women's Gypsy Association)

This association was founded in 1999 as a result of the dialogue between Gypsy and non-Gypsy women of diverse ages and characteristics with the common goal of working for equality and against the discrimination of the Roma people. It is grounded in the principles of the equality of differences and egalitarian dialogue among all women. Since its inception, the association has participated in diverse forums in order to make known its objectives, in addition to participating in research projects about the Gypsy woman.⁸ These objectives include: to work for equality and nondiscrimination between men and women within the Roma community; to overcome the racism and sexism that cause the dual inequality suffered by Gypsy women; to collaborate with all of the groups that fight for an equality that includes the right to maintain and develop differences; and to enhance the Gypsy woman's image as a transmitter and proponent of Roma cultural identity.

Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina)

This group of mothers of *desaparecidos* started acting after the disappearances of young Argentines in 1974 and 1975 and the establishment of the dictatorship in Argentina in 1976. They protested against the Ministry of the Interior, the police, the church, and political parties. They are a model for the struggle and resistance of women who have never given up demanding justice.

Since those meetings begun in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, at which the women organized themselves to go to the police and the interior ministry and to look for more mothers who had sons and daughters who had disappeared, they have had many public actions demanding a stop to negligence and that

matters be addressed until all occurrences are verified and that justice is done. Women united as mothers and, having suffered the cruelty of a dictatorship, organized and became strong; that is why this movement is a reference worldwide. Currently, they direct the Popular University of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, which offers studies on human rights, protest struggles, journalism, etc.

MEI al-Hanan (Women for Intercultural Education)

The Mujeres por una Educacion Intercultural is a group that springs from the desire of Islamic women to collaborate in the creation of new forms of communication between people and cultural groups that live in Barcelona and Catalonia. (*Al-Hanan* means "tenderness" or "affection.") Through their work, a group of women from different origins have decided to stimulate a truly intercultural dialogue, boosting cooperative learning and mutual recognition. They are grounded in an open, respectful, and positive attitude toward diversity, advocating exchange and knowledge through the daily networks that people weave in the spirit of solidarity.

Insha Allah

This is an association of Muslim women from different countries and with diverse academic levels. They fight for the recognition of their culture and advocate an interpretation of Islam that is oriented toward gender equality. Working toward this claim, in October 2000 in Barcelona they organized the first Conference of Muslim Women. Participating were women from diverse origins—from Africa, Europe, America, and Asia—who had settled in various parts of Spain and had assumed Islam at some point in their lives. The issues that they dealt with in terms of equality were: noncompetitive relations between the genders, the possibility for an enhanced participation of women in the economy, the fight against stereotypes and abuse by the mass media, family planning, education of children, and training in computer literacy and communication on the Internet.

We are witnessing how women from many different origins

and backgrounds are moving forward together toward social transformation in gender relations. As part of their struggle, associations such as the ones mentioned here are demanding access to the channels of participation in order to define and reach a consensus on human rights in terms of upholding the principle of equality based on the recognition of diversity (de Botton 2000).

These movements, and ultimately all the horizontal relations among women oriented toward mutual learning and respect, break away from the barriers that the "other women" feel. Academic reason does not prevail by discrediting discourses based on experience or women's direct knowledge; rather, academia and experiential knowledge complement each other. The Declaration of Rights of Participants in Adult Education, elaborated by FACEPA through a discursive process, proposes the right of all people without academic training to participate in educational processes, in order to avoid being supplanted by professionals and those who have already had this training.⁹ At the same time, these groups allow for the extension of communication spaces to new places. These spaces usually improve in direct relation to the level of involvement by the women, given that they become active participants where they used to attend only to be lectured to.

The joint action of all women is aimed at the attainment of spaces and processes of dialogue and mutual learning in which all the voices are included. In the last part of this paper, we make the case for dialogic feminism and discuss the concept of the *equality of differences* as key to the inclusion of the plurality of voices.



Equality cannot be mistaken for homogenization, but it must guarantee the respect of each one of us to live according to our choices. Traditional modernity proclaimed the objective of equality, but based its concept in only Western culture, without entering into dialogue with others. In order to radicalize democracy, it is necessary to overcome the imposition of a "universal" that has not been discussed by everybody. The movements of the "other women" are based on the victories of modernity as the foundation for a new society, proposing that in the new century we must rewrite modernity. They do this by returning to

the very values of solidarity and equality that were already present in it.

In their reflections and practices, they question policies that result in the preservation of majority-culture hegemony, and insist that these policies, in order to allow free choice, provide the same ability for people from minority cultural groups to enrich or even deny the characteristics of their own culture. Women's emancipation is unthinkable without cultural transmission, in the same way that we cannot obviate the cultural protest that contributes to the transformation of cultures. This fact questions the so-called authenticity of cultures, since they are not static, and even less so in the current process of globalization. Current societies are already racially mixed. The challenge of the multicultural society therefore consists not only in respect for and recognition of cultural diversity, but also in generating more egalitarian gender relations in experiences of diversity. Arabic, Muslim, Latin American, African, Asian, and Native American women, along with progressive antiracist movements in general, particularly ground their struggle in the equality of differences.

In November 2000, the 4th Gypsy Community: From Equality We Conquer Rights conference was held in Madrid. It was highlighted there that participation is the strategy to use for the promotion of the Gypsy woman, so that, through her cultural affirmation, a more egalitarian society for everyone can be reached. Roma women from different origins and academic levels attended the conference and demonstrated their mobilization, proclaiming equality through identity. No longer would they be forced to choose between becoming *paya* (the feminine form [*paya/payo*] of the word Gypsies use to refer to non-Gypsy people) or suffering exclusion and discrimination due to their retained identity. This homogenizing equality does not solve the social problems of all of the women belonging to cultural minorities; instead, it builds many obstacles to their inclusion, leading in this way to a double discrimination (of gender and culture).

Even though women from minority or non-Western backgrounds are fighting for the same rights of equality (in education, the labor market, and other public spaces) as are women's groups of the majority European and North American cultures, they are doing it to build a modernity that has been reinterpreted and reshaped with their own cultural references.

All this expresses the huge diversity of approaches existing within these societies. In this sense, the veil, the *hijab*, cannot be regarded exclusively as the symbol of confinement; it can also be the symbol of liberation. This plurality is illustrated by the different meanings that Muslim women give to it:

In the same way that many women attended the demonstrations veiled in order to defend their Muslim identity, many others [...] removed their veil with the same intention: Islam was so egalitarian that it allowed them to give up the *hijab*. (Aixalá, 2000: 266)

This example was clearly witnessed in Istanbul, when university women who attended classes wearing the *hijab* were required to discard this traditional form of dress—which, according to the university officials, was a symbol of the oppression of women characteristic of “fundamentalist Islam”—if they wanted to continue their education. It aroused the indignation of many and very diverse women in Istanbul, generating enormous solidarity. Their answer was not long in coming: The street was witness to the protest demonstrations that Aixalá alludes to, which saw a gathering of great diversity of ideological and religious positions and lifestyles demanding freedom.

The Feminist Theory of the Twenty-First Century: Toward Dialogic Feminism¹⁰

The challenge that we have set out for feminism is to take up and theorize the dynamics and proposals that are being formulated by the popular women’s and minority women’s movements like the ones discussed above. These movements are bringing out a number of gaps and inconsistencies that we feminist academics have in our discourse, and these criticisms force us to progress in the orientation of the theoretical debate. From egalitarian dialogue and exchange between the “other women” and academic women, together, we can reorient democracy toward a feminism that encompasses the full diversity of our experiences and interests. This is possible if, with egalitarian dialogue, we are able to break through the restricted areas of feminism that we have constructed. Some sectors of “other women” have been demanding this type of dialogue for a long time.

Women, through our claims, have been gaining spaces and identities that were once taken away from us because of gender. We are now raising a voice that in the twenty-first century almost nobody dares to question. However, a minority of women with university degrees and high-skilled jobs have progressively hegemonized our movements. The struggles and worries in the daily lives of “other women” have often little to do with the reality that academic women end up describing.

The struggles and voices of “other women” delegitimize the perspectives that consider women as lacking the judgment to articulate the issues and oppose the elements that limit their freedom, from which only a few, already emancipated women can save them. Despite all the obstacles that we (academics) have placed to prevent these women from being heard, they have demonstrated in their daily lives the capacity to fight and transform. And what is even more important is that they are having a decisive impact on what will be, without a doubt, the future of a radically transformational feminism. As we have seen throughout this essay, there are many women’s groups and groups from different cultures that are creating spaces in which they propose to be more united not only among each other but also with all women. This egalitarian dialogue decisively strengthens all of the changes that are taking place in their contexts.

The egalitarian transformation of their daily lives should be taken in and assumed by feminism and academic women, since they are proposing to radicalize the concept of equality, to overcome homogenizing interpretations, and include the plurality of voices (to incorporate the aspirations of women of different academic and cultural levels).

The dialogue and respect that each of us is capable of came not through a college or university degree, or through studies, but through what we learned throughout life, experience. . . . In our group nobody has a university degree. (A nonacademic woman)

The inclusion of all voices in egalitarian dialogue among all women in the feminist debate will allow us to move toward the theoretical development of what we believe should be the feminism of the twenty-first century: dialogic feminism, which aims to unite the efforts of all women (of different educational levels, ethnicities, and social classes) to overcome the inequalities we face.

This is framed, as mentioned above, in the dialogic turn that has taken place in today's society. Dialogic modernity is what enables us to orient our joint actions toward the equality of differences. It allows different women to be able to live together in the same territories and with equal rights that do not endanger, but reinforce and enrich their respective identities.

In order for dialogic feminism to succeed, there must be (1) the radicalization of the principles of modernity and (2) trust in the efforts of all women to change history.

The Radicalization of the Principles of Modernity

We understand that feminism and postmodernism are not intellectually or politically allied. Instead, the former reinforces people's possibilities in our democratic and feminist victories, while the latter undermines these possibilities and displaces our transformational aspirations, both theoretically and practically. The feminism that was captivated by postmodernism led to situations that remind us of certain inequalities we had already overcome:

There are sometimes those who do the same, they abuse other people that, that they feel bad for. I remember when I began to work in another place. I had a very bad cold. . . . I could not go to work. . . . I called first thing in the morning and uy!, she said all sorts of stuff . . . and when I went there, she didn't talk to me . . . there was a change . . . very bad treatment. . . . She even reminded me of the meal . . . and I told her: I'm sorry but I'm not a slave . . . she became pale with fury. . . . I felt very bad. . . . It hurt me very much, she seemed like a very educated, professional girl. (A nonacademic woman)

The central statement that we propose in dialogic feminism is the defense of radicalizing democratic processes in order to elaborate a theory together that allows for only one definition of femininity. One that is understood not as homogeneous but inclusive, dynamic, and egalitarian for all the voices. That is to say, a femininity that takes gender differences into account, rather than fostering their disappearance, that is sensitive to the context, rather than indifferent to the situations.

There is a distance between the objectives of our progressive movements and the daily realities of women. Yet, through the links of

solidarity and egalitarian dialogue, we are making efforts to accomplish the principles agreed upon, which are progressively transforming realities.

At the same time that the feminism of difference, in a mistaken attempt to not succumb to an essentialist discourse about gender, attacks the approaches that attempt to reach agreement through a dialogue that is increasingly more egalitarian, it also defends a multiplicity of opinions, not for the purpose of reaching agreement but simply so they can exist alongside each other, without any communication or coordinated joint actions to transform gender relations and society in general. This approach, which we reject, leads to the deactivation of movements and of women as transforming agents. The one we propose presents the power of dialogue, through egalitarian procedures based on reflection and argumentation—both theoretical as well as from life—rather than on the position of the people who defend it.

When a woman gains power she might change, why do we want her in power? We want her in power to defend us [. . .] When a woman gains power she should never forget that she is a woman [. . .] Sometimes women who reach high positions forget to continue fighting for the rights of those who are still in situations of inequality. (FACEPA women's group)

Trust in the Action of All Women to Change the Course of History

In terms of feminist theory it has been considered unnecessary up until now to open the dialogue to the plurality of voices that we represent. Feminist discourse is considered to be the exclusive birthright of university women. As we have seen, the social sciences with a dialogic orientation question the role of the expert. This debate has not yet had enough influence on feminist theories. However, the dialogic movements of the "other women" are clear about it: They want to actively participate in the decision-making process.

Many of these nonuniversity women (socialized according to the standards of behavior they have historically assumed) were used to "fulfilling their duties" at home, taking care of the family, without any kind of autonomy, much less any possibility for

action. In the spaces that we mentioned earlier, these women begin to question their way of thinking and come to modify them from the interpretations and points of view of other women. In this way, they demand from academic feminists their right to participate in the elaboration of feminist theory. Many women who have historically been subjected to masculine domination go from being women without any alternatives, or at best, objects of change, to being the protagonists of their own social transformation with respect to gender relations.

Life is getting modern and you cannot stay behind. (A nonacademic woman)

The hegemonic approach that has consistently silenced the voices of nonacademic women is being replaced by a dialogic perspective oriented toward creating spaces and learning processes and dialogue (Flecha 2000) in which all voices are included, with the objective of facilitating interrelationship, respect, and the transformation of gender relations. From this perspective, women go from being passive consumers to cultural producers and agents of transformation.



Many women (both nonacademic and academic) are already promoting the dialogic orientation of education.¹¹ They are doing this along with the social theories of this very perspective—in the international debate of the feminist movement, the dialogic dynamics of the “other women” are translated into theories of solidarity.

From dialogic feminism and through the joint action of all women, we believe that it is possible to overcome two of the limitations assumed by current feminist perspectives. Dialogic feminism leaves behind the traditional debate about equality vs. difference, taking the assumption instead that the only way to defend equality is by means of respect and listening to the diverse voices. On these terms, the theoretical development of the concept of the equality of differences articulates spaces of dialogue and egalitarian exchange.

In opposition to the feminists who mistook equality for homogenization, aiming to extend the reality of the academic

Western woman to all women, other feminists emerged who rejected the model that defends difference. In this way, enormous inequalities were justified and the feminist movement was paralyzed, breaking ties of solidarity and egalitarian exchange among women.

However, as demonstrated by many women’s movements, equality and difference are not contradictory concepts. The defense of equality would be unthinkable if the plurality of voices were not incorporated. All women have the same right to live differently. It is from this perspective of solidarity that we focus the debate, in coordinated struggles upon which we are together in agreement, in order to overcome the barriers that the social structures have been trying to impose upon us for centuries.

The explosion of the feminist movement in traditional modernity helped to overcome many inequalities in gender relations. But there are still many inequalities to be questioned, rejected, and transformed, which can be challenged today in a public debate due to the dialogic turn taking place in society. The concept of the equality of differences allows us to elaborate a proposal that provides us all with the freedom to choose how and what we want to be, while promoting ties of solidarity between all people and us.

The urgent need for feminism to incorporate the plurality of women’s voices is not due solely to the growth of multicultural societies but to the fact that these societies increasingly require the voice of every woman and not just that of an academic minority. It is necessary to include in the feminist debate the presence of collectives and people from other cultures (Gypsies, Arabs, Latinas . . .) and to do it from their own social, economic, and educational positions. Today, active participation of the citizenry is not just possible but desirable as an element that reinforces and radicalizes democracy. The “other women” are already doing it, and it is precisely their plurality of voices that is continuously contributing to reshape their movements.

Overcoming these two limits gives the women’s movement a key dimension in the transformation of gender relations in all spheres of social life. Feminist discourse usually monopolized by the university elite is beginning to feel the pressure of the “other women’s” voices, directly through their own organizations as well as indirectly by means of the dialogic theories that are beginning to have a growing influence in our theoretical debates. In

the feminist conference held in Córdoba in December 2000 called *Feminismo. Es . . . y será* [Feminism Is . . . and Will Be], we could already appreciate how these demands were becoming a reality. The conference was opened with a video, whose title even had an impact on us: *Invisible Women*. The video showed the stories of different women, married, widowed, with children, Gypsy . . . all of them nonacademic women, with daily struggles to survive in a world that has excluded them and made them invisible. Two of the women who appeared in the video entered the room, and the emotion and applause that was heard in the hall was already evidence that feminism was changing.

Dialogic feminism proposes to academics, a minority of women, to stop feeling like they are the exclusive owners of feminist knowledge and to share this space with the critical contributions that the "other women" are already developing. This will imply an enriching process: to conduct research in close contact with women who, until recently, we have seen as inferior or whom we simply ignored. This process proposes that we be committed intellectuals involved in grassroots movements and close to the concerns and contributions of the "other women."

Dialogic feminism is a proposal that aims to generate important ties of solidarity that allow for the transformation of gender relations and the development of theoretical elements that help us to foster a feminism that has a leading role in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Many women's movements defended equality not only between women and men, but also for other groups. For example, the abolitionist women who were rejected by the men at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 sparked the well-known Seneca Falls (New York) Women's Rights Convention (1848). At that convention, social equality for both women and slaves was demanded.
2. A good example of this is the anarchist feminist movement Free Women (*Mujeres Libres*), which emerged in Madrid and Barcelona in 1936. These women emphasized access to culture as the way to overcome social barriers that face women. The education and culture that they defended had great emancipatory potential for women and the working class. They ran illiteracy campaigns for workers and organized technical/vocational and general cultural courses. They faced

practical problems with initiatives aimed at the creation of free day care in companies and neighborhoods, popular dining rooms, and lecture series, as well as on questions regarding coeducation, sex education, and prostitution.

3. In 1870, Spanish women joined together to create the Association for the Education of Women. This initiative was very controversial, but despite the vehement reactions against it, they consolidated the association and achieved many advances.
4. Without confidence in women's capacities for social transformation, Federica Montseny, the great Spanish anarchist, would have never dedicated her life to politics. She was the spokesperson of CNT (the National Confederation of Workers) and the first woman in Spain to hold office as minister of health and welfare, in 1936–37 (Montseny 1987). During this period abortion was legalized and left to the discretion of the woman.
5. Beck, Giddens, and Lash have named this phenomenon "reflexive modernization," which alludes to the victory that industrial society has had over the reflexive trend of Occidental modernization (1994).
6. In Spain, for example, the feminist symposium held in Granada in May 1979 was the starting point for the important change in the feminist trajectory for modernity. The disenchantment generated by the difficulty of change convinced many women of the need to search for liberation by other means; it was proposed to break with everything and to do something completely different. New forms of feminism began to take over, which proclaimed themselves to be much more specifically attentive to women and their wishes than to the joint struggle for the improvement of all of society. Faced with the tired discussions that do not change anything, new and more creative and feminine formulas had to be found. These formulas broke away from patriarchal plans and resulted in the division of feminism.
7. The *MAR: Women and Contemporary Art* study (CREA 1998–2000) served to verify the critical capacities that nonuniversity women possess to analyze, reflect, and propose the inclusion of women not only as a theme, but as the artists themselves. From the contributions of "other women": (a) we set ways to overcome the elitist barriers that surround the current art world and (b) we worked jointly on didactic materials to improve gender relations through art.
8. Some of their participants take part in a research project coordinated by CREA: *Brudila Calli: The Gypsy Women Against Exclusion* (Instituto de la Mujer). This project aims to overcome the social and economic exclusion suffered by Gypsy women. In this respect, overcoming school absenteeism and failure in school by Gypsy children and teenagers would offer these women an important vehicle of transformation and emancipation, provided by training.
9. This declaration was part of an international project that provided it with a European perspective. The declaration was supported by more than twenty governmental delegations at the 5th UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education.

10. We presented, for the first time, the proposal of dialogic feminism at the conference on *New Critical Perspectives in Education* held in Barcelona in 1994.
11. At the national level in Spain is CÓNFAPEA, the Confederation of Participants' Associations in Adult Education (with which FACEPA is affiliated). Besides managing both their own associations and projects, the members of the confederation encourage other adults with nonacademic backgrounds to get involved in the definition and management of the various educational projects addressed to them. Its main goal is to create optimum spaces for learning, where there is no coercion or distortion for any cultural, educational, or social reasons.

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