Toward a Feminist Deconstruction of Development Theory

Joanne Wright

A diverse and multifaceted enterprise, feminist theorizing has accomplished the essential task of recovering and rediscovering women, of bringing to light our experiences, our economic and social roles, our art and literature and is now entering the phase of reviewing and reconstructing the social world with the new perspectives of women in mind. When feminist theory moves beyond the recovery of women to questioning what difference the addition of women's experiences makes to existing paradigms themselves, women move from the status of interest group to full citizen. What feminists are discovering in their evaluations is that many of the institutions and paradigms taken to be neutral and universal are actually gendered. In other words, a thorough examination, or deconstruction, of some dominant theories and paradigms forces the recognition of their maleness, and exposes their patriarchal biases such that women's experiences, in their "endless variety and monotonous similarity" (Rubin, 1975: 160) become immiscible with them.

In particular, international development theory requires feminist deconstruction. Although widely criticized by neo-Marxists, and cultural theorists, development remains in need of rigorous feminist analysis. True, Women in Development (WID) theorists and practitioners have made clear the fact that development affects women adversely, but

the integrationist solution offered by WID falls short of its goal of improving conditions for many women exposed to development projects. Building on WID's recovery of women, and on current trends in development theorizing, which posit development as a mode of Western cultural and economic imperialism, feminist deconstruction cuts to the core of patriarchal ideology in development theory. It unravels the paradigm to discover a mystification of patriarchy being passed off as progress and modernization.

Development theory, like much of Western theory, relies on the asymmetric patriarchal dichotomies of man/woman and public/private. Western theorists constructed development as a project of the public sphere which, by the Western definition, prohibited women's full participation, denigrated their knowledge, and, as WID discovered, underestimated women's contribution to cultural and economic life. A discussion of the situation of Mexican women in the *maquiladoras* facilitates an understanding of the prevalence of these patriarchal dualities in Western development and further evidences the inability of development theory to account for women's experiences.

The branch of development theory with which this deconstruction takes issue is the dominant, orthodox branch—the original, post-war development theory. Orthodox theorists forward modernization as definitive of development, as the solution to the 'problems' of the Third World. C.E. Ayres epitomizes this belief in his 1962 Forward to The *Theory of Economic Progress*:

> The only remaining alternative is that of intelligent, voluntary acceptance of the industrial way of life and all the values that go with it. We need make no apology for recommending such a course. Industrial society is the most successful way of life mankind has ever known ...For all those who achieve economic development, profound cultural change is inevitable. But the rewards are considerable (1978: xxxii-xxxiii).

Ayres' sentiments, although characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s, are still relevant as modernization has experienced

renewed popularity with the rise of the Right in the 1980s, and the introduction of structural adjustment. Although orthodox development theory has been modified slightly over the decades, at its center remains the belief in economic growth as a cure-all for poverty, unemployment, political instability and, ultimately, 'underdevelopment.' In the 1990s, economic growth continues to be the orthodox touchstone, but is couched in the language of managed growth and sustainable development.

Sustainable development is but one paradox among many to the cultural critics of the orthodox development discourse. Cultural critics, although not conforming to a distinct school of thought, see in development a cultural imperialism, wherein Western notions of economics, progress and modernization are imposed on, and infiltrated throughout, Third World societies.[1] After a few decades, development, in its attempt to produce a global homogenized culture, has caused "two billion people [to] define themselves as underdeveloped" (Illich, 1981: 19). The cultural critics employ a form of deconstruction, a critical method that peels back and unravels the layers of ideology which sustain development as a theory and discourse, and which influence and legitimate material conditions. When applied to development, deconstruction has shown that development relies on a dichotomization of modern vs. traditional; this Western dichotomization blinds development theorists to other, non-Western versions of modernity and cultural viability. In the end, the cultural critique argues not for a renewed or more successful development — indeed, it has been all too successful — but for total abandonment of the paradigm. The deconstructions of development unravel, among other things, knowledge — as perceived by the West — capitalist economics, and science. Yet, Western patriarchy, also a constituent part of development theory, is left intact by the cultural critique.

Development theory has received no shortage of feminist attention, but many of the feminist efforts have fallen under the general Women in Development (WID) approach. Where

development has failed to include women, WID's mandate has been to 'bring women in.' When the development industry realized that women and men were affected differently by development, even the orthodox school sought to integrate women into development projects, theorizing that women were the missing key to successful development. But women are less excluded from development and more appropriated by it; they have an "enforced but asymmetric participation" in development "by which they [bear] the costs but [are] excluded from the benefits" (Shiva, 1988: 2). To recognize development's appropriation of women is also to recognize the gendered nature of development theory. Such a discovery renders problematic the "add women and stir" solution that characterizes some WID efforts, and demands a deeper analysis of development theory itself. This deeper analysis is possible with the use of the critical method of deconstruction; feminist deconstruction exposes development theory's reliance on the patriarchal dichotomies of man/woman and public/ private.

A feminist deconstruction of development theory takes as its starting point the notion that development, along with imposing Western versions of economics and culture, imposes Western modes of patriarchy on the Third World. These Western modes of patriarchy do not replace the various patriarchal social relations in Mexico, for example, but rather articulate with them and, in so doing, often exacerbate gender hierarchies and oppression for Mexican women. Such is the case for women in the Mexican *maquiladoras*, whose situation bears particular relevance to the deconstruction of development and the resultant exposure of patriarchal dichotomies. Conceptualizing the situation of Mexican *maquiladora* workers first necessitates a more general discussion of the how the dichotomies function with respect to development.

A recurring theme in the women and development literature is the criticism of development's segregation of certain life-sustaining processes from activities directed toward the market. A founding Women in Development theorist, Barbara Rogers, refers to an ideology of

domesticity related to the separation of the 'modern economy' from the domestic sector to which unpaid, subsistence work was confined. Rogers did not use the terms public and private, but drew attention nevertheless to the male bias in development which prohibited proper recognition of women's work in the domestic realm (Rogers, 1980). Maria Mies takes the discussion a step further in her analysis of 'housewivization,' a Western concept which she applies more broadly in her discussion of global capitalist development. Never meant to suggest that development transforms all Third World women into housewives, housewivization fosters an understanding of how women's value came to be determined by their *symbolic association* with the private sphere (Mies, 1986). Housewivization is truly a contradictory process in that even as women are symbolically defined as housewives, and are associated with the domestic realm, they are expected, and in fact have no choice, but to produce for the market and participate in the 'outside' economy.

What is alternatively called domestication or housewivization derives from the public/private split in development theory. As manifested in the development process, the public/private separation is predicated on a dual process of appropriating certain tasks from women for the public sphere and systematically devaluing the remaining subsistence tasks, which are allocated primarily to women and the private sphere. Development views the Third World through a Western, public/private conceptual prism which serves to distort Third World women's roles in the economy and society. From the activities of men, from industrialization and commercialization, development theorists shaped a public sphere from which women would be ideologically, if not practically, excluded. Regardless of what women's and men's roles were prior to the development process, development theory determined externally that women and men should be treated differently, "because of a very specific Western [men's] model of what women in general should be, and what they should and should not do" (Rogers, 1980: 35).

The public/private dichotomy in development theory operates as an ideology; its existence serves not to define rigidly separate spheres for women and men, but to shape and influence their roles in development. In other words, the problem is not that women in the Third World are in fact confined to the private sphere as a result of development, the problem is that when women do labour outside the domestic realm, they are treated and paid as though their rightful place is in the home. In conjunction with the man/woman dichotomy, the public/private duality prioritizes men's work and activities over women's, and simultaneously values public sphere activities as work while denigrating private sphere activities as non-work. The devaluing of women's private sphere work carries over into the public realm so that women's work 'outside' the domestic sphere is often marginalized and confined to the 'shadow economy,' or informal sector. Since poor women often do not possess the means to acquire a formal education and are labelled 'unskilled,' they cannot compete for formal sector employment. As a result, their paid work is frequently a continuation of their private sphere tasks. The symbolic tie between women and the private sphere also manifests itself in the fact that women's paid work does not preclude their primary responsibility for care-giving and domestic work.

The ideological segregation of private from public is sustained by myths regarding women's natural roles and from the devaluation of women's knowledge. In the Western tradition, the biological processes of menstruation, pregnancy, giving birth and breast feeding reserved for woman determine woman's primary role to be that of mothering. Woman is said to be unable to see past her immediate concerns and experience to create culture or knowledge, whereas man transcends subjective experience through rational reflection and produces knowledge, society and culture. It is the association of woman with mothering which has historically excluded her from affairs of the state, the public sphere and knowledge production and confined her to the private realm. In the West, the myths associating women with the private sphere prevail long after practical

circumstances have been altered. Similarly, these myths shroud development theory, thereby influencing material conditions for Third World women.

Defining mothering as women's natural primary role clouds the perceptions of women's work: if mothering is the natural purpose of women, then it is not 'work.' By extension, the domestic tasks associated with mothering are also not work and are similarly devalued. And, if women are mothers they cannot also be farmers, or, at least that is the rationale of development theory, which is unable to view anyone but men as farmers. But even a brief glance at Third World food production reveals women's essential contribution to, and often control of, subsistence farming. Classifying women as mothers and not farmers enabled development theorists to appropriate women's roles in farming for the public sphere. Farming, then, has been transformed from an enterprise run jointly by men and women, if not solely by women, for household consumption, to a production process controlled by men and directed toward the market. Development usurps women's roles in farming as well the land itself, and provides men with the 'modern' training and remuneration to grow cash crops for export. In the end, women lose the autonomy and security that accompanies growing their own food without shedding their primary responsibility for maintaining subsistence.

The designation of women first and foremost as mothers means that their work outside the private realm is defined as supplementary; men are considered the breadwinners. Clearly, reality defies such reductionist portrayal of Third World societies, but the public/private ideology does not dissipate accordingly. Often men do not earn enough to support an entire family singlehandedly, nor do all women live in households supported by a male. As long as the ideology functions, however, women are considered secondary, temporary wage earners and paid less than their male counterparts. The point must be made that Third World societies have their own dichotomizations of public and private, which, in some cases, function in a similar fashion.

Furthermore, development's imposition of the Western dichotomies is not uniform or monolithic, but fluid and changeable. The *maquiladora* development effectively capitalizes upon those aspects of the Mexican separation of public and private which resemble its own biases to the end of maximizing profits.

An examination of women's situation in the Mexican *maquiladoras* adds nuance to the deconstruction and underscores the incessant reign of the dichotomies within development theory. The *maquiladoras* are concentrated in Mexican cities near the border of the United States and were devised as part of the Mexican government's Border Industrialization Program in 1965. *Maquiladora* production is part of a global phenomenon called export processing, wherein foreign parts are assembled in Third World countries and exported to First World markets under special tariff agreements. The Border Industrialization Program was designed to combine foreign — primarily American — investment with Mexico's large reserve of unemployed labour on the border. The advantage for Mexico was a reduction in unemployment; the attraction for foreign investors was inexpensive, predominantly female, labour.

Figures attesting to the overwhelming success of the *maquiladoras* as an orthodox development project obfuscate the critical issues regarding the nature of *maquiladora* employment. From the beginning, women — primarily young women — have comprised between seventy and eighty percent of the *maquiladora* work force. The highly repetitive, tedious and, at times, dangerous, nature of *maquiladora* work fosters a high turnover rate: women are able to tolerate the working conditions only for a finite period of time and are forced to quit from "eye sight deterioration, and nervous and respiratory ailments" (Fernández-Kelly, 1983: 68). Plants are not properly ventilated to accommodate toxic fumes, and workers remain uninformed about the dangers of the chemicals that they are required to use, some of which have been banned from use in North America. Unidentified airborne contaminants circulate causing stomach pain, vomiting and breathing

difficulties (Sinclair, 1992: 58). As one electronics worker describes:

> Chemicals are spilled on the floor. Trays of solvents are left uncovered—methylene chloride [a known carcinogen], thinner, acetone, alcohol... In one job you measure the width of capacitors. On each tiny piece you take five or six measurements, making the same motions of your wrist all day long. Eventually the workers get a growth on their wrists and then they have to have an operation (quoted in Sinclair, 1992: 55).

When confronted with similar complaints about workers' health problems, a Ciudad Juárez manager responded: "We don't worry too much about these matters; these girls don't stay on the job long enough to get sick" (Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1981: 31).

The working environment inside the *maquiladoras* is made more toxic by rampant sexual harassment of female employees by male managers and owners. *Maquiladora* workers admit to feeling pressure to comply with sexual demands placed on them by management out of fear of losing their jobs. In her extensive research and employment in a *maquiladora*, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly discovered that it was not unusual for managers to ask outright "for sexual favours in exchange for job stability" (Fernández-Kelly, 1983: 140). Far from incidental to the labour process, sexual harassment constitutes a "fundamental aspect of social control in the *maquiladoras*" (Peña, 1990: 82), and is instrumental in maximizing productivity. Demands for sexual favours are interspersed with invitations to after-work activities:

> Women who join male supervisors for entertainment and perform well on the shop floor are rewarded with wage increases, bonuses, vacations, and the like. Women who resist the 'seduction' are ostracized or threatened with termination (Peña, 1990: 80-82).

The recurring ideologies that accompany development

suggesting that women cannot be farmers or primary income-earners also accompany *maquiladora* employment. *Maquiladora* managers' justifications for targeting women for employment rely on myths about women's natural traits, which are said to be docility, manual dexterity, and patience:

> We hire mostly women because they are more reliable than men; they have finer fingers, smaller muscles and unsurpassed manual dexterity. Also, women don't get tired of repeating the same operations nine-hundred times a day (quoted in Fernández-Kelly, 1979: 8).

Not only are women biologically better suited to *maquiladora* assembly operations than men, they are socialized to defer to male authority, according to Mexican primers for firms locating in Mexico:

> ...from their earliest conditioning women show respect and obedience to authority, especially men. The women follow orders willingly, accept change and adjustments easily and are considerably less demanding (quoted in Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1981: 13).

By *maquiladora* owners' standards, everyone benefits; the female work force is naturally suited to assembly work and gains the freedom that comes with spending power. In fact, "the girls genuinely enjoy themselves. They're away from their families. They have spending money" (quoted in Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1981: 15).

The justifications for targeting women to work in the *maquiladoras* are easily traced back to the patriarchal dichotomies found in the deconstruction of development. The *maquiladoras* benefit first and foremost from the devaluation of women's work, from the 'invisibility' of women's economic roles. If women's work is secondary and supplementary, women can be paid less than men. However, as a byproduct of denying women's economic roles comes the widely held belief that factory employment is inappropriate for women. The *maquiladoras* overcome this obstacle by disseminating "an ideology that considers

assembly work to be consistent with female gender roles and thereby serves to legitimate the employment of women" (Tiano, 1990: 218). In other words, because women are naturally docile, patient and nimble-fingered, they are "ideally suited for the painstaking tasks involved in assembly work" (Tiano, 1990: 218). It is through the permeation of such attitudes that the *maquiladora* project accomplishes the dual task of facilitating women's entry into the paid labour force while at the same time legitimating the cultural norms which prevented them from entering the formal sector labour force in the first place. Rather than representing an ideological shift from private to public, the *maquiladora* project represents a practical shift: women perform the same tasks as they do in the private sphere and the informal sector but in a new location.

Perpetuating the patriarchal dichotomies, the *maquiladoras* avoid acknowledgement of women's work, skills and training. Sewing, lacemaking, and embroidery learned from female relatives, handed down through generations, and the manual dexterity acquired from repeating these meticulous tasks, are often useful when performing minute assembly operations. These skills are not classified as such, but as natural feminine traits. Similarly, women's fulfillment of these meticulous tasks and other repetitive household work may foster patience, but Mexican women have no greater predisposition to docility, passivity or patience than Mexican men, or men in general.

Mexican women do, however, occupy the lowest rung on the development ladder. At the intersection of economic necessity and socialization practices are women who have little choice but to seek employment in the *maquiladoras*, regardless of how tedious and low paying. Far from accurate depictions of Mexican women, justifications for women's employment based on perceived docility, passivity and manual dexterity are ultimately recognitions of their exploitability, and are dependent on oppressive dichotomies (Chant, 1991: 104).[2]

To the believers in integration, the *maquiladora* project

would seem, on the surface, to represent an advancement for Mexican women. But a closer examination of orthodox development reveals that integration of women "does not mean that women should expand their subsistence production, that they should try to get more control over land and produce more for their own consumption, more food, more clothes...for themselves." Integration advocates that women produce "not what they need but what others can buy" (Mies, 1986: 118). The point must be reinforced that women have been included in development from its inception — the *maquiladoras* do not change their prior status, in fact, quite the opposite. Women's subordinate status is instrumental to the *maquiladora* development: the perpetuation of the patriarchal dichotomies is the hinge on which the success of the *maquiladoras* hangs. The *maquiladora* development has effectively invested in maintaining Mexican women's subordination.

When feminist theory moves from recovering women's experiences in the margins "to an analysis of the world that produced that experience" (Brown, 1988: xi), it becomes a critique of patriarchal constructions, development included. So conceived, feminist theory is not "simply 'about women' but about how masculine constructions depend upon maintaining feminine ones (and vice versa)" (Peterson, 1992: 9), about the interdependence of public and private. Together, the feminist deconstruction of development theory and practice and the situation of Mexican women in the *maquiladoras* shed new light on the universality of development. Feminist deconstruction shares with the cultural critiques the belief that the reconstruction process must "clear out of the way of this self-defeating development discourse" (Sachs, 1992: 4), and move toward a post-developmental era. Yet, feminist deconstruction moves beyond the cultural critiques to underscore the patriarchal ideologies embedded in development, and to commit to making a post-patriarchal era come to fruition.

Notes

[1] I have designated a group of works as constituting a cultural critique, namely Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *The Development Dictionary*, 1992; Thierry G. Verhelst, *No Life Without Roots*, 1990; Rosemary E. Galli, *Rethinking the Third World*, 1992.

[2] While Chant's research is conducted in three cities in the interior of Mexico, her findings prove relevant to a discussion on the *maquiladoras*.

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