WOMEN, ETHNICITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Nira Yuval-Davis

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'Empowerment' has been a central item, at least since the late 60s, on the political agenda of all grass roots resistance movements, whether they have called for black power, raising women's consciousness or for a more general 'return' to 'the community' (see e.g. Gorz, 1982; Wainwright, 1987; Cain & Yuval-Davis, 1990). One of the major issues the anti-racist and feminist movements have been struggling with has been the effects of that self-negation which powerlessness carries with it. Franz Fanon (1952) called on the 'Black man' to 'regain his manhood'; and the feminist movement has called on women to reclaim their 'womanhood' (or 'humanhood' - depending on their specific ideology). The internalization by the powerless of the hegemonic value system according to which they are invisible, valueless and/or 'dangerous', has been seen as a major obstacle to their ability to resist their discrimination and disadvantage. Of particular influence in this has been the work of Paulo Freire (1972) which intimately links knowledge and power.

Jill M. Bystydzienski claims -

> Empowerment is taken to mean a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly. In its course people become enabled to govern themselves effectively. This process involves the use of power, but not 'power over' others or power as dominance as is traditionally the case; rather, power is seen as 'power to' or power as competence which is generated and shared by the disenfranchised as they begin to shape the content and structure of their daily existence and so participate in a movement for social change. (1992, p.3)

Bystydzienski and other feminists who have written about empowerment (e.g. Bookman & Morgen, 1988; Macy, 1983; Hartsock, 1981 etc) see empowerment as a process which breaks the boundaries between the public and the private domain, that comes out of the personal into the social, and which connects the sense of the personal and the communal. Empowerment can be felt momentarily or can be transformative when it is linked to a permanent shift in the distribution of social power. Great emphasis is put on autonomous grass roots activity -

> Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications (Patricia Hill Collins, 1990, p.222).

The ideology of empowerment, however, is not without its pitfalls, as has become clearer the more successful collective empowerment resistance movements have become. The aim of this paper

is to critically evaluate the ideology of empowerment and its links to debates about solidarity and difference among women, especially those from oppressed and minority collectivities.

'Empowerment' and the ideology of 'the community'

The work of Freire and those who followed him links the notion of empowerment closely to the notion of 'the community'. Its progressive political connotations of 'power of' rather than 'power over' firmly situates the individual inside a more or less egalitarian and homogenous grouping which is 'the community', the members of which share in the process of empowerment and collectively manage to fight their oppression and become the controllers of their own destiny.

The ideology of 'the community' has become popular in wide circles of the Left since, in recent years, in the western world in general, and in Britain in particular, representations based on political parties and trade union memberships have come to be seen as less and less satisfactory, reflecting imbalances of power and access which exist within the civil society itself as well as in the state. Women and ethnic minorities have been the primal foci of attempts to create new selection mechanisms which will be more 'just' in their representative and distributive power. The notion of autonomous 'community organizations' as the basis of an alternative mechanism of representation to the more traditional ones has been promoted for that purpose (Gorz, 1982).

As has been elaborated elsewhere (Young, 1990; Yuval-Davis, 1992; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992, ch.6), certain analytical (as well as political) problems arise with these formulations. The notion of 'the community' assumes an organic wholeness. The community is perceived as a 'natural' social unit. It is 'out there' and one can either belong to it or not. Any notion of internal difference within the 'community', therefore, is subsumed to this organic construction. It can be either a functional difference which contributes to the smooth and efficient working of 'the community', or it is an anomaly, a pathological deviation. Moreover, the 'naturalness' of the 'community' assumes a given collectivity with given boundaries - it allows for internal growth and probably differentiation, but not for ideological and material reconstructions of the boundaries themselves (Bhabha,1990). It does not regard collectivities as social constructs whose boundaries, structures and norms are the result of constant processes of struggles and negotiations, or more general social developments. Indeed, as Homi Bhabha (in GLC 1984) and Paul Gilroy (1987) have shown, the fascination of left-wing intellectuals with the 'working class community' has resulted with their adoption of a model of 'Englishness' which is unquestionably racist, culturally discriminatory and invariably sexist. The perspective of the community as fixed can create exclusionary boundaries of 'the community' which

would keep as 'the other' all those perceived different - in other words, they can become extremely conservative, racist and chauvinist (e.g. tenants associations on some housing estates who mobilize the neighbourhood to exclude Blacks and Asians in Britain; and on a much more horrific scale some of the fights in Lebanon, Bosnia and other 'ethnic cleansings').

These inherent problems within the notion of 'community' are shared, in somewhat different ways, with the notion of 'empowerment'. The automatic assumption of a progressive connotation of the 'empowerment of the people', assumes a non problematic transition from individual to collective power, as well as a pre-given , non-problematic definition of the boundaries of 'the people'. Moreover, it also assumes a non-problematic, mutually exclusive boundary between the notion of 'power of' and the notion of 'power over', as if it is always possible for some people to take more control over their lives without it sometimes having negative consequences on the lives of other powerless people. Two very different examples can demonstrate the naivety of such an assumption - firstly, the price children often pay when their mothers break out of oppressive family situations; and secondly, the destabilization and often persecution of internal minorities as a result of successful struggles of liberation and independence of oppressed and colonized people.

The automatic assumption that no inherent conflicts of interest can arise during the process of people gaining empowerment has been, as has been shown (Cain & Yuval-Davis, 1991; Phillips, 1991) a cornerstone of the 'equal opportunity' policies. The promoters of those policies, both in formal institutions and in the voluntary sector assumed that the interests of all the oppressed and disadvantaged - be it women, ethnic & racial minorities, the disabled etc - are not only always 'progressive', but also automatically shared and reconciled. The ideological construction of these policies did not allow for possible conflict of interests among them. 'White backlash' and 'working class racism' were, therefore, never taken seriously, except as 'false consciousness' or a personal pathology of despair. Nor were taken seriously the 'in-fightings' and growing clashes between 'women' and 'race' units, between 'Afro-Caribbeans' and 'Asians' etc.

I am far from believing, and especially hoping, that solidarity among different people, as individuals and as groupings, in struggles against racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and disadvantage, are impossible, as I shall expand further on in the article. However, I do not believe that such a struggle can be taken successfully forward by simplistic notions of empowerment of the oppressed, except, probably, in very specific situations, in which the boundaries of 'the community' are indeed 'natural' or at least non problematic. Even then, articulations of gender, age, family status etc are bound to problematize these notions which need to be replace by more complex and dynamic ones.

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Before continuing to develop this model of politics and applying it specifically to women's struggles, however, I would like to examine more closely notions of ethnicity, culture and identity which are crucial to such a task.

Ethnicity, culture and identity

Some of the underlying assumptions of the ideologies of both 'the community' and of 'empowerment', relate to their analytical collapse of ethnicity into culture, on the one hand, and into identity on the other hand. These collapses, evident in various forms of 'identity politics' movements and 'equal opportunities' policies based on both 'multi-culturalist' and 'anti-racist' schools of thought need examining and unpacking.

There is no space here to enter into a full elaboration of a theoretical framework on ethnicity and the ways it is linked with race and racism (see Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992). Ethnicity relates to the politics of collectivity boundaries, dividing the world into 'us' and 'them' around, usually, myths of common origin and/or destiny and engaging in constant processes of struggles and negotiations. These are aimed, from specific positionings within the collectivities, at promoting the collectivity or perpetuating its advantages, via access to state and civil society powers. Ethnicity, according to this definition is, therefore, primarily a political process which constructs the collectivity and 'its interest', not only as a result of the general positioning of the collectivity in relation to others in the society, but also as a result of the specific relations of those engaged in 'ethnic politics' with others within that collectivity. Gender, class, political and other differences play central roles at the construction of specific ethnic politics and different ethnic projects of the same collectivity can be engaged in intense competitive struggles for hegemonic positions. Some of these projects can involve different constructions of the actual boundaries of the collectivity. Ethnicity is not specific to oppressed and minority groupings. On the contrary, one of the measures of the success of hegemonic ethnicities is the extent to which they succeed in 'naturalizing' their social constructions.

Ethnic projects mobilize all available relevant resources for their promotion. Some of these resources are political, others are economic and yet others are cultural - relating to customs, language, religion etc. Class, gender, political and personal differences mean that people positioned differently within the collectivity could, while pursuing specific ethnic projects, sometimes use the same cultural resources for promoting opposite political goals (e.g. using various Koran suras to justify pro- and anti- legal abortion politics, as was the case in Egypt or using Rock music to mobilize people pro- and anti- the Extreme Right in Britain). In other times, different cultural resources would be used to

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legitimize competing ethnic projects of the collectivity - e.g. when Bundists used Yiddish as 'the' Jewish language - in an ethnic-national project whose boundaries were East European Jewry, and Zionists (re)-invented modern Hebrew (till then used basically for religious purposes) as they wanted to include in their project Jews all over the world. Similarly, the same people can be constructed in different ethnic-racial political projects in Britain to be 'Paki', 'Black Asians', and 'Muslim fundamentalists'.

Given the above, it is clear, therefore, why ethnicity cannot be reduced to culture, and why 'culture' cannot be seen as a fixed, essentialist category. As Gill Bottomley claims when discussing relationships between ethnicity and culture -

> Categories and ways of knowing... are constructed within relations of power and maintained, reproduced and resisted in specific and sometimes contradictory ways. (1991, p.305)

Different ethnic projects can also play different roles in the construction of individual identities. I recently heard a presentation by a Bosnian woman refugee who described how Islam, from a virtually non-significant 'if quaint' element in her background has become, through the recent war, her primary identity. Different historical situations can enforce individual as well as collective identities, and thus promote certain ethnic projects more than others (Chhachhi, 1992). Moreover, certain ethnic projects can be primarily a result of external enforcement which construct new boundaries of people that previously would not have defined themselves as being part of the same collectivities, and sometime of even hostile ones (e.g. 'Asians' in Britain as including people from Sikh, Hindu and Muslim origins (including from both Pakistan and Bangladesh) who were fighting each other on the Indian sub-continent). As Avtar Brah points out (1991:58), 'Difference is constructed differently within various discourses. These different meanings signal differing political strategies and outcomes'.

Moreover, because specific ethnic projects tend to suit certain members of the collectivity more than others who are positioned differently in terms of class, gender, stage in the life cycle etc, there can be no automatic assumption, as has been so prevalent within 'identity politics' (Bourne, 1987) that specific individuals, just because they are members in certain collectivities, can automatically be considered as 'representing their community'. Only those elected in democratic ways can even partially be considered so. Otherwise, the best and most committed 'community activists' should be considered only as advocates, not as representatives of their 'community' (Cain & Yuval-Davis, 1991). And in terms of equal-opportunities policies, the fact that certain individuals of the groupings become employed in a category of work that previously excluded members of their grouping, although positive in itself, can by no means automatically guarantee the overall

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improvement in the situation of those who belong to it as a whole. The widening gap of class positions among African Americans is a case in point.

The collapse of ethnicity to culture, on the one hand, and identity, on the other hand, can also create what Kobena Mercer (1988) calls 'the burden of representation' which can handicap members of groupings subject to positive actions and equal opportunities policies. In the collection he edited on this subject, Judith William remarked -

> The more power any group has to create and wield representations, the less it is required to be representative... the visible demand to 'speak for the black community' is always there behind the multi-culturalism of public funding (Mercer, 1988, p.12)

Moreover, specific individuals are usually, especially in contemporary urban settings, members in more than one collectivity. The boundaries of these collectivities sometimes partially overlap and often cross cut each other. 'Identity politics' which called people to organize (and empower themselves) according to their particular identities, came up against this reality. In the 'equal opportunities' policies of the GLC and other local authorities' 'popular planning', for instance, fights broke out concerning the question whether a certain black woman worker should become part of the 'Race' or 'Women's unit. On the other hand, once budget was tight, the same black woman would probably be asked to represent all the interests of all minority 'communities' in the area, notwithstanding conflicts and differences of interests among them.

As Kobena Mercer points out, these assumptions are part and parcel of the ideology of multi-culturalism which, with some changes, 'anti-racists' and 'popular planners' have adopted as well (Rattansi, 1992; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Sahgal & Yuval-Davis, 1992).

'Multi-culturalism'

'Multi-Culturalism' (and later on 'Anti-Racism') has been a major ideological response in the West to the obvious failure of previous liberal approaches which assumed that racism is caused by the 'strangeness' of the immigrants, and that with the 'acculturation' and eventual 'assimilation' of the immigrants - or their children - the issue would disappear. The 'melting-pot', however, did not melt, and ethnic and racial divisions got reproduced from generation to generation (Glazer & Moynihan, 1965; 1975; Wallman, 1979; Watson, 1977).

Multi-culturalism constructs society as composed from basically internally homogenous units - an hegemonic majority, and small unmeltable minorities with their own essentially different communities and cultures which have to be understood, accepted, and basically left alone - since their

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differences are compatible with the hegemonic culture -, in order for the society to have harmonious relations.

Multi-culturalist policies construct cultures as static, ahistoric and in their 'essence' mutually exclusive from other cultures, especially that of the 'host society'. Moreover, 'culture' in the multi-culturalist discourse is often collapsed to 'religion', with religious holidays becoming the signifiers of cultural difference within 'multi-cultural' school curricula.

Fundamentalist leaderships, who use religion in their ethnic political projects, have benefitted from the adoption of multi-culturalist norms (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1992). Within the multi-culturalist logic, their presumptions about being the keepers of the 'true' religious way of life are unanswerable. External dissent is labelled as racist and internal dissent as deviance (if not sheer pathology, as in the case of 'self-hating Jews'). In the politics of identity and representation they are perceived as the most 'authentic' 'others' to be included in the multi-culturalist project. At the same time, they are also perceived as a threat, and their 'difference' as a basis for racist discourse and exclusion. Unlike older versions of multi-culturalism, fundamentalist activists refuse to respect the 'limits of multi-culturalism' which would confine 'ethnic cultures' to the private domain or to some limited cultural community spheres. Fundamentalists aim to use modern state and media powers in order to impose their version of reality on all those whom they perceive as their constituency.

This has proved to be very confusing for the Left, and impossible to grapple with within the paradigm of multi-culturalism based on identity politics. An ILEA document in 1977 promoted multi-culturalism as a policy 'which will ensure that, within a society which is cohesive though not uniform, cultures are respected, differences recognized and individual identities are ensured'. While the contents of the ideology promoted by religious fundamentalist activists are often anathema to all they believe in, in terms of women's equality, individual freedom etc., they are committed to 'respect different culture and ensure different identities'. The ideology of autonomous self-determination and empowerment, which is at the base of identity politics and multi-culturalism, forbids 'intervention in the internal affairs of the community' as Eurocentric and racist, part of a tradition of cultural imperialism which must to be rejected.

Women have been primary victims of fundamentalist politics (Sahgal & Yuval-Davis 1992). However, many women have also joined fundamentalist movements and gained a certain sense of empowerment from them (Haleh Afshar, 1989; Yuval-Davis 1992). As Richard Johnson, (1991) points out -

> Frameworks are embodied in practical strategies, tacit beliefs, detailed stories... I may feel empowered or disempowered, heroic, a victim, or stoical, depending on the framework. (p.17)

Therefore, 'choosing the framework' is not just a question of applying 'positive thinking' - as some of the more simplistic feminist and 'Human Growth' workshops on 'women and empowerment' would tend to imply. As Foucault importantly has shown us (1988, p.119) -

> Power doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no... it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse.

In a conference in Ireland on Gender and Colonialism (Dublin, Spring 1992) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defined 'Effective gendering' as 'constructing constriction as choice'. Her statement can be used to explain why some women join fundamentalist movements. But more than that, it points out that a subjective feeling of empowerment and autonomy cannot be the full criterion for evaluating the politics of a certain action. Feelings and knowledge are constructed as a result of specific power relations and are not outside them (Haraway, 1988). This is why it is so important to examine questions of women and empowerment in relation to the ways women affect and are affected by ethnic and national processes.

Women, citizenship, and 'the community'

The specific ways women affect and are affected by ethnic and national processes have been elaborated elsewhere (Yuval-Davis 1980; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Walby, 1992; Yuval-Davis 1993). They include the roles of women as biological and cultural national reproducers; as cultural embodiments of collectivities and their boundaries; as carriers of collective 'honour' and as participants in national and ethnic struggles. All these ways are vitally important to any analysis not only of the specific position of women, but also for any adequate perspective about the ways state and society operate in general.

The construction by the state of relationships in the private domain, i.e. marriage and the family, is what has determined women's status as citizens within the public domain (Pateman, 1989; Vogel, 1989). In some non-European countries, the right of women even to work and travel in the public domain is dependent on formal permission of her 'responsible' male relative (Kandiyoti, 1991), and until 1948 women marrying 'aliens' would have lost their British citizenship altogether.

There have been attempts to explain some of the recent changes in Eastern and Central Europe, in terms of the reconstruction of civil society. This is defined as a presence of a social sphere which is independent of the state. Many western feminist analyses of the relationships between women and the state have shown this 'independence' to be largely illusory, as it is the state which constructs, and often keeps surveillance of, the private domain (especially of the lower classes - e.g. Wilson,

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1977; Showstack Sasoon, 1987). However, in Third World societies often there is only partial penetration of the state into civil society, especially in its rural and other peripheral sections. In these cases, gender and other social relations are determined by cultural and religious customs of the national collectivity. This may also happen in 'private domains' of ethnic and national minorities in other states.

However, it is not only in the 'private domain' that gender relations are differential in the state. Often the citizenship rights and duties of women from different ethnic and racial groupings are different. They would have different legal positions and entitlements; sometimes they might be under the jurisdiction of different religious courts; they would be under different residential regulations, including rights of re-entry when leaving the country; might or might not be allowed to confer citizenship rights to their children, or - in the case of women migrant workers who had to leave their children behind - may or may not receive child and other welfare benefits as part of their social rights.

With all these differences, there is one characteristic which specifies women's citizenship. That is its dualistic nature - on the one hand women are always included, at least to some extent, in the general body of members of a national and ethnic collectivities and/or citizens of the state; on the other hand - there is always, at least to a certain extent, a separate body of regulations (legal and/or customary) which relate to them specifically as women.

Marshall (1950; 1965; 1981) defines citizenship as 'full membership in the community' which includes civil, political and social dimensions of citizenship. The problematic notion of 'the community' discussed above notwithstanding, the ambivalent nature of women's citizenship creates an inherent ambivalence within women's politics vis-a-vis their collectivities, on the one hand, and vis-a-vis women from other collectivities, on the other hand. The famous quotation by Virginia Woolf that 'As a woman I have no country' emphasizes the realization of many women that they are positioned in a different place then men vis-a-vis their collectivity. That the hegemonic cultural and political projects pursued in the name of their collectivities can be against their interests. On the other hand, especially among subordinated and minority women, there is a realization that to fight for their liberation as women is senseless as long as their collectivity as a whole is subordinated and oppressed.

Feminist politics is affected by this ambivalence. Many Black and minority women have pointed out the racist eurocentric and middle class biases which have been at the heart of most feminist agenda, at least until the last few years. As Bell Hooks claimed (1990: 29)

> The vision of sisterhood evoked by women liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression - a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women' varied and complex social reality.

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There are many examples to this varied and complex social reality of women, which, as a result, problematize any simplistic assumptions about what is 'the feminist agenda'. Debates relating to these issues range from abortion vs. sterilization via pro/anti 'the family' to violence and participation in the military (Judith Kimble & Elaine Unterhalter, 1982; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1984; Spelman, 1988; Hill Collins, 1990).

If we add to membership in particular ethnic, national and racial collectivities also other dimensions of identity and difference among women, such as class, sexuality, stage in the life cycle etc, it would be very easy to reach a post-modernist deconstructionist view and a realization that 'everyone is different'. The question, then, is whether any collective political action in general, and feminist in particular, is possible once such a deconstructionist analytical point of view is conceded as valid (See the critique of Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 1985, of Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1984). Are effective politics and adequate sociological analysis inherently contradictory to each other? My basic answer to this question is the same as that of Gayatri Chakravaty Spivak when she claimed

> Deconstruction does not say anything against the usefulness of mobilizing unities. All it says is that because it is useful it ought not to be monumentalized as the way things really are. (1991, p.65)

Or, to put it in Stuart Hall's succinct way - 'all identity is constructed across difference' (1987, p.44).

Women and 'coalition politics' - linking theory and practice

Adopting such a political perspective of boundaries construction of 'units' or 'unities' can keep us aware of continuous historical changes and maintain our perception flexible enough concerning collectivity boundaries sufficiently open so as not to permit exclusionary practices. At the same time it still enables us not to be paralysed politically. Concretely this means that all feminist (and other forms of democratic) politics should be viewed as a form of coalition politics in which the differences among women would be recognized and given a voice, without fixating the boundaries of this coalition in terms of 'who' we are but in terms of what we want to achieve. As Caryn McTighe Musil says -

> The challenge of the nineties is to hold on simultaneously to these two contradictory truths: as women, we are the same and we are different. The bridges, power, alliances and social change possible will be determined by how well we define ourselves through a matrix that encompasses our gendered particularities while not losing sight of our unity (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990, p.vi).

The question is, of course, how to go about this task concretely. I shall now look critically at several approaches which attempted to develop this kind of politics - two which, although creative and thoughtful in many ways, have, I believe, some major flaws relating to some of the issues discussed earlier in the article, and two which, although very different from each other, might point the way for effectively tackling the problem.

The first approach has been described in the article by Gail Pheterson in the <u>Bridges of Power</u> collection (1990). It describes an experiment in Holland in which three mixed women's groups (more or less in half and half proportions) were constructed - one of Black and White women, one of Jews and Gentiles and one of Lesbian and Heterosexual women. The groups operated very much within the usual pattern of feminist consciousness-raising tradition. Pheterson found that -

> in every group, past experiences with oppression and domination distorted the
> participants' perceptions of the present and blocked their identification with people
> in common political situations who did not share their history. (1990, p.3)

She talks about the need to recognize and interrupt how we internalize both oppression and domination in order to create successful alliances. Her position constructs ethnicity as including a power dimension - of oppression and domination and not just as made of 'cultural stuff'. She also shows that women can experience internalized oppression and domination simultaneously as a result of different experiences - people and identities are not just unidimensional. On the other hand her approach implies that there is such a thing as an 'objective truth' that can be discovered rather than a constructed one. I would say that rather than using a discourse of 'distortion', one should use a discourse of ideological positioning - and will come back to this point later.

The discourse of 'distortion' creates its own distortions. Pheterson discusses, for instance, the reluctance of some women (Black women born in the colonies rather than in Holland; Jewish women who have only one Jewish parent) to identify with their groups and sees it as a distortion and 'blocked identifications'. Such a perspective assumes essentialist homogeneity to each category such as 'Blacks', 'Jews' etc and refuses to accept that these women are genuinely located in a different positioning than other members of these groups. Moreover, it assumes that the centrality and significance of these categories would be the same to different women members and disregards differences of class, age and other social dimensions among the participants as inherently irrelevant for the group.

Such an approach is typical to 'identity politics' which was discussed above and which has been very central to western feminism. The whole consciousness-raising techniques assume as a basis for political action a reality that has to be discovered and then changed, rather than a reality which is being created and re-created when practised and discussed. Moreover, this reality is assumed to be

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shared by all members of the social category within which the consciousness raising movement operates who are perceived to constitute a basically homogenous social groupings sharing the same interests. Individual identity has become equated with collective identity whereas differences, rather than being acknowledged have been interpreted by those holding the hegemonic power within the movement as mainly reflections of different stages of raised consciousness. Although to a large extent this has been acknowledged by the women's movement(s) in recent years, the solution has often been to develop essentialist notions of difference, such as, for example, between Black and White women, or middle class and working class women. And within each of these prototypes, the previous assumptions about discovered homogenous reality, and the other problems of 'identity politics' and the politics of 'the community' discussed above, usually continue to operate. Moreover, as Linda Gordon points out, such a perspective is necessarily exclusive -

> We are in danger of losing any ability to offer any interpretation that reaches beyond the particular groups...it does not capture the experience of all...women (Gordon, 1991, p.103)

Even more importantly, as Bonnie Thornton Dill points out -

> As an organizing principle, difference obliterates relation... Difference often implies separation, but these relationships frequently involve proximity, involvement (Thornton Dill, 1988, p.106)

An attempt of a more sophisticated type of identity politics was theorized by Rosalind Brunt who writes in the influential collection New Times (Brunt, 1989). Brunt argues that -

> Unless the question of identity is at the heart of any transformatory project, then not only will the political agenda be inadequately 'rethought' but more to the point, our politics aren't going to make much headway beyond the Left's own circles. (p.150)

Reflecting upon one's own identity, the return to the 'subjective' does not imply for Brunt withdrawal from politics, but rather the opposite - locating grids of power and resistance - in the Foucauldian way, which are horizontal and not just vertical, while keeping political frameworks of action heterogenous and floating. She rejects the logic of 'broad democratic alliances' and 'rainbow coalitions' because, she argues, political action should be based on 'unity in diversity' which should be founded not on common denominators but on (p.158)

> a whole variety of heterogeneous, possibly antagonistic, maybe magnificently diverse, identities and circumstances... the politics of identity recognizes that there will be many struggles, and perhaps a few celebrations, and writes into all of them a welcome to contradiction and complexity.

As a positive example for this type of political struggle Brunt points to the support activities which surrounded the miners' strike in 1984-5. This is, however, an unfortunate example, because

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the strike ended up in such a crushing defeat, not only of the miners and trade-union movement, but of the anti-Thatcherite movement as a whole.

Real politics aside, Brunt's model of politics seems very seductive - it incorporates theoretical insights of highly sophisticated social analysis, is flexible, dynamic and is totally inclusive. However, it is in this last point that the danger lies. What ultimately lies behind Brunt's approach is a naive populist assumption that in spite of contradictions and conflicts, in the last instance all popular struggles are inherently progressive. She shares with other multi-culturalists the belief about the reconcilability and boundaries of difference which has been precisely the source of the space that has encouraged the rise of fundamentalist leaderships.

The next example which I want to discuss is that of Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF), which got organized in London at the wake of the Rushdie Affair to struggle exactly against such fundamentalist leaderships of all religions as well as against expressions of racism which covered themselves up as anti fundamentalists.

WAF includes women from a variety of religious and ethnic origins (Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus etc). Many of the members also belong to other campaigning organizations, often with a more specific ethnic affiliation - such as the Southall Black Sisters (SBS), the Jewish Socialist Group, and the Irish Abortion Support Group. However, except for SBS which has had an organizational and ideological initiatory role in establishing WAF, women come there as individuals rather than as representatives of any group or ethnic category. On the other hand, there is no attempt to 'assimilate' the women who come from the different backgrounds. Differences in ethnicity and points of view - and the resulting different agendas - are recognized and respected. But what is celebrated is the common political stance of WAF members, as advocating 'the Third Way' against fundamentalism and against racism.

Patricia Hill Collins in her book on <u>Black Feminist Thought</u> (1990) discusses the importance of recognizing the different positioning from which different groupings view reality. Her analysis (which follows to a great extent the feminist epistemological perspective elaborated by Donna Harraway(1988)), echoes exactly the agenda which has been guiding the members of WAF -

> Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished [to differentiate from invalid - NY-D]... Partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard; individuals and groups forwarding knowledge claims without owning their position are deemed less credible than those who do... Dialogue is critical to the success of this epistemological approach. (p.236)

In this Hill Collins side steps the trap that Marxists and many sociologists of knowledge have been caught in of relativism on the one hand, and locating specific social groupings as the

epistemological 'bearers of the Truth' on the other hand. Dialogue, rather than fixity of location becomes the basis of empowered knowledge. The campaigns of WAF on, for instance, state religious education or on women's reproductive rights, has been informed by the differential experiences of the women of different positionings and backgrounds in the group.

The last example I want to discuss is also based on dialogue. A dialogue which has been developing by Italian feminists (from the movement Women In Black - especially the women from the Bologna and Torino Women's Centres) while working with feminists who are members of conflicting national groups, like the Serbs and the Croats, but especially Palestinian and Israeli Jewish women.

On the face of it, such a dialogue does not seem very different from the more common 'identity politics' type of dialogue such as was described by Gail Pheterson. However, several important differences exist.

The boundaries of the categories are not determined by an essentialist notion of difference, but by a concrete and material political reality. Also, the women involved in the different groups are not perceived simplistically as representatives of their groupings. While their different positioning and background is recognized and respected - including the differential power relations inherent in their corresponding affiliations as members of the Occupier and the Occupied collectivities - all the women who were sought and invited to participate in the dialogue are committed to 'refuse to participate unconsciously in the reproduction of the existing power relations' and are 'committed to finding a fair solution to the conflict' (Italian letter of invitation, December, 1990).

The basic perspective of the dialogue is very similar to that of Patricia Hill Collins. The terminology is somewhat different. The Italian women use as key words 'rooting' and 'shifting'. The idea is that each participant brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity, but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different membership and identity. They call it 'transversalism' - to differentiate from 'universalism' which by assuming a homogenous point of departure ends up being exclusive instead of inclusive.

Two things are vital in developing the transversal perspective. Firstly, that the process of shifting would not involve self de-centring, i.e. losing one's own rooting and set of values. There is no need for it, as Elsa Barkley Brown claims -

> All people can learn to center in another experience, validate it and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own... one has no need to 'decenter' anyone in order to center someone else; one has only to constantly pivot the centre (1989, p.922)

It is vital in any form of coalition and solidarity politics to keep one's own perspective on things while empathising and respecting the others. In multi-culturalist type of solidarity politics there can be a risk

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of uncritical solidarity. This was very prevalent, for instance, in the politics of some sections of the Left around the Iranian revolution or the Rushdie Affair. They saw it as 'imperialist' and 'racist' to intervene in 'internal community matters'. Women are often the victims of such a perspective which allows the so-called representatives and leaders of 'the community' to determine policies concerning women.

Secondly, and following from the first point - the process of shifting should not homogenize the 'other'. As there are diverse positions and points of view among people who are similarly rooted, so there are among the members of the other group. The transversal coming together should not be with the members of the other group 'en bloc', but with those who, in their different rooting, share compatible values and goals to one's own.

Conclusion

Empowerment of the oppressed, whether one fights for it for one's own - individual or group - sake, or that of others, cannot by itself be the goal for feminist and other anti-oppression politics. Recently, for instance, memoirs by former members, especially Elaine Brown, have brought to light the 'disciplinary' practices of brutality and violence which became part of the daily reality of the American Black Panthers (Walker, 1993), and the murder of the teenager to which Winnie Mandella has been party to has been just one dreadful demonstration of the old truism that 'power corrupts'. And this applies also to power of previously disempowered people, and to power which is only relative and confined to specific contingencies.

The ideology of 'empowerment' has sought to escape this dilemma by confining 'positive' power to power 'of' rather than 'power over'. However, in doing that, empowerment has been constructed as a process which breaks the boundaries between the individual and the communal. As Bookman and Morgen (1988:4) point out, the notion of empowerment connotes

> a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge the basic power relations in our society.

The paper points out that such construction assumes a specific 'identity politics' which homogenizes and naturalizes social categories and groupings, denying shifting boundaries and internal power differences and conflicts of interest. Also in such an approach cultures and traditions are transformed from heterogenous, sometimes conflicting reservoirs of resources into unified, a-historical and unchanging essence.

As an alternative to this kind of 'identity politics' the paper develops the idea of 'transversal politics', in which perceived unity and homogeneity is replaced by a dialogue and which recognizes the specific positionings of those who participate in it as well as the 'unfinished knowledge' that each such situated positioning can offer. Such transversal politics, however, does not assume that the dialogue is boundariless, and that each conflict of interest is reconcilable. However, the boundaries of such a dialogue are determined by the message, rather than the messenger. The struggle against oppression and discrimination might (and mostly does) have a specific categorical focus but is never confined just to that category.

If empowerment of women is to transcend some of the pitfalls discussed in this paper, it is perhaps wise to adhere to Gill Bottomley's warning -

> The dualistic approach of a unitary Us vs a unitary Them continues to mystify the interpenetration and intermeshing of the powerful constructs as race, class and gender and to weaken attempts at reflexivity... Both the subjective and the objective dimensions of experience need to be addressed as well as the thorny issue of the extent to which observers remain within the discourses they seek to criticise. (1991, p. 309)
> The transversal pathway might be full of thorns, but at least it leads in the right direction...

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A note: The last part of the article is based on a paper presented at the Women's Studies Conference, July 1992, in Preston, U.K.

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