

INTERVIEW WITH CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY: ON THE ACADEMY AND FEMINIST POLITICS

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In Under Western Eyes Revisited you emphasize a clear shift regarding what the main concern of feminism should be. What were the main social and economic structural changes that you have observed that made you name global capitalism as a bigger enemy? Can you expand this a bit through your personal experiences in academy throughout these years?

We are talking about 20 years of changes. The main thing that made me really draw attention to global capitalism as a site for feminist engagement in the second essay was my sense that within the academy in the spaces that I occupied there was a certain kind of naturalization of the effects of structural adjustment. I mean in the Global North. Feminists had identified structural adjustment in the Global South for a long time and they have been fighting against it for a long time. But within the academy itself there was very little talk by feminists about the restructuring by the US State of the welfare system, and of the university, and there was very little recognition that these were all connected. Connected to the history of immigration, connected to the way insiders and outsiders and citizenship has been constructed in the US. I came to the point of saying ok; there will be a number of people who would think this is not new. Marxist feminists have been talking about capitalism for a long time. Nevertheless given what had been happening within feminist scholarship, I felt like there was not enough attention being paid to global capitalism and its material consequences on all our lives... That's one reason. The other reason is that, I was involved in community organizations for whom the impact of these structural adjustments in the US was very acute. There is a group of immigrant women, Chicanas and Latinas in New York City, a group of domestic workers that I am involved with (Center for Immigrant Families) and there is a group in North Carolina that grew out of civil rights struggles, but is now working against the privatization of prisons that I have been involved with for the last decade or so (Grassroots Leadership of North Carolina). In fact a lot of the issues that were been picked up by the community organizations, the grassroots organizations that I had contact with were crucial not just in the Global North but of course in the Global South as well. There were enormous mobilizations there. In the North, within feminist intellectual spheres, or within feminist programs I started realizing that we were not taking this on as a serious issue. I mean all of the connections you can make by literally analyzing the restructuring of the political economy in the U.S, which is connected to global capitalism.

There are group of feminist intellectuals who are arguing that feminism strengthens neoliberalism at the moment. What do you think about this idea?

It is not an unimportant point. If we are not careful feminism and other sort of progressive projects sometimes can in fact support certain kind of neoliberal politics. You can talk about imperialist feminism for example. But I don't think you can go to that kind of generalization that feminism as a whole, is so complicit that there is no way that you can identify any kind of radical potential, radical effects, radical histories of feminism. This is not true. You can only make that kind of an argument if you are looking at particular kinds of feminist work. Sometimes I use this analogy that you have a camera and you zoom in and you base your analysis on exactly what you see there when you zoomed in. But the moment you pull back, you have wide angle shot. Then you start seeing a bunch of other things that force you to change what it is you said when you looked at something in an isolated space, within a narrow set of boundaries. That's one of the ways we can think about how sometimes the generalizations people make about feminism have to do with seeing it within very narrow, finite frames. Another way to think about these limited generalizations is to acknowledge that all arguments emerge from concrete political and historical contexts, and not assume that one can go to Sri Lanka, and to Turkey, and make the same argument. Sometimes feminists in the Global North have no clue that we can actually be undermining things that people are fighting for may be very different from the issues that we are involved with.

How can we as intellectuals, producers of knowledge, can we be accountable within the context of discursive colonialism that you talk about in your work? Who is the feminist project addressing?

I think that the projects that we are working on should be accountable first to the communities, whose experiences we are drawing on, and whose experiences are central in the work we are doing as feminist intellectuals. If we are writing about communities that are professional we have to be accountable to those. If we are writing about poor women in some place we have to be accountable to them. That's first. Second, I think that we are accountable to larger anti-capitalist social justice anti-imperialist movements and to people who are in fact fighting against forces of exploitation, domination, erasure, and genocide. We are accountable to people in these social movements, and if we are staff in the academy we are accountable to our colleagues and students, and sometimes to our disciplinary projects. As a teacher, going into the classroom, giving a lecture which may eviscerate half the students in my class. I am accountable to them too. So I have to find a way to teach that will make them literate in the way that I want without destroying them. Confrontation and disagreement do not have to be destructive.

Do you have any ideas about mechanisms of accountability?

I can talk in very practical terms about this. One way to practice accountability is to make the politics of knowledge as visible as possible. Something that Angela Davis often says is that one of the most radical things you can do in the academy is to practice a politics of citation and always cite knowledge that emerge not just from scholarship, but from all kinds of activist spaces. If you analyze the way people produce scholarship and their citational practices, you get a very clear sense who they consider themselves accountable to. I think there is something interesting about this idea of politics of citation which can also be about accountability. Who do you draw on? Whose knowledge do you make visible? This is one way to think about it.

Yesterday you were talking it does not matter what your project is but what matters is the ethics that underlies the project. But different people have different kinds of ethics. What kind of an ethic do you conceptualize?

Some of it has to do with being conscious that the kind of knowledge you are producing does not enact violence on other people. When people talk about the objectification of the research subjects, to me that's a form of enacting violence. That would be one sort of ethical thing to keep in mind—to be clear that the work you are doing does not do that. I really truly believe in collaborative work. Sometimes it is collaborative work that can keep you honest about what it is that you are claiming and the limitations of what it is doing.

What do you mean by collaborative work? Collaboration with whom? Colleagues?

Anyone that you share political project with. Actually much of my recent work has been collaborative.

There are few assumptions behind this idea of feminist collaboration for me. One is that it is in collaborating with people with whom you share a political project, who are not necessarily the same race, gender, class, sexuality as you are. In doing that, you can come to a more comprehensive understanding and analysis. This is because more than one person is analyzing the situation. Often times it is when there are differences among people, this becomes really important. The knowledge you produce I think can in fact be more comprehensive or more nuanced than what you may have produced individually. So that's one piece. The other is this idea of partnership. It usually just denotes university-corporate partnerships. Corporations are partners now in funding research, in the university. That's not what I am talking about. Let me use an example. One of the organizations I work with, they believe because of the way whiteness and masculinity and heterosexuality are dominant in social relations and in the way they interact with each other, if you want to create "equal" voice for everybody then you have to numerically tilt in the other direction. So in any given

situation if you are creating a committee you will have 2/3 women and 1/3 men. You will have 2/3 people of color 1/3 white people. That just creates the potential for voice for the subordinate group. You don't just go to equal numbers. Equal numbers does nothing. Equal representation does nothing. But if you tilt it in the opposite direction, then you are potentially giving more weight to the subordinate group. That can lead to a more equitable partnership because this practice takes power into account. Saying ok so how am I going to deal with these power differentials so that in fact partnerships are possible. When I am in community organizations of grassroots situations, I try not to be the person who speaks. I have to be conscious of the fact I make my living talking. So I have to step back, and listen more in these situations. It is not easy but it is like teaching yourself certain kinds of practices which go against the grain of what is seen as business as usual for somebody in my location.

What about the careerist academic feminism? You argue that feminism has become a way to advance individual careers rather than a call for collective activism or radical transformation. What is your experience regarding academic careerist feminism? Can we consider it within the context of global capitalism?

I think it is not new but it is the same point I made earlier which is about institutionalization. The more women studies and gender studies approach the center of the academy the more these tendencies come to the surface. The neoliberal culture makes it possible for the coexistence of multiple viewpoints. However these multiple viewpoints are never supposed to challenge each other. We are proliferating multiple viewpoints in women centers, a kind of benign multiculturalism. Thus feminist scholarship and feminism itself can become a career detached from larger questions of gender justice. There is nothing wrong with making your scholarship part of a career that you are building. But then I would not want people to claim that they are doing radical transformative work. Because that is not what is happening then. What is happening is probably the production of good knowledge and scholarship which is useful for feminists. You can make your career being really a smart scholar, doing incredible work that other people who are in more activist positions can use. Or you can make your career sort of reproducing ideologies about women and gender—these are choices we have to make.

Is there a relationship between these tendencies and the white feminist scholarship you criticize?

I don't know if those sort of limitations of white feminism come out of careerism. I think careerism is something very specific. I think that limitations of white feminism come from very particular places. And a lot of it has to do with generalization of a particular experience and viewpoint to the exclusion of everybody else. Sometimes of course it is just plain old

racism! I guess you can point to careerism in any field. This is the result of the ideology of the market—a market that has grown because of the kind of naturalization of capitalist relations and neoliberalism that is so much part of the academy. I also think sometimes about my own commodification. The difference for me between when I was struggling to get *Under Western Eyes* published and how I got the second piece published when it was solicited tells me a lot. I am not vain enough to think that this is all because I am so brilliant and so well-known that they do it. But I have to think about the fact that the academic market now positions me in a certain way—as a commodity. It is not comfortable but it is true.

In your talk you indicated that although you are producing radical knowledge you are in an institution which is not questioned. Questioning the conditions of possibility where you produce knowledge is also important. Trying to have a radical stance against the institutions you are in. While you are institutionalizing feminist work you are accepting these hierarchies rather than organizing an alternative way.

That's why people create autonomous institutions outside the university. Those are enormously important. All the freedom schools must continue. Some people leave the academy because it does not actually provide the space for the work they want to do which is entirely legitimate. Right now I am very conscious of having an incredible privilege in terms of being able to speak about certain things and having a public voice—one some people actually listen to! And my political practice is to use that privilege to do the things I want to do. I try in my role as department chair to make certain things possible. That means asking questions about the ethics and value of women's and gender studies. What knowledge do we need in this field? What kind of work do we need to be doing? That's I was able with my colleague Linda Carty to get funding for distinguished feminists like Angela Davis to teach part-time at Syracuse University for three years. Angela comes and teaches for one month in October. She teaches both undergraduates and graduate students about privatization and prisons, and women of color epistemology and theory. The point is; Syracuse students then have exposure to somebody with this amazing, radical profile—and it expands their vision of who they can be, what they can do. These arrangements are possible because I have access and I can make compelling arguments for this kind of funding. I think we all make choices about how to use privilege—even within a limited sphere. This is the sort of work I can do in the position I occupy right now. So I will continue to do it.

Can I ask a question about privilege itself? So using that privilege, how do you use that privilege to undermine privilege itself? In a sense what you were saying one step inside the academy or one step outside the academy you still try to extend your privilege within the academy against those institutional constraints for that very project itself.

It is a hard question because I don't know that one can. You can give up privilege. Undermining it is harder. I think it is possible for me to give up privilege. I have in various situations in order to make certain other questions or issues come to the surface. I will be done with my chairing in a year and half. I think being conscious that you are not consolidating power for yourself is important. I think that's one way in which you think ethically about your own position and privilege. Undermining privilege in the long run is not possible unless you engage in collective organizing. I think individually you cannot do that. Because it just does not work that way. As an individual you have power and privilege because of your status. It is hard to undermine one's own privilege as an individual. I think you can do this though organizing. I think you can choose to give up privilege and join movements, and be part of other sort of collectivities and struggle to transform an institution. I think when I have doubted what I was doing or become aware that there are things that I don't quite like is moments when I am expected to speak for an institution that I do not speak for that I don't want to speak for. Quite honestly, I have had moments that I asked: "What am I doing here? How am I living with these contradictions?" I think that's a better way to describe it —than to speak in terms of undermining one's own privilege.

How do you navigate that very specific stage when you have to do this thing or you are going to be rejected from that position? Because some people get tenure and other people don't, right? It is not just about academic work it is about collegiality and doing those things for an institution. How do you negotiate? Do you resist in that moment? Or do you do it?

I think you negotiate it so that you do not do the things you feel are not right to do on the one hand. On the other, you try to get a perspective on what it is you are really doing so that it does not become your entire life. The battle is not about your entire life. It is about something particular that you called upon to do. And if you can negotiate it and you think it is honest, that is fine. If you cannot then you opt out. I don't write about this too much. One day I will. But I have had many experiences with people trying to evict me from the academy. I have a long history of that. Experiences of being invited to apply for jobs and then people organizing against my getting the job. So there is a disjuncture between the way people read my work and think oh my god this is fabulous and the way they interact with me. What happens is when I am physically present in a space then people see that my presence would make a difference in that space. And they don't want that difference. So they will do everything they can do to force me out. This has happened multiple times. So what I am also saying that I have experienced privilege and discrimination in relation to the academy. Seriously ridiculous things. Seriously painful things as well. Because of these experiences, I can decide what matters to me, what struggles to take on and why I am taking on these struggles. If we are clear that struggles are not just for ourselves. If the struggles are only for you then it is

really about building you career eventually. But if the struggles are like ok if I do this then certain things become possible for this particular set of people that I am committed to, then I believe I am doing something that I want to be doing in the world.

Thank you very much for this nice exchange of experience.