
Disciplinary “Moratorium”: Post-Colonial Studies, Third Wave Feminism, and Development Studies

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Opinion Paper

Abstract: *This paper explores some similarities between Feminism, especially intersectionality theory, Post-colonial studies, and Participatory Alternative Development. While the three fields deal with different subject matters they have commonalities such as methodology, historical development, and activism. The three fields have as their goal, not only the accumulation of knowledge but also to strive for transformation in the world. A general sympathy for the weak and the oppressed is also shared by the three fields and their empowerment is an important goal. Finally, the role of post-modernism as an intricately linked theoretical movement that has strengthened and weakened the three fields at one time or the other will be discussed.*

Keywords: *Development Studies, Feminism, Post-colonial Studies*

Feminism developed as a reactive field. The goal was to study why women were oppressed and enjoyed fewer opportunities than males. It was formed as a reaction to a perceived wrong, in this case the oppression of women. The Field had clear objectives. First, the goal was to gain political rights, this was First Wave Feminism. Then the goal became using those political rights to gain economic and social equality. Finally, third Wave Feminism deals with questioning the idea of “gender” related discourses (Ritzer, 2008, p. 453). The goals of the field have become increasingly vague due to its success in attaining the more concrete goals of First and Second Wave Feminism. The similarities with the historical development of liberation

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movements in the Third World are striking. Both Feminism and liberation movements started as a reaction to the perceived oppression of one group by another. That realization led to concerted action aimed at achieving political rights. Post-colonial movements then took over from the original liberation movements to attempt to transform those political rights into economic and social equality. Finally, once economic and social equality was attained to a certain extent, a crisis in identity ensued, and the original assumptions of the movements came under critical scrutiny. A few examples of the development of liberation movements will clarify the previous comparison.

The liberation movements in Indochina underwent a historical development very similar to the one delineated in the previous paragraph. Oppression under French colonial rule led to the development of a liberation movement in order to fight for formal independence and political rights. Once that was attained, liberation movements concentrated on dealing with a perception of relative deprivation in relation to the West and to Westernized members of the elite. The communist revolution in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam can be seen in this light. Finally, at this point the liberation movements have run their course and are undergoing a painful period of questioning dealing their original goals and their identity. Some signs of this can be seen in the rise in nationalism in Cambodia, Vietnam's "Doi Moi" policy and transition to an economy with a more open market, and Lao's search for a common identity in regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Gottesman, 2003; William T. Tow, 2000).

Another important similarity between Feminism and Post-colonial Studies is that both deal with subjects that are defined in terms of another subject which is considered to be the norm. In other words, "women" are defined in terms of "men" and the "Third World" is defined in terms of the "First World". The same is true in the Development Field. The "developing world" is defined in terms of the "developed world". Therefore, the "subject" of study of the three fields is also defined as the "Other" in terms of the standard. The discursive power of a definition that defines a subject as "the Other" should not be underestimated. It sets up a hierarchical relationship with the implicit expectation that

"the Other" should be compared and judged according to the characteristics of the "norm". Thus, the citizen of a country of the developing world is considered to be an inchoate version of his or her counterpart in the "developed world". Women are judged in terms of male attributes such as physical strength, assertiveness, and independence. According to this, women would be described as "dependent", "weak", "unassertive", "frail", etc. Notice that all the terms used are based on the traditional male characteristics that are used as universal norms. Something similar happens when members of non-western cultures are judged according to Western norms. For example, a traditional Indian, would be described as having bad table manners because he eats with his or her hands, Japanese are described as unassertive and introverted, while Latin Americans are described as lazy. The power to define is related to framing and to agenda setting. In the case of development, defining low income countries as "developing" sets the implicit agenda that they are supposed to strive to reach the level of the countries defined as "developed". How are the characteristics of what a "developed country" is supposed to look like identified? This is done by identifying the main characteristics of the countries that are presently considered to be "developed". Participatory Alternative Development has to deal with this powerful frame of the world system of nation-states. Feminism also had to deal with a similar dichotomy and finally Post-colonial Studies is still struggling with the powerful frames left by Western Orientalism (Said, 1978).

The three fields in discussion have arrived at a stage in which their core concepts are being questioned. Goals are not so clear anymore and they seem to be entering a difficult moratorium from which they will hopefully come out with a clear and strong identity. Feminism is questioning core concepts such as the value of "gender" as a category. Development Scholars are questioning the goal of modernization and economic development and Post-Colonial intellectuals are trying to move away from determinist theories based on a colonial past. Most importantly the three fields are questioning core concepts but have not been able to replace them with equally powerful ones. If "gender" is not important then what should be the locus of feminism? If

modernization and economic development are not worth striving for then what is? If the Third World should not be defined in terms of the First nor of its colonial history, then how should it be defined? Those are some of the pressing questions that will have to be answered during this period of disciplinary moratorium.

Post-Modernism aided the disciplines during early stages of the moratorium to deal with the uncertainty of a possible paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996). The claims made by Post-modern scholars about the weaknesses of mainstream epistemologies and research methods strengthened the will of scholars in the three disciplines to continue to question the core concepts and the discursive webs that upheld them. Michel Foucault talked about the “insurrection of local discursivities” that was needed in order to give voice to “subjugated knowledges” silenced by the claims to truth of scientific discourse (Foucault, 1980). This connection of discourse to the production and reproduction of power struck a sympathetic chord in scholars related to the three disciplines because it helped them weaken the claims to truth of the “oppressors”. Nevertheless Post-Modernism’s aid came at a great cost to the policy oriented branches of the disciplines. The methodology it introduced based on discursive analysis of local discursivities took away attention from pressing issues related to need on the ground, such as lack of running water, sex trafficking, and HIV/AIDS. Policy oriented scholars were left without a paradigm on which to base their policy recommendations. If the world could be talked into existence, then a water purification plant may not be so central to bring about change in the world. An example of how a post-modern world view can be taken to an extreme is how Michel Foucault is said to have said in his dying bed that HIV/AIDS is not an objective reality but rather a discursive creation. Tragically, he died of it.

Feminism, Participatory Alternative Development, and Post-Colonial Studies were forged in the fire of struggle against oppression. Their development followed similar paths and they have entered an uncertain period of disciplinary moratorium. This moratorium will be considerably different from the period preceding a paradigm shift described by Thomas Kuhn due to the influence of Post-Modernism. Nevertheless, a balance must be struck between mindless

instrumentalist positivism and an extreme Post-Modernism approaching nihilism. Women still suffer from organized rape in conflict zones, poor villages still lack proper sanitation, and Third World countries still need a functioning bureaucracy and better infrastructure (Smirl, 2008).

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