

“Emergence of the Feminine Question in the Discourse of Human Sciences”, Algeria

The author begins by raising the following question: Why is it that none of the social sciences was constituted around the topic “family,” though it is precisely this topic that we are referred to as an answer to questions regarding women?

She proceeds to say that a product of Western bourgeois humanism, the concept of the social sciences revolves around man. It pretends to be universal and to transcend the differences of class, race, nation and sex. Such a claim has been refuted first, by Marx who declared that when a bourgeois speaks of man he means the bourgeois; second, by ideologies of the Third World liberation movement which denounced the Europeocentrism of Western thought; third, by the women's movement which showed that when a man speaks of man, he means the male sex.

Women are excluded as a subject from the humanities and are systematically relegated to a space located outside the humanities: the family. Woman being always “The Other”, the questions she raises are straightway drained into an indefinite, mythical spot. That is why attempts to integrate “the family” into the social sciences have failed. Questions regarding woman's work such as discrimination against her in employment, feminine absenteeism, and disparities in pay, should be treated through descriptive studies and statistics instead of theories.

The function of woman as the means of “producing offspring” seems to be an object of multiple questioning. In spite of the fact that Marxism declares itself as a critic of political economy, many of its statements remain implanted in the field of the latter. The debate about giving birth to children, in other words, the reproduction of the labor force, remains within the control of political economy where it is principally centered on the problem of defining the labor force as a **particular commodity and that of defining its value**. Domestic work and reproduction of the labor force being two intrinsically related activities in economic argument, it becomes necessary to coordinate the debate concerning them. In economic theory, only the reproduction of the labor force finds a place, while domestic work, considered as non-productive of value, is effectively excluded from its field. Because women are not “productive” workers, on the assumption that every woman is a housekeeper, they should be excluded from the working class.

This authoritarian concept has been contested by feminists who try to affirm that domestic work is productive. Women should be rehabilitated as a working class. If they work outside the home, they assume a double task.

So far, the debate between feminists and their opponents has reached deadlock. To solve the problem, its analysis should be developed around something which is not in itself a problem already settled by Marx himself, who denies the productive quality of domestic work.

Here the author inserts the following remark: “Marxism, considered to be the most advanced stage of human thought, is the privileged place in which the women's movement may theorize about the collective practice of women. But Marxism itself needs profound and radical changes because until now it has remained globally masculine. It needs a reconstitution of a theory for women.”

The patriarchal system is a more oppressive system than capitalism which constitutes a part of it. The contemporary sociologist Foucault insists on proving the capitalist character of the modern family which draws its essence from the diffusion of power through the meshwork of society. But Foucault neglects to discuss the preceding period and to explain how the division of the sexes and the oppression of women originated. If his system has removed certain myths regarding the stability of the family institution and explained historically the formation of the female status, it still excludes women from its basic questions.

Rosi Braidotti, in an essay published in 1980, criticizes the archaic methods used by feminists in their struggle against a discursive field dominated by rational thought and absolutism. Instead of a direct attack against the strongholds of rationality, they have elaborated ideas which surround these strongholds without confronting them.

If the purely historical and social reality of women were to disappear, the differences between man and woman would be reduced to the purely physiological aspect. Then it would be possible to reestablish humanism and progressiveness in the feminine.

The future will tell whether the Feminine Movement will be able to secure entry in socially validated knowledge. At the moment, this process is only indirect and is the source of inverse, deforming effects. Here we face the problem of the presence or absence of women from places which produce recognized knowledge. It is not only a question of numerical weight but also that of the attitude which they adopt when they are involved in any scientific practice.

(1) Abstract of a document submitted by Fatiha Hakiki, Groupe de Recherche sur les Femmes Algériennes. Document de Travail no. 1, C.D.S.H. Université de Wahran, 1981.