

COMMENTARY

'Woman' as theatre

United Nations Conference on Women, Beijing 1995

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The United Nations is based on the unacknowledged assumption that 'the rest of the world' is unable to govern itself. In fact, of course, no state is able to govern itself, in different ways. And, in the current conjuncture, the role of the state is less and less important. Therefore it is necessary to show, as lavishly as possible, global national unity.

One is not 'against' the UN as such. But the US-controlled Security Council (which Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* has called the 'Insecurity Council', because US control seems to be slipping), and, at the other end, these women's conferences, are more problematic. The latter may even be called tremendously well-organized and broad repressive ideological apparatuses. The thing to show is the unity of nations, remember. And, just as for capital the *use* value of labour power is capital accumulation, so for the United States, and even, *mutatis mutandis*, the EC, nationalism *is* globalization, and that is where the problem lies.

In this perspective, the China-bashing that accompanied the events in Beijing last autumn was a red herring. Human-rights violations happen only in China, although the USA is currently decimating welfare and approving mergers that allow Chief Executive Officers to pull in 'salaries' in eight figures? China is blocking a 'free exchange of ideas' and thus re-initiating the Cold War? We do not see free exchange on the other side. It is a situation of repression versus exploitation. China should perhaps learn from the 'free' world that repressive tolerance is the best ally of exploitation.

The financialization of the globe must be represented as the North embracing the South. Women are being used for the representation of this unity – another name for the profound transnational disunity necessary for globalization. These conferences are global theatre. There is, of course, no politics which is not theatre. But we are interested in *this* global theatre, staged to show participation between the North and the South, the latter constituted by Northern discursive mechanisms – a Platform of Action and certain power lines between the UN, the donor consortium, governments and the elite Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In fact, the North organizes a South. People going to these conferences may be struck by the global radical aura. But if you hang out at the other end, participating day-to-day in the (largely imposed) politics of how delegations and NGO groups are put together – in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Central Asia, say, to name only the places this writer knows – you would attest that what is left out is the poorest women of the South as self-conscious critical agents, who might be able to speak through those very nongovernmental organizations of the South that are not favoured by these object-constitution policies.

Of course, the constitution of a 'South' – and, indeed, of a 'North' – doesn't deal with the internal division within nations. Yet, one distinction still holds. Poor women

in the North are being denied access to an existing welfare structure that is being dismantled; the poorest in the South are at the bottom of a society where a welfare structure cannot emerge because of globalized exploitation (and, often, state corruption). The structural disparity is immense. Fertilizer and pharmaceutical dumping, biodiversity-grabbing, et cetera, affect women in the two sectors in a discontinuous way. Although in certain areas – as has been pointed out by Swasti Mitter and others – one cannot endorse a clean North–South divide.

Paradoxically, the distinction is blurred and sharpened in another way, from above: Southern diasporics, in their nostalgia to be identified with their nations of origin, come forth to stand in for the South. They are not only not the South, they are not the South-in-the-North either. Their class alliances are often vertical, their political concerns modelled, at best, on migrant suffering – a worthy interest, but only indirectly connected with *international* exploitation. Class-formation, understood loosely to take in the demographic effects of global capital in rural areas, is an important category here. And, with respect, the nationalist blindness of the US Left (Cornel West in *Rethinking Marxism* or Stanley Aronowitz in *Socialist Review*) needs a shot of vulgar Marxism in order to understand that the USA is not the world.

Some of the blame must be put on the South, of course. The subversion of the GATT, which could perhaps have secured some positive global checks at a certain point, is not a little due to the fact that the so-called Third World countries entered into bilateral agreements with the North and a Southern solidarity could not develop. As a result, today the World Trade Organization can constantly ruse the performance of exploitation as the constataion of international economic regulation. The theatre of Beijing cannot successfully represent the small-scale struggles that daily deconstruct capital into the social. It is laudable to support small banks that in turn support women's small enterprise, as the UN certainly does. But the UN also supports the kind of women's development programmes that are nurtured by post-Fordism. Breaking the radical criticism of conscientized, disempowered, very poor women is thus the silencing of a certain kind of micro-effort which brings into being the 'small is

beautiful' of post-Fordism. They are both small scale. But one is a small that can resist, build and work with the big. The post-Fordist small, although it looks decentred, helps the centralization of capital.

Nationalism and the interest in domestic redistribution often comprise a different logic or approach to basic questions which women in the United States assume to be part of a global agenda. The 1994 Conference on Population and Development in Cairo finessed this by monolithizing abortion. This brings us back to object- and subject-constitution. Already in the document from the 1985 Nairobi conference on women, one began to see who qualifies as 'woman', and what that woman must think in order to represent the woman who is to be empowered. And the contemporary discussion as to whether the term 'gender' should be allowed in the document plays out a peculiarly evolutionist, often irrelevant, unexamined and wasteful nominalism. In the context of this, what was the purpose of complaining constantly about the living conditions,



the site? What connection does it have with the suffering of the world's women?

We are witnessing the proliferation of feminist apparatchiks who identify conference organizing with activism as such, who cannot successfully imagine the lineaments of the space of existence of the Southern grassroots. They have no idea of the vast difference between the actual bottom and the layer above, of, say, the rural fieldworkers. They often assume that altogether salutary debate *in the conference* will have necessary consequences in the lifeworld of oppressed and super-exploited women. The connection between state- and local-level implementation and the legal force of UN documents is a moot issue. If you asked the largest sector of the electorate in large developing countries where elite NGOs do not often penetrate: what is the United Nations and what effect will a document framed here have on your daily life, in terms of primary health care or in terms of your children's education or in terms of year-round income?, you wouldn't get much of a rise.

Again, one is not against the UN effort in principle. One just wishes that so much time, so many resources, were not spent on it. All over the world, especially in the developing world, serious activists are staying away more and more, for the real work may be elsewhere. Yet, unless the mainstream feminist hears responsible critique, the feminist status quo will continue to provide an alibi for exploitation. The Asian Women's Human Rights Coalition recently deplored the fact that the Southern press was insufficiently subsidized.

At the end of the day, I pose the same question that I put to a group of Bangladeshi fieldworkers who were about to go to Beijing, and were complaining about their scant English: Do you have any idea how you will be matronized by white and diasporic feminists? Can you get behind their herding smiles? And why, in your opinion – with all your hands-on experience of international exploitation – is it necessary to tabulate our state and local problems at the UN? Or, to echo a powerful feminist lawyer in India: How, when domestic feminists cannot (or will not) grasp the complexity of the last forty years of legal history in India, will the United Nations help in the matter of the Uniform Civil Code?

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