Feminism and teaching about globalization: contradictions and insights

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Feminist analyses have shown that we need to understand the ways globalization not only oppresses women but opens up new spaces of possibility, including the possibility of escaping patriarchal, racist and classist structures. This paper briefly introduces some analyses which work towards such understandings, and argues that they are important for teaching ‘first world’ students about ‘third world’ women and realities. The paper argues for more careful and critical attention to dominant constructions of women in the south and of the effects of globalization, in order to promote education for social justice.

Critically-minded professors, including those informed by feminist and anti-racist theories and pedagogies, confront a powerful contradiction when teaching about globalization in the context of education for social justice. On the one hand, we need to teach, often against an overpowering desire for innocence, about the extent, disparity and injustice of the control of local and national economies by transnational corporations and the international financial institutions that support them. On the other hand, we need to do this in ways that do not perform the colonialist trick of assuming that we in the ‘North’ are in charge of the identities and experiences of people in the ‘South’. We must see globalization as something more than ‘the inexorable spread of capital and commercialized culture throughout the world’ but also a complex web of social relationships and movements (Thayer, 2000, p. 203). Further, we need to attend to the ways that ‘domestic state initiatives and the agency of labor [also shape] the changes’ (Lal, 1998). According to Freeman and Murdock,

Nestor García-Canclini argues that we need to ‘shift away from dependency arguments that fuse notions of “importation” and “imposition”’ and instead see that transnational
cultural exchanges, even under conditions of social inequality, do not completely obliterate local agency in the reception, interpretation, and creation of non-local forms. (2001, pp. 434–435)

A related contradiction is that even when we profess to believe in agency, we have difficulty seeing globalization as other than what ‘we’ do to ‘them’: it’s our agenda, our actions. Some people talk about ‘resistance’ as a way out of this dilemma, but even the notion of ‘resistance’ still says we’re in charge: all ‘third world’ peoples can do is respond to the ways we try to control them. A partial way around this is offered by Lila Abu-Lughod, who argues that rather than assume we understand power and go looking for resistance so we can measure or judge its effectiveness, we analyse power through resistance—that we let the existence and forms of resistance teach us about power. She says,

... we should learn to read in various local and everyday resistances the existence of a range of specific strategies and structures of power. Attention to the forms of resistance in particular societies can help us become critical of partial or reductionist theories of power. The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resistors but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power. (1990, p. 53)

Lughod is suggesting, as am I, that we need a Foucauldian attention to the ways power is productive, not just repressive, and to follow the insistence of feminists and other oppressed groups that scholars, teachers and students learn to see the world from where they are in it, without putting ourselves in the centre. We need to examine ‘globalization’ through the kinds of actions people in the so-called ‘developing countries’ are taking, and how they continue to make changing realities work for them even while resisting unwanted consequences.

Feminists are far from the only ones to take this up, but feminists in particular have needed to develop this kind of analyses, because women continue to be portrayed as objects rather than actors, as dependents rather than providers, and as the victims of state policies and patriarchal cultures. In addition, women have been peculiarly affected by some of the negative consequences of the economic changes wrought by globalization and structural adjustment. In their quadruple roles as mothers, wives, workers and community activists, for example, it has been women who have had to find ways to feed, clothe and keep healthy their families and their communities, often with fewer resources and fewer services (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989). As Violeta Sandino has said,

while adjustment programs cannot be suspended altogether, the National Women’s Coalition believes there are spaces to move wherein men have failed to take advantage. Why? Because their understanding is masculinist, linear, and closed to alternatives. Women, however, see things differently because we experience life differently. We see openings of possibilities in which to minimize the impact of adjustment and to better utilize Nicaragua’s resources, yet without being manipulated or manipulative. (quoted in Chavez Metoyer, 2000, p. 104)
While many of the consequences of structural adjustment programmes, like larger forces of globalization, have been negative for women, this is not unilaterally the case. Indeed, some of the ‘openings of possibilities’ Sandino envisions, and some of the examples I will discuss later of the ways women change their lives in the face of changed realities, may themselves be the result of structural adjustment.

Some feminists have also joined poststructuralists in calling for the breaking down of the dualisms that construct meaning and constrain action: male/female, active/passive, strong/weak, rational/emotional, even global/local. Thus, I am not promoting the ‘agency’ side of the old structure/agency debate, but rather suggesting that we need to see globalization as ‘both/and’: both the creator of social and economic situations that are largely harmful to earthwide projects of justice, peace and sustainable use of the environment and not entirely successful in controlling the lives of people around the world.

There are similar problems with the dualisms often used to distinguish between parts of the world. I have, so far, used a variety of different terms to distinguish between differently-located nation-states. All of the terms used to distinguish between groups of countries (high-, middle-, low-income; ‘First’ ‘Third’ ‘Fourth’ and once, ‘Second’ world; ‘North’/‘South’; ‘colonizer’/‘colonized’, ‘white people’/‘people of colour’, ‘the West’ and so on) are all unfair generalizations. There are rich people in the poorest of countries, and vice-versa, as well as vast differences in the national incomes of countries in the same group. Racialized ‘others’ exist within most nation-states. ‘North’/‘South’ distinctions ignore the fact that Australia, for example, would in most groupings be included with countries of the ‘North’, although geographically located in the south. The terms ‘Newly Industrialized Countries’ and ‘developing countries’ buy into a uni-dimensional model of development. Using historical markers like colonization ignores both the fact that countries like Canada were once colonized but would normally not now be grouped with countries like Zimbabwe or Nicaragua and the fact that an end to formal colonization has not usually brought an end to the social and economic markers of most once-colonized countries. ‘The West’ draws on idealized and problematic views of an ideological, political, cultural and economic monolith, whether seen as the height of superiority or the repository of all evil. Further, ‘the West’ does not tell us what to call the rest of the world: ‘the Rest?’ Clearly, ‘East’ does not work. A reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper suggested that ‘The cosy terms north/south should be replaced with others that are geographically meaningful and politically and materially relevant’ but did not suggest what such terms might be. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out, the term ‘Third World’, has come to have pejorative connotations, but ceasing to use it risks at the same time losing its potential political impulses (1998, p. 232).

Yet there still seems to me a need to make some distinctions which mark patterns of structural injustices between nations and groups of nations, while recognizing that all such distinctions are generalizations and carry conceptual baggage which reflects changing times and a history of oppression. By using terms like ‘the South’, and ‘Third World’ I want to signal peoples and countries about whom colonialist and developmentalist discourses circulate in the dominant cultures of the countries which
house the headquarters of corporations and international financial institutions currently dominating the world economy. But how to use them without putting those very discourses—ones against which I am arguing here—back into circulation? How to maintain the idea that there is a difference between a country like Nicaragua and a country like Canada without re-enshrining the differences colonial discourses claim? My colleague Len Friesen, when asked how he thinks about this question, replied, ‘This is what I’ve ended up with; though I happily admit it’s a work in progress. I, for the most part, talk in terms of ‘here’ and ‘there’. My students actually get it quite quickly, as they are clearly ‘here’ in the sense of well-off and so forth, regardless of whether they are from China or Canada. Similarly, we talk about how ‘there’ can be two kilometres away, or half a world away, even though it is more likely to be distant; hence ‘there’. But this also allows me to say that there are also pockets of here located there, and there located here’ (Friesen, 2003). ‘Here’ and ‘there’ may be less specialized but more useful terms. While I cannot solve the terminological dilemma here, I do note it, as it stands at the heart of the very question I ask in this paper: How do we teach about injustice without re-enacting or reinforcing ideas about superiority and inferiority? I continue to use a variety of terms, always in inverted commas to signal their instability and inaccuracy.

In what remains of this paper, I give some examples which see women as competent actors in responding to an increasingly globalized world. Some of the examples which follow may appear to be stretching the concept of ‘globalization’ to meaninglessness. However, the very definition of globalization is a participant in the masculinization of the social world and how we think about it. Many mainstream theorists focus on increasing economic interdependence between nations, a definition of globalization that in effect limits discussions of globalization to terrains where men have dominated, such as economics and politics. The feminist theorists of interest here, on the other hand, are more likely to agree with a more expansive definition, which includes cultural processes, social groups and movements, as well as understandings, manipulations and contestations of these processes (Peterson, 1993, p. 4). This leaves room for consideration of individual as well as group realities, for small-scale and large-scale processes, for personal as well as political understandings.

Carmen Luke (2001) demonstrates how globalized communication networks and globalized education systems have made physical and intellectual spaces for women not previously available. In an oddly-similar vein, Stephanie Barrientos (1998) shows how Pinochet’s economic strategies—consistent with the structural adjustment policies of globalizing ‘first world’ nations—resulted in the transformation of agriculture into agribusiness. Peasant families lost access to land and moved into waged labour where several household members’ salaries were needed to fend off poverty. As critics of globalization have told us, there are many disadvantages in this shift to wage labour. But in Chile, women entering wage labour for the first time also found there are advantages. Barrientos shows that women like their work in the new, globalized, fruit plants, because, while they are doing work very similar to what they had done before, their income means they have an independence never before available under the gender regime of their households. Furthermore, working together in the fruit
agribusiness companies gives women workers access to possibilities for organizing not available when they were invisible workers on plots that were considered their husbands’. Carla Freeman’s (2000) study of Barbadian informatics workers shows that the meanings of both work and gender are altered, not just by the introduction of the new data processing centres, but by the active engagement of women workers in ways that ‘simultaneously inscribe patriarchal notions of femininity and create a space of invention and autonomy’ (2000, p. 5). Discipline, agency and pleasure, Freeman argues, need all to be taken into account. Luke, Barrientos and Freeman are all, then, pointing to ways that analyses of the losses for ‘workers’ of globalization assume male workers; many female workers, in conditions forged not by globalization but by patriarchy, have much less to lose and as a result are finding much more to gain.

In Canada, I live in a rural community of 130 people, 100 km from the nearest major centre. The average income in the area is less than two-thirds of the provincial average, in what is already considered a have-not province compared to the rest of the country. More than 50% of the population has less than a high school education, and this includes half of those who have moved to the community in the past 5 years and half of those aged 20–34. The area was settled by Ukrainian immigrants who were sold what they expected to be fertile land (land which had been previously taken from the Aboriginal peoples who once used a much larger portion of it than they now have access to). Although the land was marginal and covered with rock, there was nonetheless once an active farming community with a flour mill, a dairy, several stores and hotels, and a railway station which allowed for goods to move easily in and out. National policies affecting farming, driven by global economics and international markets, have made difficult the kind of small-scale farming once carried out, while large-scale farming requiring large tracts of fertile land is impossible here.

In cities, the characteristics of my community: few job opportunities, low income, and low levels of education would be considered to be correlated with high crime, low participation in elections and in community activities, large numbers of people leaving the area, and little power for the residents. Yet this community is growing, and largely though not exclusively through the voluntary work of women, maintains a historic church, a community hall, a museum and park, and provides local support and advice to a large nature preserve. We have banded together to resist the imposition by local and provincial governments and large corporations of intensive hog operations which are considered by many to be contrary to the social, cultural, environmental and economic values of the community. Standing strong in the face of some of the effects of globalization, the women of rural Manitoba provide another example of women finding new forms of pleasure and struggle in their changing communities.

Lisa Law (1997) shows how sex tourism in the Phillipines, commonly constructed as one more egregious example of globalized Western male power, the result of the movement of global capital and its representatives, nonetheless also creates spaces in which identities can be negotiated. Filipina sex workers find ways to gain control over their bodies and financial lives, they see themselves as guides to the city and local
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culture, and sometimes as ‘hunting’ for a husband: ‘It would be unfair to cast dancers as merely seeking the allure of wealth or an escape from poverty, because their relations with foreign men—even if they desert or disappoint them—are most often seen fairly favourably .... It is difficult to place their desire outside the pursuit of happiness via foreign men, marriage and more children …’. (Law, 1997, p. 119). The notion that it is Western men with all the power is also shown to be a fantasy, as many of the customers know themselves to be sexually unattractive and inadequate in their home countries, and indeed are seen to be so by the Filipina prostitutes, who are interested in their wealth but not in them otherwise. Without denying that sex tourism is problematic in many ways, Law nonetheless shows that women see themselves as gaining real, tangible benefits from this global phenomenon.

Looking at a women’s health NGO in Brazil, Millie Thayer studies globalization in ‘the construction of a transnational social movement and the complex network of relationships that sustained it’ (2000, p. 203). Her examination led her to see that the workers in this organization drew on US feminist theory around women’s health, but that, rather than an instance of ‘unequal conceptual exchange’ in which ‘academics transmit and receive new conceptions’, the organization ‘selectively appropriat[ed] and transform[ed] global meanings, and materializ[ed] them in local practices’ (2000, pp. 207–208). Theory travels, as many scholars have shown, but it does so not simply from ‘North’ to ‘South’. While it may be sadly true that there is all too little attention paid in the north to theory developed in the ‘Third World’ (or even to that developed in the ‘First World’ by marginalized groups), it is still not the case that scholars and activists in ‘low-income regions’ take our theory holus bolus. In fact, Thayer shows, there is much negotiation and adaptation, and ‘their relationship to the state, other social movements, and international funding agencies also played a part in the course of the organization’s discursive development’ (2000, p. 212).

On the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, Nubia Ordoñez has studied what Creole kids are doing with the American movies now available to them through the globalized video market. Interestingly, Ordoñez started with a theory which told her, in advance of talking to the kids, that these movies were destroying Creole culture, that the kids were becoming ‘Americanized’ in ways that could only bring harm. Presented with alternate theories of identity, in particular the work of Daniel Yon (2000), and after actually talking to the students in a high school where she used to teach, Ordoñez concluded that teachers and others should ‘trust the students’ critical and analytical stand towards the cultural productions that permit them to know more about other people, places and cultures. The research also teaches us that there is no such process of homogenization taking place with students who embrace the wild variety of information that reaches them through videos and movies’ (2000, p. 36). Ordoñez thus agrees with Escobar (1995, p. 220) that ‘rather than being eliminated by development many traditional cultures survive through their transformative engagement with modernity’.

My last example comes from my friend Mavis, who I met in her rural village in Zimbabwe in 1995. In the early- and mid-1990s, Mavis met a number of ‘Westerners’ with links to aid agencies and study-abroad programs through her involvement with
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The local YWCA. In a sense, using 'development' and the globalizing interests of universities, among others, she internationalized—even 'globalized'—her own household. Among other effects, she and her family were able to greatly improve their English skills. Several of these Westerners continue to be in touch with her; between us we have financed high school educations for two of her four children, and most recently a group us put enough cash together to help Mavis get out of the country during the dangerous election period, and provide her with the 500 pounds sterling she needed to demonstrate her legitimacy as a ‘tourist’. In London, Mavis was in touch with a group of women from her area who have left in recent years who, in turn, found her an under-the-table job, a cell phone, a place to live, and a connection to black-market money exchanges which have meant that in a few weeks she can save and send home substantial amounts of money to her children, principally to pay for their education. She has enrolled in a college programme, so that when she goes back—which she definitely plans to do—her employers might be less patronizing.

Whatever the various agendas of the many agencies connected to the individuals who have been involved here, whatever the various corporate interests served by the current states of the Zimbabwean and British economies, and regardless of the fact that this is obviously not a universal solution, Mavis has used the same global economic policies that have made it difficult for her to feed her family to effect—principally through education—changes in her well-being not available to her in Zimbabwe. Maybe if colonization—and the kind of globalization the economists talk about—hadn’t happened she would have found other ways, but it did, and here she is in a small community of ex-pat Zimbabwean women taking a couple of years to turn things around before heading home. Previously, I felt it unlikely that this would be a positive experience, and I may yet be proven right, but so far I’m wrong. So far, my efforts to cast Mavis as a victim of globalization, and to wish that she could continue to live in her mud hut which held for me so much romance and affection, meet up with a woman who manages London just fine, and who uses a global network of money and people to accomplish what development has not.

My point is that while we could, easily, see Mavis or women academics or Filipina prostitutes or Creole kids or rural women in Manitoba or many others as victims of globalization, we need to ask about the will to power contained in such analyses. We/they may be victims of globalization but we/they are also finding ways to use global economic realities to their/our own advantages. While challenging and even mitigating some of the worst effects of globalizing trends, these efforts do not eliminate the reality that the ‘imbalance’ created by capitalist forms of material and knowledge production ‘has produced not only a powerful economic base in the North supported by sophisticated technologies, but also a one-sided worldwide political system organized to favour the richer countries where Southern realities and facts may be unknown, disregarded, or unilaterally exploited’ (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003, p. 103). This is the both/and of globalization. Our students need to understand global economics and social injustice; they are also entering their working lives in a time when they may in fact be linked through their work and their education to people from the ‘Third World’ and in a time when the old discourses about how ‘we’ are saving ‘them’ can
no longer hold. Global economics itself gives us one clue to this, when we see that for decades less money has gone from the south to the north in aid than vice-versa in debt payments. Yet many students still come with the view that the only reason they would go to a ‘Third World’ country is to ‘help’. Students often also come to us with a romanticized view of the ‘Third World’ frozen in historical time, a time which was more innocent, more simple (see Narayan, 1997). Such attitudes come with much baggage, perpetuating representations of ‘Third World’ peoples as children, the object of our paternal and patronizing care, leaving us in ‘the missionary position’ (Narayan, 1997). Globalization theory too often looks like just more proof that ‘the west’ really is in charge, and even if our ‘helping’ takes the form of challenging the global economic instruments and institutions, ‘we’ still think ‘they’ need us to do it for them.

If our teaching and our thinking are to promote social justice, we have to be able to see and say that even if those responsible for globalizing moves by large corporations and international financial governing institutions are doing all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons, those on the receiving end are far, far more than victims, and they are not waiting around for us to produce the analyses or the actions that will bail them out. ‘We’ may be the ones most trapped by our own narrow views of who ‘they’ are and what ‘they’ can do, in the face of economic realities ‘we’ often find immobilizing. As educators, we need to learn from ‘there’, and encourage our students to do the same. Seeing oppressed peoples as subjects and not merely objects, whether of national histories and policies, of globalization or in fact of education systems is important for dominant groups and oppressed people alike, particularly since so many of us find in our lives a little of both.

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Notes
1. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for suggesting this possibility.
2. All information about this community comes from my ongoing research project, ‘Keeping Community, Building Alternatives in the New Economy: A Case Study of a Small, Rural Manitoba Town’, funded by the Manitoba Research Alliance on Community Economic Development in the New Economy. I am grateful to the Alliance, to the residents of the community, and to student research assistants Leigh Hayden and Leigh Anne Caron.

References


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