

## POST-COLONIALITY AND CULTURAL STUDIES: ARE THESE USEFUL TO FEMINISTS?\*

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Today, I would like to share with you two concepts and their attendant critical strategies which I think may be useful to Philippine feminist praxis. The first is *Cultural Studies*, the second, *Post-coloniality*.

Cultural Studies does not merely refer to the commonsensical notion of the analysis of cultural forms and practices associated with studies done in the traditional liberal-oriented humanities disciplines. Rather, it is a multidisciplinary examination of "cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication with and within relations of power." (CS, 4). It looks at the mutually determining/determined interrelations between aspects of culture and various race, ethnic, class, gender, religious, etc., structures of power in a particular society. Although originally developed at the Centre for Contemporary Studies in Birmingham, England (CS, 7 & 8) during the 60's as part of the effort "to recover working class culture and history and to synthesize the progressive traditions in western cultural history", today, Cultural Studies is linked to studies dealing with a wide range of categories like gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity,

popular culture and its audiences, colonialism and post-colonialism, global culture in a modern age, nationhood and national identity, etc. (CS, 4). In spite of its range, however, not just anything can be considered Cultural Studies. There are parameters which include:

1. *its shared commitment to studying culture as articulations of power relations;*
2. *its cross-disciplinal or aggressively anti-disciplinary orientation because Cultural Studies "draws from all major bodies of thought of the last several decades -- Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, postmodernism" (CS, 2);*

Cultural Studies believes that the narrow confines of one discipline are inadequate in terms of addressing the complex problems of the post-industrial, postmodern world which can best be understood when diverse theoretical and critical strategies are employed.

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3. *its critique of developmentalist and universalist conceptions of culture that assumes one universal history for "mankind" and all culture in various stages of development;*

Because of this, its objects of inquiry are very specific cultural practices located within particular societies; hence, although Cultural Studies has been informed by major bodies of thought, it makes no attempt at grand theorizing or looking for paradigms that can encompass all types of problems in all types of society with different modes of production, and for all times.

Let's go to the second term -- **POST-COLONIALITY**. Post-coloniality refers to a position one assumes after recognizing how our subjectivities/identities have been constructed by hegemonic, colonial/imperialist, class, Judeo-Christian and patriarchal forms of western discourse. From these subject-positions that constitute us as the "ontological other" of the white, upper-class, Judeo-Christian, imperialist male, we are attempting "to make whole our fractured and deformed identities in order to create new identities and modes of existence outside universalizing/homogenizing Eurocentric, Anglo-American perspectives." (PCS, 6)

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4. *its questioning of the traditional dichotomy between the cultural (referring to art, literature, music, mass media, religion, etc.) and the material (referring to economics, politics, history);*

For Cultural Studies, culture refers to material practices. Rather than being merely spiritual,transcendent or above the material world, belonging only to the realm of the symbolic (CS, 4), culture is inscribed in material human institutions/practices, human relations and gets articulated in human behavior/action -- in short, in everyday life as it is lived.

The kind of studies, writings, cultural forms and practices that are produced from this post-colonial perspective have two distinct features:

1. *their critique of western hegemony.*

The post-colonial perspective interrogate the philosophical and historical assumptions of colonial/imperialist, metropolitan, patriarchal modes of discourse (e.g., literature, art, religion, discourses on the family, on women, on religion, on medicine, on science, on history). Post-Colonial Discourses demonstrate how the latter western patriarchal discourses have been used and continue to be used to

legitimize colonialism and neocolonialism and patriarchal practices as well as to justify the continued marginalization of our own knowledges and cultural productions. It will explain how the refusal of our status as "civilized" persons, even as "humans" as compared to our counterparts in the west have fractured our identities and denied us our humanity.

*2. its focus on the articulations of those formerly occluded and marginalized cultural practices and knowledges of our "minoritized" groups and sectors as well as the alternative practices of those considered by the hegemonic western and our western-oriented national culture as so-called "social marginals" like women, gays, lesbians, children, peasants, workers, as well as the supposed "cultural minorities" and "subversives."* From the post-colonial perspective/position, these articulations address more cogently (i.e., more than canonical texts) the complex realities of a people and a society attempting to build more humane structures and social relations.

**Of what use are these theoretical paradigms and critical strategies employed in Post-colonial Studies and Cultural Studies to feminists?**

*Cultural Studies and Post-colonial Studies* share very similar assumptions and general political agenda. They both critique the liberal-humanist assumptions of universal man, universal human nature, universal history, universal culture, universal literature, etc. Because of these axiomatics, everything that does not fit the universal mode is denied as inauthentic, aberrant, uncivilized. Hence, the denigration, and even

deracination of native, indigenous cultures and peoples. Women, as I have shown earlier, are considered social marginals too. Hence, like other social marginals, women's cultural productions are denied the status of Literature, Art. Their experiences are considered unrepresentative. Their action evaluated as insignificant and therefore not worthy to be documented as history.

Cultural Studies and Post Colonial Studies interrogate the notion of the autonomous, freely acting and freely thinking individual by counterposing the concept of interpellation which is the process whereby individuals are made subjects of the hegemonic ideology. This interpellation is effected through ideological apparatuses, their attendant practices and discourses which give persons illusory representations of their conditions of existence. This illusions make them think that the conditions of their existence are "natural" or "inevitable" or "God-given".

*Interpellation* makes workers accept inequitous economic relations in the workplace as natural or given; makes men and women accept the oppressive conditions of women as the product of destiny or biology. Persons who are unaware of the effects of these ideological apparatuses on the construction of their subjectivities are just living the illusion that they are free individuals. Therefore, in deconstructing universalist, liberal-humanist concepts of the autonomous man, of a transcendent human nature of one world history, of universal culture, etc., together with Cultural

Studies and Post-colonial Studies critics, feminists will be undermining the metaphysical underpinnings of western societies which similarly undergird patriarchal practices.

Included in the critique can be an interrogation of aspects of western feminist practices for their "adumbrating" assumptions of western knowledges in spite of their being on the side of women.

*Secondly, both Cultural Studies and Post-colonial Studies retrieve the forgotten, occluded works of marginalized sectoral and groups of mainstream society; as well as produce alternative articulations of these people's experiences and aspirations for a better social order. They do so by pointing out the processes of inclusion and exclusion that occur in the supposedly innocuous practices of knowledge-formation and subject-constitution.*

### **How are we interpellated as subjects of the hegemonic culture?**

How are our cultural texts evaluated as good, legitimate, worthy? How are our histories written? What type of labor has value? What sphere - whether public or private - is important in terms of determining the shape of our social lives?

The answers to these questions all have to do with who has power; how they use power to perpetuate themselves and their own understanding of their experiences, their history, contemporary events and the institutions they set in place; how they reward/compensate themselves. By looking at those found in the intersections of the political, economic and cultural elites, *one can know who controls the production and reproduction of hegemonic culture.*

**Feminists also retrieve the articulations of women (their literatures, their artifacts) occluded by patriarchal canons.** They also point to the systematic exclusion of women and women-related activities, practices and texts and relate this exclusionary practice to the economically, politically, culturally powerful male groups. They also scour the archives and document the experiences of women to know how women have figured in our history and what they are doing in terms of our contemporary social life.

Feminists are highlighting women's cultural productions and seeking in the earlier texts (for instance, those referring to the babaylanes) for elements of the past that the colonial and patriarchal state/religious authorities tried to put under erasure.

The general political strategy of Cultural Studies and Post-colonial Studies is focused on making cultural practices and other modes of discourse the sites of conflicting, contending understandings of our past, present and future to enable us to build more humane societal structures and social relations. Feminists recognized too the powerful effects of discourses in constituting the subordinate roles and statuses of women, and, therefore, see the necessity of providing alternative discourses that will awaken both men and women to the pernicious effects of these discourses.

**Therefore, akin to these discourses (cultural forms and practices) important sites of new, pro-women representations and meanings that will interrogate and replace patriarchal representations is a political goal that feminists share as a better social order can only be realized when we simultaneously address the epistemic (not only the actual physical violence) caused by inequitous class, race, ethnic, religious and gender arrangements on our subjectivities and cultures.**