

# SPANISH AND LATIN AMERICAN FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

## Gender and Power

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Translated by Ivan Marquez

*Philosophical feminism is the only coherent philosophy with universal implications that provides a theoretical alternative to patriarchal thought and sociopolitical structures. I distinguish between a patriarchal logic of power and a feminist logic of pleasure that leads to an enlightened ethical hedonism, a pleasure-centered, feminist ethical framework based on a cooperative rather than authoritarian model of social relations.*

Men tell us how the world is, women what it is.  
(Cees Noteboom, *Rituales*)

One of the greatest strengths of feminist thought is that it has arisen from an analysis of women's lives and from our own vision of existence. Women's authentic heartfelt sense of having been oppressed in education, at work, at home, in the bedroom, and in the house of representatives has brought us to an understanding of the place of women in society and of what needs to be done in order to change this state of affairs.

In this article I refer briefly to the causes of the feminine oppression that took place 3,000 years ago and which was due to men's appropriation of the sexual and reproductive capacities of women, capacities that are highly valued by men (Lerner 1990, 25). It began when one group of men started to exert control over the rest of men and the whole of women. I am talking about the social order called patriarchy, that consists of the power of the father, the master, and the eternal father, and that replaced social organizations in which power was shared by men and women. Also, I wish to comment on the present attempts devised by women in order to disturb this system. The history of feminine oppression is supported and legitimized by a concrete morality, the

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morality of patriarchy which is based on a hierarchy of fixed values that regulate, distribute, inherit, and transmit the power or dominion of this group of men over others. The result of this is that the symbol of Humanity—with capital letters—is precisely the possession of power, understood as the capacity to control.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate aim pursued by this political system is the absolute control of these few over everyone in everything. That is to say, the utopia of power is the totalitarian control of the world sanctioned by atomic war. To overcome this state of affairs we are offering an opposite morality which has different pretensions and carries with it its own utopia. This alternative morality is based in the values that have traditionally been considered feminine and whose ultimate goal is the opposite of power, that is, pleasure. This utopia is constructed around a nonhierarchical social organization not geared toward dominion but toward shared authority, regardless of gender. This organization is a necessary condition for the disruption of hierarchical power and the liberation of pleasure (see Hierro 1986).

I begin with a discussion on gender, then I talk about power, and finally I comment on an alternative theory to the philosophy of patriarchy, which is feminist philosophy. All of this culminates with a utopian vision of a more asant world.

This research is based on readings of female and male authors who have put forward a revolutionary methodology—studies of women that weave the evidence coming from myth, art, archaeology, religion, social science, philosophy, and many other fields of knowledge viewed from a feminist perspective. That is, they take into account what women do, what they say, and how they say it—in short, feminine interests as women themselves express them.

#### GENDER

In our contemporary world, it is almost universally the case that men are valued more than women. Customs as well as social and political institutions subordinate women to men (French 1985, 54). This does not mean that women cease to have importance in the world, however, where they procreate, care for the young, and work. And few are those throughout the world who do not do these things. Women who do not work constitute a very small group within a social class. Nevertheless, starting with the imposition of patriarchal power, which has come to dominate political, social, and economic life, men around world have come to play a central part while women have ended up being excluded. The “formation of patriarchy” did not come into being “all of a sudden,” but instead it was a process that developed in the course of almost 2,500 years, from 3100 to 600 B.C. The rate at which it developed and the historical period when it occurred vary among societies (Lerner 1990, 25).

If we think about what we have said so far, we see that there have been two basic ways of structuring male-female relationships. All societies are structured

either in a pattern of domination, in which a human hierarchy is maintained by force or with the threat of force, or in a model of participation of both genders, based on mutual consensus. There are also intermediate variations of these two models. This is evident even nowadays when we re-examine human society from a perspective that takes into consideration both men and women. We can see that there are patterns or systems currently characterized by the model of dominion and others by a participatory social organization. Hitler's Germany, Khomeini's Iran, and the Japan of the Samurai are all rigidly patriarchal organizations. While other societies have a greater level of feminine participation, for example, Sweden and Holland. I want to show that it is not men or sex that shapes the structure of society but the configuration of power: hierarchical or participatory. In this way, we can see that social organizations presently transcend conventional dichotomies, such as, Left versus Right and capitalism versus socialism (Eisler 1988, xix). The feminine and the masculine can be understood by means of natural dichotomies: the feminine experience is necessarily linked to nature and immanence due to procreation and the presence of vital cycles; the masculine experience is characterized by control and transcendence. To give life is the function of women: to regulate life the function of men. All of this constitutes the poles of signification of the genders.

Rituals reflect this dichotomy. Goddesses are telluric and the god from the West that marginalizes them is transcendent. Not subject to his own creation, he only controls it without participating in it. Patriarchy signified a new structure that was not merely a modification of the matricentric culture but the opposite, the reverse of the plot of the social arrangements and their morality, when it emphasized male control over nature and women. The commercial products which are most valuable: plants and animals, sexuality and procreation. This is why it was required of men, first a few and then all of them, to feel superior to women and to impose their power over them, in order to be truly considered men by their equals, that is, other men. Thus, the human was constituted as force and control over nature. It was the substitution of one symbol: the chalice, principle of origin, birth, participation, and union, was replaced by sword, symbol of force and hierarchy. Eisler bases this explanation on the appearance of warrior tombs in Europe. The power of taking away life rather than giving it is established and forces domination (Eisler 1988).

Genders were historically and socially constructed on the basis of sex difference. From then on to distinguish among genders means to rank them. Male-female inequality is not the product of a biological difference but of psychological, social, and political differences. Gender is a system of social hierarchy. It is an inequality of power imposed on sex and constitutes the sexualization of power.

## POWER

Put your trust in god, undoubtedly she will help you.

(Sylvia Pankhurst)

Before referring to patriarchal power it must be noted that the biggest obstacle for understanding it is the intensity of the desire to possess it. In the majority of people this desire stems not so much from a positive love of power but from fear that without it they will not be safe or they will be impotent.

To talk about patriarchy is then to make reference to power, to the control over nature, other men, and all women. It is to talk about the force that stirs up a feeling of reverence and admiration. This translates into a disposition to sacrifice everything just to have power. Because if someone who reveres power decides to extend it, the only recourse available is submission to power or the creation of a stronger one in order to oppose it. This is the morality of patriarchy (French 1985, 112).

Masculine superiority over the feminine world stems from controlling all women because it is precisely one group's control of others which makes the first ones superior to the ones under control. In this context, power is understood as "domination".<sup>2</sup> The result of control is the stratification of men over women, one class over another, one ethnicity over another. This is why nonpatriarchal morality concludes that "all power of control is morally wrong." In the following sense: Men do not hate and fear women, that is why they control them. Given that power corrupts, because men need to control women, in order to partake in power, they have to hate and fear women (see Weber 1983, 535). Since it is the case that in the patriarchal system control over women is the necessary condition for the existence of the moral order which legitimates political control of the group over the totality, all men feel compelled to demonstrate their superiority over women employing all the devices that we know and suffer from. Our male companions will do anything to avoid being told: "*pareces vieja*"—"you look like an old woman." (*Vieja* means "old woman" and it is a colloquial form of referring to all women in Mexico.)

Given that power can be exercised without threats of the use of force, one can distinguish between power and influence. Power is understood as having the capacity to produce the desired consequences in the conduct or beliefs of another. When there is the aim of exercising the power that comes from being in a superior position in the person who produces these effects, then we are talking about authority. So the motives that guide conduct when exercising power or influence are of the utmost importance for making a moral judgement concerning interpersonal relations. It is possible that the victim has long since accepted his or her position and taken it to be natural.

In order to convince women of the legitimacy of their submission and their "natural" inferiority men employed two basic resources to consolidate their



power: (1) division among women and (2) severing the bonds between mothers and sons and daughters. First, let us talk about women's disaffiliation from each other, and then about the breaking of the bond between mother, daughter, and son.

As we already know, women did and still do all sorts of chores, production and preparation of food, weaving, housekeeping, manufacture of utensils, care and education of children. They lived in a matrilocal unity. Patriarchy breaks this matrilocal unity, and patrilocality is begun. When a man was united with a woman in wedlock, he would generally become a part of the woman's family. The wife would continue to be linked to the women of her family. Within patrilocality the customs change; women are radically separated from their family, and they come to be a part of their husband's family. According to the judgment of feminist researchers, "the defeat" of women that Engels mentions consists precisely of this dissociation of women. A separation that has not been overcome even now.

In addition, the fragmentation of women makes them nonexistent, for they are in charge of the "invisible" realm of domestic work, just like fairies. Thus the feature that separates and annuls women was erected: the invisibility of what we do and how we do it. Patriarchy treats women as if they did not exist: like well trained servants that serve without making themselves noticeable or Japanese theater actors disguised as shadows, who sustain the stage of which they are not a part. Recently, in *Time* magazine, the wives of important politicians wrote an article entitled "I'm nobody. Who are you?" They referred to their "invisibility" in meetings and official receptions where nobody asks them who they are or what they do.

As we noted earlier, maternity was the cause of women's submission, and patriarchy stems from the men's desire to control nature, ensure paternity, and impose a new form of sociopolitical organization. Patriarchy snatched the centrality of the mother-daughter-son relationship and reformulated the relationship that persists in contemporary ways of thinking, like a psychological "cross" that we all have to carry due to the fact that we were all exclusively taken care of by women.<sup>3</sup>

Several women authors point out the way in which this state of affairs has been gradually overcome. When men and women share in taking care of the infants and children, opportunities are opened for both: women gain more time to be by themselves, and men learn the capacity for tenderness that was taken from them with the imposition of a rigid model of gender-power. Finally, for boys and girls, there is the possibility of opening up to the world with two role models, and for women, of identifying not only with the figure of a devalued mother but also with the father.

One of the most serious women's problems to control the hierarchy of power and achieve equality, perhaps the hardest one, is to achieve the reunification of women. It seems that women's union in matrilocal societies was absolute.

They gave each other mutual support while performing all their chores. The woman who leaves her home following her man in order to start a new family in many cases loses the "room of her own" that belonged to her in her original family and attaches herself to an alien world, the new patrilocal space. Given that feminine work takes place inside the house or close to it, women who go to their husband's families can undoubtedly find friends or in-laws, but in some cases they have lost the moral and political value intrinsic to the primitive family unit. Patriarchy is characterized by the canceling of feminine alliances, starting from the insertion of women into the gynoeceum or their transference to the patrilocal domain where the young woman is oppressed by the mother-in-law and the sisters-in-law.

Celia Amorós (1988) points out in an analysis of power that power is constituted by a network of relations. Hierarchical power is a power of groups, not of individuals. There is no individual power. Men as a group have power over women as a group. This individual man, "Pepe," has power over "Lupe" because he represents the patriarchal group.

Undoubtedly, we have the potential in our life to influence our surroundings, but in our life of relationships, power is group power and one has more power the more cohesive the group is. When the compact is greater. The compact is a space of "equals" in the sense of "peers." They do not all necessarily have the same power, but they could (Amorós 1988, 10). Men are the heirs of patriarchal power. They are born to occupy positions of power and prestige. For that purpose they are educated in their families and at school. The young ones will relieve the old. Sons will relieve fathers. Patriarchy is precisely a system of primogeniture that is learned in the education that takes place outside of school and gets reinforced in school: education is destiny.

Amorós emphasizes that characteristic trait of the feminine gender other than being invisible, or due to it. It is the lack of individuality, since we are a group by virtue of *antonomasia*, where power is not played. Within the masculine gender as a space of equals, individual distinction is achieved by giving first and last names. Within the feminine gender only the first name is given. The feminine last name is like an umbrella or like virginity: its only purpose consists in being lost. Hence the idea of power is the capacity to differentiate oneself (Amorós 1988, 13).

Summing up, patriarchal power can be analyzed as women's marginalization.

... of which is sanctioned through obedience to a transcendent and detached god in control of nature. In patriarchal morality, Abraham represents the order that commands even the sacrifice of his own son, Isaac. This figure symbolizes the priority of the public sphere, within religion or the state, over family ties of blood or affection between mother, father, daughter, and son. Although the masculine function in procreation was not known until well after patriarchy had inserted itself in the world scene.

## FEMINISM: THE EMPOWERMENT OF GENDER

Feminism is the only serious and coherent philosophy with universal reach that offers an alternative to patriarchal thought and its structures.  
(Marilyn French 1985, 442)

Feminists have a very simple creed:

*Women are human beings.*

The two genders are the same with regard to the most important matters and differ among themselves not as sex but as individuals. That is to say, that individual differences are more important than gender differences.

*This equality must be publicly recognized.*

We believe that the qualities that have traditionally been associated with women, what could be called the feminine "principle," is at least as valuable as the masculine principle and that this equality should be publicly recognized.

*The personal is political.*

This is the basic assertion that lays the foundation of feminist morality. It means that the value structure of a culture is identical within the public and private spheres. That is, that everything that takes place in the bedroom is absolutely relevant to what takes place in the chambers of public power and vice versa. From this perspective all relations are moral and political. In the present order of things the same gender has control over the board room and the bedroom.

Present-day gender inequality gets its legitimation from the idea that moral judgment operates at only one level of reality, such that one can sustain that what seems good from one point of view becomes bad or less good from another equally valid point of view. According to feminist morality, what is morally good or bad is so at the personal, pragmatic, and political levels. In other words, Machiavelli's clarity and honesty is also his immorality. Given that reasons of the heart coincide with reasons of state, moral law is supported by personal interest, that is, by pleasure and not power.

The purpose of feminist morality is to achieve equality in the public sphere as well as in the privacy of the bedroom. Moral law, as we saw, can be based on the possibility of pleasure or power. These are antithetic intentions because oppression annuls the possibility of pleasure: of the master and of the slave. It is up to human beings to choose the logic of controlling power or the logic of pleasure, but one cannot be guided by both.

Patriarchy in its logic of totally controlling power establishes the ideology of transcendence that transforms the real world into a symbolic world. It tells us *how* the world is, and it is willing to destroy the world so that it is that way. For that reason it used the excellence of rational and scientific thinking to create the ultimate weapon of controlling power: the atomic bomb.

From what I have already shown, it is easy to see the difficulty in achieving gender equality. It is as hard as eradicating war, it is like giving up social and political control of the world (French 1985, 443).

Feminism legitimates the need to consider women and men equal; to treat women as human beings, despite the fact that nowadays we value control, hierarchy, property, and status, that is, power.

Following MacKinnon's viewpoint, when we criticize masculine power and its results in the world we co-inhabit, we realize that it is not a matter of women to trying, of their own accord, to dominate men by substituting phases of matriarchy for phases of patriarchy. The nature of the struggle consists in transforming power itself, its terms and conditions. All of which is to be supported by legislation that takes into account women's interests.

Even less are we striving to eliminate differences between the sexes in order to achieve equality. Because requiring that one be the same as the ones that set the criteria that distinguish and classify us as socially different have as a consequence the impossibility of achieving such equality because we would never fulfill the criteria.

Everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others.  
(George Orwell 1946)

According to MacKinnon, in the world structured in conformity with patriarchal power women can play only two roles: victims or survivors. Obviously, victims are the ones who succumb to sexual violence. We can survive by means of formal complicity with the ones in power, be it by adjusting to their image of femininity, and if ultimately we want not only to survive but to succeed, we can be men in social life, political life, in academia. For this, first, it is required never to speak in feminine voice and only to make use of the grammatical change in person: where it says "he" to say "she" being careful not to alter the discourses.

Finally, surviving without concessions is achieved by adhering to a feminism without liberal or Marxist modifiers. A radical feminism to which I will now turn my attention.

#### RADICAL FEMINISM

A while ago I discovered a fundamental difference in men's and women's ways of life. I noticed that men who have attained high positions in the hierarchy of power, in the economy, in politics, or intellectually do not have a comparable level of security in their personal decisions—in the same way that women are insecure in their public life. This situation was brought to my attention precisely by men who have distinguished themselves in the intellectual world, recognized for their capacity of logical argumentation in the realm of politics. I think that for men in general, the personal is not political, in the

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(MacKinnon 1987)

sense that they distinguish sharply between their personal lives and their public lives, between their intellectual education and their sentimental education. This has been pointed out by the biographers of John Stuart Mill when they try to explain how the excellent intellectual education that Mill received collapsed when he had to face an existential crisis.

Women experience the opposite phenomenon. For us, the personal is political, in the sense that we do not make sharp distinctions in our professional practice and our family life. In the case of women, the professionalization of their endeavors is not easy because they are lived in a personal key. They are ladies of the house, mother-wives (see Lagarde 1990), in their offices, workshops, and schools, and also in their relationships with other women. This has as a consequence the idea that in order for a woman to attain equality she must "grow" to become a man just as Henry Higgins wished: "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" (in *My Fair Lady*), in their actions, in their language, and in their knowledge. They have to do this to reach majority, to assimilate themselves to the world just like it is, or so many affirm. But this is the false road to power. I propose, on the contrary, that we need, as Marx suggests, to change the world, but through a movement more radical than his. That is why I refer to the empowerment of the feminine gender as an ontological vision. It is not just a political movement with the goal of "integrating" women into the hierarchies of power. That is the struggle of a vast number of women who are attaining positions of power within the present social arrangement. The feminist proposal of which I speak is far more radical than that. It is a moral and political movement to transform society: to feminize it.

The first step in achieving this goal has been, for many, the entry of more women into the structures of power. But this is not the objective that radical feminism seeks. It is not a matter of constructing a power to oppose the other power. This would merely bring as a consequence an increase in the cult of power itself, of control and the ones who possess it, even if now it is "female-ones" rather than "male-ones" who have it. The ultimate goal of radical feminism is to substitute the centrality of power in human life in order to liberate pleasure. Pleasure is not a commodity that can be obtained through the sources of satisfaction offered to us by the consumer world. It is a different experience, a moral attitude that can be learned with a feminist-based education. Neither is pleasure the opposite of work. There is pleasure in work, like there is in everything that human beings do. Pleasure contemplated as the ultimate end, that brings hedonism back to the center of life. This means to recover the idea of the value of nature. Not a return to the "natural life" of the "noble savage," but to recover the value of the body and of nature, without any extrinsic purpose: I am my home.

## PLEASURE

Pleasure is the opposite of oppression for oppression reduces being itself while pleasure increases it, empowers it. In this sense, power as potentiality is a capacity to act, to influence, and to affect instead of being affected. Pleasure is the search for the plenitude of the self. Following the philosopher Spinoza: All pleasure makes us remain in being, and pain (oppression) takes being from us.

The political program of feminism for the future is not at hand. We only know that it promotes pleasure instead of power. It supports the creation of social organizations based on cooperation instead of those based on control and obedience. This is why presently we can only have a very sketchy view of it. On the contrary, the political program of patriarchy is obvious: the worldwide consolidation of totalitarian power, that at the moment is fragmented into loci of force. This power is preserved by the threat of nuclear war.

## CONCLUSION

If we summarize the history with which I began this paper, we notice that it takes more or less the following path: a power structure is erected that marginalizes women—patriarchy. The matrilineal unity of women is fragmented. The mother-daughter-son relationship is modified. Women become invisible, although they continue to perform all their work. The misogynistic features of the culture are encouraged, in order to consolidate the masculine features of power. Women learn to disdain one another. Although some of them gain access to the structures of power the link among women remains fragmented. However, the defeat of patriarchy is envisioned as the reunion of women. Many women continue to work together giving mutual support. We have only achieved the complicity of some women in feminism.

I have referred to two moralities: the patriarchal morality, the basis of which is the logic of power understood as control, domination, serfdom, and violence; and the feminist morality, which follows the logic of pleasure that stems from love, nonviolence, welfare, and hedonism. What preceded does not mean that men are evil and women are good. Only that some men and women envision the principle of pleasure as the ultimate purpose of human life.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful for Graciela Gutiérrez's suggestion that I include the notes on Weber. Max Weber conceives power in the following way: "Power" (*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber 1978, 53).

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