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Feminism and Critical Rationalism

The basic feminist view of the modern Women's Movement that rose at the end of the 1960's is: that the inferior status of women in society must be abolished; that violence against women, the exclusion and the segregation of women, their legal, judicial, customary, political and economic de facto discrimination, all constitute crucial infringements of human rights and of democracy. Most modern feminists also assume that by now the abolition of these infringements is quite feasible.

This feminist goal appears to be in accordance with Popper's ideal of the Open Society. Popper himself has occupied himself neither with the Feminist Movement), nor with social research connected with it. My thesis is that Critical Rationalism can be of great help and significance for feminist researchers.

Before embarking on an explanation of this statement, let me present my short outline of a basic Feminist Research Program for sociologists, anthropologists, economists, political scientists and historians, who share the basic feminist views mentioned above:

- 1) What are the causes of women's inequality? Is there one major cause for it in all societies and periods?
- 2) What are the causes of different degrees and different forms of gender inequality in different societies and in different periods?
- 3) Have there ever been societies where women's status was equal or superior to that of men?
- 4) If yes, why? Could such conditions be recreated?
- 5) If not, does this not point to the fact, that all, most, or at least a significant part, of the causes are biological-physiological?

Assuming that the large social differences in the forms and degrees of gender

inequality refute the claims that all or most of these causes are biological, yet not the claim that a significant part of them is, then the following questions should be asked:

- 6) Have the biological differences between men and women themselves, or their impact on women's lives, changed recently? Could they be changed more radically? What is the price of such a change?
- 7) If the answers to 3) and to 6) are negative, does this not negate the possibility of gender equality ever to be achieved?
- 8) Rejecting the view that absence implies unfeasibility, what recent basic changes could have made gender equality feasible now?
- 9) Are women a social group? What are their common interests, where do their interests differ? Can they develop solidarity in the fight for their common interests?
- 10) What part does/can the Women's Movement/different women's movements play in the equalization of women's status in society? What makes for success or failure of a specific women's movement?
- 11) What is the most effective strategy of the women's movement? Equalization of gender roles and integration of work roles, or gender separatism by turning women's traditional skills into monopolistic strongholds or by creating a separate women's economy?
- 12) How strong are men's--which men's--interests in keeping women in an inferior status in household and workplace?
- 13) How can the male role be changed sufficiently to facilitate such a change in the female role, so as to enable women to achieve equal power in society? Can this process be facilitated by social policy? By which social policy?
- 14) Which factors in present-day industrialized society support the status quo of gender inequality, and which factors push for change?

- 15) Can the large change in women's roles that has taken place in the last 30 years be reversed? How serious is the backlash to this change?
- 16) What are the causes of male violence against women? Will the economic and political empowerment of women reduce male violence against women? Is the backlash in fact producing an increase in violence?

Considering this research program, does it raise special epistemological and methodological problems? Do they differ from those faced by social scientists in general? Are they more acute? Here are some such problems and the thoughts they gave rise to:

- a) For centuries thinkers, philosophers, historians, social scientists, and psychologists disregarded women completely or misrepresented them as having inferior intellectual capacity, character and moral judgment, as a secondary species; some of them denied, and still deny, that women's status in household and society is inferior; others admit it but justify it as natural or as essential to the functioning of society. How come? Obviously they did not achieve the "truth" about women by scientific means; Can social scientists then at all find the truth about social reality, or even approximate it? Does such a truth exist at all? Does social reality exist at all?
- b) The claim to be committed to the truth, the scientific ethos of objectivity, appeared especially suspect, as the bias of male scientists concerning women was so blatant. This raised the question: Can men at all be objective in their research concerning women? Can they--as long as they accept prevailing male supremacist norms of gender roles and of masculinity/femininity?
- c) This led to the more far-reaching question--can objectivity be achieved at all? Is the entire ethos of objectivity, indeed the claim to rationality itself, not a part of male "scientism", a pretense of the male-dominated scientific establishment?

Many Feminists adopted fashionable anti-positivist, anti-scientific views such as the many variants of relativism, neo-Marxism, post-modernism or Kuhnian paradigms, all of which share the claim that (at least in the social sciences) the pursuit of objectivity and the pursuit of truth are impossible and that those claiming to do so are deceiving the public.

Relativism has been used to justify differences between the value of social theories and historical descriptions of different periods, between kinds of societies, between modern thinking and "magic thinking", and between the values and the social arrangements of different nationalities, races and classes.

The theory of Kuhnian paradigms was taken to assume that science is relative to political, economic and institutional pressures, all of which were presumably parts of what constitutes a ruling paradigm.

The conclusion advocated by relativist feminists is that at least social research--perhaps also natural research --necessarily always is, and should be openly admitted to be, relative and separate according to gender. This is open to at least two interpretations: perhaps it means that only women can be feminists or that only women are qualified to conduct women's studies.

Post-modernism reads as follows: both objectivity and truth cannot be achieved at all in the human sciences, because their subject-matter is made up of "texts", of significant "events" or of various "discourses", that can only be interpreted, and all interpretations are equally legitimate.

Thus it happened that the much-needed criticism of positivism and scientism led some feminist scholars into subjectivism and irrationalism. This only reinforces positivism and scientism.

- d) A certain historical situation in the social sciences happens to have played an important role in the evolution of feminist critique. Functionalism was the ruling school in sociology and in social anthropology at the time of the advent of the new feminist movement at the close of the sixties. It is a grand theory of social equilibrium, that stood for men's and women's

desirably different roles in the nuclear family, and thus also in the economy and in politics, as the basis for the stability of modern society. This, of course, stands in diametrical contrast to the feminist critical view of modern society and especially of the American nuclear family.

- e) In their critique of functionalism some feminists joined Marxist and Neo-Marxist schools, such as the Frankfurt school, whose leaders declared extremely critical views of "American imperialism" and of the "bourgeois family". In spite of the fact that gender could not possibly play a significant role in Marxist and Neo-Marxist social analysis, they tried now to introduce gender as an additional factor without attempting to examine critically the main Marxist tenets of social class as the basic social whole, of the inevitability of the class struggle, of the state being nothing but an instrument of the "ruling class", and of the future classless society that will automatically solve all social problems, including the problem of women's social inequality. Later some neo-Marxist feminist scholars attempted to introduce not only gender, but also race and ethnicity, next to the basic Marxist factor of social class, thus further confusing the relativist and holistic tendencies of Marxist social analysis.

Thus it happened that these feminist scholars in their criticism of functionalism as a holist, conservative and pro-establishment theory, did not contribute to the much-needed critique of holism and of the accepted dichotomy between holism and individualism.

- f) The inductivist, rigidly quantitative methodology, often using dubious statistical data and methods, or data arrived at by shallow questionnaires or contrived "laboratory" experiments, that had been established in sociology and social psychology side by side with Parsonian Grand Theory, was considered by a growing number of sociologists as often artificial and misleading;

The Feminist criticism of the scientist fetish made of the quantitative method and statistics in the social sciences certainly was very important. "Factors" and

"parameters" that are fixed arbitrarily, are all too often taken seriously without regard to the specific meaning that the question originally had to the person to whom it was presented, nor to his or her specific circumstances, nor to the possible distortions of the measurements of these "factors" and "parameters". All too often the numbers resulting from these pointless procedures are subject to some mindless inductivist correlations. And all too often the outcome of this entire process is passed to the overwhelmed reader with no explanation. All this does deserve severe criticism.

In addition feminists considered much of research by the questionnaire and structured interview method to be male-biased due to its measuring women against male norms, and also of manipulating its human research subjects, especially insulting women, by disregarding their experience and their feelings. This disregard of experience and of feelings was deemed to be part of the "rationalism" of the male scientific establishment.

As alternatives feminist scholars greatly developed the research tools of the so-called qualitative method such as semi-structured questionnaires and semi-structured and minimally structured and in-depth interviewing (video and/or audio taped); they developed the entirely new method of "Oral history".

Unfortunately many of them erroneously claimed to have thus abandoned any kind of quantification. This suited well those who had earlier adopted a subjectivist, irrationalist, anti-empirical stance.

- g) Another problem was posed by the dominance of inductivism in social science research. Feminists were openly problem-oriented and critical in their approach; inductivists in power in academe declared them to be not "value-free" and thus not measuring-up to academic standards .
- h) Feminists were in a special need of a method that would facilitate not only the description and analysis of present social reality, but also of projections of the effects of possible drastic social changes. They developed the "scenario" method.

- i) Feminists have noticed that many basic concepts used by different schools in the social sciences are seriously flawed. (Examples: sex, family, work). They have introduced the distinctions between "sex" and "gender", "marriage", family" and "household", and between "paid work" and "unpaid work".
- j) In addition to the authority of functionalism, another specific historical situation at the time of the rise of the new women's movement also influenced the direction of feminist critique. This was the popularization of psychoanalysis, loosely characterizable as Freudian. In the USA this had started as late as the fifties and gained dominance in the sixties. In the mid-sixties semi-Freudian theories were used by psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, physicians, social workers, teachers and social policy makers. They were used as means of scientific legitimation for the devaluation of women and for their domestication, and as justification for gender discrimination of all sorts.

Betty Friedan gave the sign to "Women's Liberation" by publishing her book the "Feminine Mystique" that was a critique of the application of quasi-Freudian quasi-psychoanalytic theories to subjugate women. She discussed Freud's famous claims that women's anatomy was their destiny, that they were destined to narcissism, to "hysteria", to penis-envy and to dependence and lack of autonomy; that women who aimed at occupational and intellectual achievement were unnatural "castrating bitches", that those who desired sexual gratification by clitoral orgasm were "infantile" (mature women were satisfied by vaginal orgasm and gained full satisfaction by giving birth to sons); that women who claimed to have been sexually abused in childhood by their fathers or other male father-figures, suffered from wish-fantasies, and that women who reported male violence had attracted sadistic men because of their own masochistic tendencies.

Some Feminist psychologists and sociologists developed Friedan's criticism further and rejected Freudian Psychoanalysis, and some of them used Popper's

argument that Freud's teaching is pseudo-scientific, as he had refused to open his hypotheses to criticism, that he had formulated them in a way that characterized any criticism as resulting from the critic being psychologically inferior and even sick. (Popper called this technique "reinforced dogmatism".) Feminist sociologists pointed out the dogmatic character of the Freudian teaching that the period of infancy determines all future psychic development, as Freudians refused to examine the impact of social influences on character. (When such examinations were finally made, they showed amazing changes in the attitudes of groups of women faced with similar choices--even after a relatively short period of time had elapsed.)

Yet the well-known feminist Carol Gilligan simply accepted Freud's dictum that women--due to a basically and unchangeable difference between experiences of female and male infants--were different from men by having a stronger tendency or capacity for human attachment (Freud had called it dependence) and a weaker urge for "autonomy" and declared that this made women different but superior to men, by causing them to develop a superior morality to that of men. In her critique of Piaget and Inhelder, Gilligan justly criticized their tendency to make the moral judgments of boys the yardstick for measuring the development of human moral sense in general, thus condemning the usually less abstract, less legalistic answers made by girls to the moral dilemmas posed by the researcher, as inferior - and using this as "proof" of women's slower and inferior moral development. Thus Gilligan opened the floodgates to separatism.

To sum up: In the course of the more than thirty years of modern feminist research, different feminist researchers have looked for help in several different directions, in order to solve these pressing methodological problems. Some of their philosophical choices and preoccupations were a waste of time, and some even proved to be obstacles hindering their work. The relative disregard of most feminists of the epistemological contributions of critical rationalism and of their methodological corollaries was most unfortunate.

Finally, this development invites explanation.

In the early seventies some of the younger feminists in the humanities and in the social sciences rejected empirical research and the search for truth and objectivity altogether, and advocated instead reliance on "gut feelings" and the "collection of ammunition for the battle", just as many New Leftists had previously done. Moreover, some even threw overboard the common rationality of women and men, just as some Neo-Marxist New Leftists had thrown overboard the rationality common to the "Oppressors" and the "Liberators".

Some of these became the ideologues of Radical Feminism, combining some psychoanalytic with some anthropological elements from Levi-Strauss, Lacan and others, and developing them and integrating them into the grand and utterly untestable theory that compulsory heterosexuality is the root of all women's wrongs and that it thereby proves a major argument in favor of a policy of general women's separatism.

Most younger North American feminist social scientists, however, did not go this separatist way; they came in the seventies under the influence of classical Marxism and/or its various, not-outright irrationalist offshoots, convinced that in order to belong to the camp of progress and social justice, they had to be (neo-) Marxists, or at least not come into open conflict with Marxist dogma and jargon. This in spite of the fact that in the process of their research and the development of their feminist theses they noticed more and more often the incompatibility or even outright conflict of their ideas with central Marxist or neo-Marxist theories concerning the stages of the economic development of society, concerning "matriarchy", and concerning the status of women under Capitalism and under Socialism, concerning class and its impact on discrimination against women in the family, the household, the workplace and the political arena. They also had to notice the anti-feminist character of the Marxist claim that technology only serves capitalists in their drive for the total control of the worker. All these clash with their own findings about the life-realities of women.

These researchers usually were not acquainted with the earlier literature that contains epistemological and methodological criticism of Marxist social theory.

This made it much harder for them to disentangle themselves and to declare openly that the Marxist theories are refuted, and to stop using those misleading Marxist concepts that reflect these theories.

Karl Popper had made two important contributions to this criticism in his *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies*: although he deemed very laudable the initial concern of Marx with the misery of industrial workers, he considered Marx' "historist" grand theory mistaken and pernicious, because of its furthering totalitarian practice. Historicists claim to be able to predict the future of all societies, due to their discovery of the grand laws of historical development; historicist researchers tend to target and to limit their research in order to verify their grand theories; historicist theories tend to be formulated in a way that precludes any refutation.

Popper also criticized Marx' "historist" mistaken demand that the expectation of the future arrival at a desired state of society should be based on the claim that such a state existed in an early stage of human society (that a classless society is the return of "Primitive Communism"). Engels had based his forecast of the abolition of women's social inferiority by means of the socialist revolution on just such a historist claim of the existence of an early state of "Matriarchy". It took feminist anthropologists enormous efforts to criticize this historist mistake.

Beyond these two criticisms of Marxism there exist major potential benefits of critical rationalism to all social scientists' epistemological problems--and especially to those of feminist social scientists: the most important one is Poppers theory of refutability (fallibilism) as the criterion for the empirical character of hypotheses: according to Popper the social sciences--including history--achieve scientific status, when they are formulated as refutable hypotheses; this way we have the chance to come nearer to the truth in the social sciences, just as in the natural sciences. The natural sciences achieve neither unanimity nor proof: there can never be proof of the truth of theories concerning the physical or the social world; all that scientific inquiry can and should attempt is to bring us nearer to the truth. Therefore, the social sciences

should not be burdened by inferiority feelings. Attempts to make large-scale long-range forecasts in order to be "scientific", then, to miss their mark.

Likewise, there is no need to copy uncritically the quantitative or the laboratory methods of the natural sciences, as the claim is anyway false that in the natural sciences, exactness, unanimity and absolute truth are reachable by these methods. This does not mean that methodologically "anything goes": methods should fit the needs posed by the task of devising (crucial) tests of hypotheses.

Popper considers the inductive method of starting out by collecting details and proceeding from them towards unbiased generalization, as equally futile in the natural as in the social sciences. According to critical rationalism starting out by openly posing a problem is not only legitimate but also preferable to it by far.

Popper agrees that there exists a basic difference between the natural and the social sciences: the fact that humans, and also some animals, have a measure of free choice in their actions. Therefore the social scientist has to ask the basic two questions: what did/do certain human beings intend to achieve by their actions (the "logic of the situation") and what were/are the unintended consequences of these actions.

Irrationalism on the part of the researcher means the end of research, the end of (social) science. Without a common human rationality there would be no possibility to improve our picture of our (social) world. The difference between traditional rationalism and critical rationalism is that critical rationalism a) does not mean the disregard of the importance of emotions. b) does not promise more than it can deliver.

Critical rationalism could also have been at least a beneficial starting point to feminist social scientists' specific struggling with the problems of bias and objectivity. Critical rationalism does not promise absolute objectivity, nor absolute truth in any science, whether natural or social, but it suggests that we can and should consistently aim at maximizing it with the help of institutions fostering the free critical examination of social reality that are part of the Open Society.

The rationality principle requires also some empathy of the researcher with the researched. This can be very helpful and does not have to be opposed to the striving for objectivity.

Popper developed valuable arguments against and rejected both psychologism that claims that all social phenomena can be explained by individual psychology, and holism or collectivism that claims that social wholes such as societies, nations, states, classes or parties have wills, interests and destinies that are superior to those of individuals.

John Stuart Mill claimed to endorse psychologism, but he was not as consistent about it as was Freud. Although most feminists, including Chodorow, Gilligan, and Benhabib, are critical of Freud, they accept his psychologistic explanation of gender differences.

Holism: Hegel and Marx were holists. Hegel's important wholes are the Nation, the State and Civil Society; Marx' wholes are classes; holists also tend to use grand and fuzzy concepts like "Capitalism"; many Feminists make the same mistake with "Patriarchy".

Many philosophers and social scientists disregarded critical rationalism, mistaking it to be identical with positivism and scientism--which they rightly reject. Yet why was this mistake not cleared up in the half century that Poppers basic teachings are around?

Popper did not develop further his thought about such social "wholes" as social groups, institutions, organizations and social movements that are of basic interest to the social sciences. He did not further develop his thought about class, race, nation, ethnicity and religion, about economic, military and political power and their impact on the individual. These omissions contributed to the fact that Poppers writings--in spite of the great immediate political and ideological impact of his *The Open Society* - and the stir caused by the publication of *The Poverty of Historicism* in book form (Jarvie, 1986) were not recognized as addressing some of the central epistemological and methodological problems of social scientists.

Popper is opposed to large-scale planning, because of its large unforeseen consequences and because of its irreversibility. He is in favor of small-scale social engineering. He is opposed to planning the ideal society but is in favor of the reform of existing ones by alleviating obvious human suffering. Hayek has interpreted Popper's views as opposed to any social or economic planning, relying completely on the market. Radnitzky has condemned the rather gradual and voluntaristic Swedish welfare state as tyrannical. I do not know if Popper has anywhere reacted to Hayek's and Radnitzky's interpretations of his teaching, which preclude any social reform applying social science, i.e., rational social technology.

It is quite likely that not only Popper's neglect of social problems and of applied social science/social technology, but also these ultra-conservative interpretations of his views by some of his leading disciples, have kept away many moderate social scientists.

Other critical rationalists have used and developed further Popperian principles to discuss epistemological and methodological problems of a specific social science (Albert, Boland - Economics; Banton, Gellner - Sociology; Gombrich - History of Art; Fried and Agassi - Psychiatry; Jarvie - Anthropology; Reed - Psychology; Segre - Social History of Science; Wettersten - History of Psychology; Watkins - Political Science; Wisdom - Psychotherapy). Agassi has sharpened the critique of holism and developed the theory of social technology that is missing in Popper's works.

In addition, perhaps due to the absence of a critical rationalist response to the feminist challenge (its influence on Janet Radcliffe Richards notwithstanding), and to Popper's own denial of the need for a women's movement and his denial of the very fact that women's status in modern society is still inferior (Urban 93), his teaching did not come to the attention of most feminists. Thus unfortunately they overlooked the important contributions of critical rationalism to the critique of positivist scientism on the one hand, and of Marxism on the other, that are very relevant to some of their special needs.

What all this amounts to is as follows. Many feminist researchers have already done much to improve the social sciences by their criticism of extant suppositions and methods and by their discovery of the many lacunae and distortions. They have also adopted and developed methods that promise to help overcome traditional male biases. (Indeed any method may be adopted, but tentatively, while examining its suitability for the purpose at hand.) Yet the main concern here is the possible gain of feminist research from Popperian critical philosophy.

First and foremost, there is no need for feminists to become exclusive partners of any philosophical school, critical rationalism or any other. Second, feminists can seize fallibilism as a liberating epistemological principle, especially emancipating from positivism or scientism. (This should come rather easy, in view of the unacknowledged Popperian influence on feminist sociologists in helping them present research papers by starting with problem and hypothesis to be tested. It will help greatly in the reduction of the hesitance to eliminate refuted hypotheses, especially those relating to sacred cows.) They should also make use of Popper's criticism of psychologism and holism, of Marxism and historicism. Much epistemological and methodological work still needs to be done to advance the big research program of feminist social science.

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