TRANSFORMING "THEM" INTO "US": SOME DANGERS IN TEACHING WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

By: Cynthia A. Wood

No Abstract
Week 9. Subject to Desire: Technologies and Social Control

How does the state’s need to become a nation shape reproductive controls? In what ways are women constructed as biological reproducers of the “nation”?

Small Group Activities: Do you think that the “state” shapes women’s reproductive choices in Australia? If so, how? What kinds of policies have states used to control women’s reproductive choice? In what ways do such policies reflect analyses of gender and power? In what ways does an understanding of state power confront your ideas about the public and private spheres?


Weeks 10–12. Oral Presentations of Work-in-Progress

Transforming “Them” Into “Us”: Some Dangers in Teaching Women and Development

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Courses on women and the third world, or women and development, appear to satisfy all aspects of progressive demands for curricular reform in an era of globalization and multiculturalism. Such courses are international in scope, give proper attention to a segment of the world’s population that is often vulnerable and generally neglected, and are likely to address issues of class and race as well as gender. There would appear to be no better vehicle for the education of university students in the United States on issues of diversity in an international context. My experience in teaching courses on women and development suggests, however, that this education is not an inevitable outcome.

I argue in this essay that despite their content (or perhaps because of it), courses on women and development do not necessarily promote student or faculty engagement with issues of diversity, and as generally taught may do just the opposite. I pursue this argument by examining difficulties I have encountered in teaching such courses. And I discuss how I have changed my approach in response to these difficulties.

I have faced a variety of challenges in teaching courses on women and development, in a number of different contexts, but certain issues recurred in every venue. Crucial to a discussion of inclusiveness in the curriculum are a core set of concerns, which have led me to every major change I made in the course over time, and these I see as the major problems in teaching women and development: ethnocentrism, essentialism, and intolerance of diversity.

These are problems that I believe arise also in the field of women and development, and in some ways the evolution of my course has mirrored that of the field itself. In the earliest women in development (WID) literature (arising in the 1970s and early 1980s), and in the earliest version of my course, the central issues were posed in these terms: What are the conditions under which women in the third world live, and what can be done to improve their lives? In the field and in the literature, the answers to these questions were based on the practical experience of development practitioners, with policy uncritically posited as the solution.

Underlying all of this practical experience and advice, of course, was a theoretical perspective on what defines development, what constitutes an improvement in women’s lives, and how best to achieve
desired goals. This perspective was, in general, an ethnocentric one. Improvement was understood in terms of an increase in material welfare, especially as measured by rising gross domestic product (GDP), with the template for development being that which has occurred in the first world, that is, modernization. The means to achieving this goal was fairly straightforward: show people new technologies, provide them with capital and access to credit in order to increase production and thereby improve women’s material well-being, especially as measured by rising GDP, with the template for development being that which has occurred in the first world, that is, modernization. The means to achieving this goal was fairly straightforward: show people new technologies, provide them with capital and access to credit in order to increase production and thereby improve women’s material well-being, especially as measured by rising GDP.

More recently, there has been a shift in the literature to an emphasis on gender systems, especially on how such systems result in women’s disadvantage. The feminist literature on gender and development, such as Gita Sen and Karen Grown’s 1987 book, Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions, suggests that the main concern should be women’s empowerment. This does not preclude improving access to technology, capital, and credit, or an interest in improving women’s material well-being, but it does argue that the transformation of gender systems is a necessary condition of increasing their well-being.

To get at these kinds of issues in class, I use material that presents the complexity of women’s lives, such as I, Rigoberta Menchu, an autobiographical account of the Guatemalan indigenous activist (1984), or Tsi Tsi Dangarembga’s 1988 novel Nerrow Conditions. From works such as these, students can discuss the limitations of the modernization model’s emphasis on material welfare, as well as its disregard of history, particularly that of colonialism and its legacies. Generally, my students did not have any problems understanding or accepting this perspective.

But this difference in approach did little to transform students’ ethnocentric attitudes of patronage and protection. The interpretation of development resulting from such an approach (especially common among feminist students) goes something like this: “How can we help those poor third world women see their oppression so they can become free like us?”

Implicit in this statement is the tendency to essentialize third world women—to assume that the perceived status of such women as traditional, passive, closer to nature, irrational, and so on, is essential to their character as third world women, that they have these characteristics because they are third world women, that they are homogeneous in these essential characteristics, and that they are therefore essentially and radically different from (and inferior to) women in the first world.

The problems in teaching the course are that students come with these ideologies already in place and that the literature does not discourage (and may encourage) the students’ tendency to homogenize and make Other. Chandra Mohanty argues that Western feminist dis-
desired goals. This perspective was, in general, an ethnocentric one. Improvement was understood in terms of an increase in material welfare, especially as measured by rising gross domestic product (GDP), with the template for development being that which has occurred in the first world, that is, modernization. The means to achieving this goal was fairly straightforward: show people new technologies, provide them with capital and access to credit in order to increase production and trade. The WD version of this was that women should be given equal or preferential access to technology, capital, and credit so that they would not be left behind in the process of development.

More recently, there has been a shift in the literature to an emphasis on gender systems, especially on how such systems result in women's disadvantage. The feminist literature on gender and development, such as Gita Sen and Caren Grown's 1987 book, Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions, suggests that the main concern should be women's empowerment. This does not preclude improving access to technology, capital, and credit, or an interest in improving women's material well-being, but it does argue that the transformation of gender systems to further empower women is a necessary condition of increasing their well-being.

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But this difference in approach did little to transform students' ethnocentric attitudes of patronage and protection. The interpretation of development resulting from such an approach (especially common among feminist students) goes something like this: "How can we help those poor third world women see their oppression so they can become free like us?"

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The problems in teaching the course are that students come with these ideologies already in place and that the literature does not encourage (and may discourage) the students' tendency to homogenize and make Other. Chandra Mohanty argues that Western feminist discourse on women and development contributes to the production of a monolithic third world woman (Mohanty 1991b, 55). She continues,

The assumption of woman as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender. The WD version of this was that women should be given equal or preferential access to technology, capital, and credit so that they would not be left behind in the process of development.

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The problem is complex. On the one hand, the literature on women and development contributes to the creation of a homogeneous third world woman who is inherently alien to "us." On the other hand, one of the things that goes along with the modernization approach is the attitude that we are all the same: third world women's hopes and aspirations are limited by their oppression, but if we could
show them the way (or alter the constraints they face), they would want what we want, and that is why the policies we recommend are universally applicable.

Students grasp this as a way of identifying with the women we read about in class, and in teaching the course, identification is a powerful way to challenge the idea that third world women are necessarily and inherently Other. This is another reason I use personal stories and novels, such as I, Rigoberta Menchú and Nervous Conditions. It is easy for students to see that they might act and react the way the women they read about do if they were faced with the same situations.

The problem with this approach is that it allows students to remain intolerant of difference and eliminates the need to acknowledge diversity. "They look different, but they aren't really (from us or from each other), they are like us, they want what we want." The students' desire to believe this is very strong. I once gave a paper assignment which required students to compare Menchú's early life in I, Rigoberta Menchú and that of Tambu in Nervous Conditions. Almost without exception, the students created a story of individual achievement in which each girl pulled herself up by her bootstraps to be successful, Menchú as an activist and Tambu as an educated woman. This story had little textual support and completely failed to acknowledge the differences in circumstance facing the two girls, or the authors' own interpretations of their lives and voices. It did serve, however, to recreate them as girls "just like us." And if they are girls like us, there is no need to acknowledge difference, much less to engage it.

So the other major challenge in teaching this material is in some ways the opposite of the problem of students defining a homogeneous third world woman as Other. How do you teach a course on women and development that recognizes diversity and promotes the acceptance of difference? There is thus an ongoing tension in the course between the desire for sameness and an underlying ideology of otherness, conflated into an understanding of development as a process of transforming "them" into "us."

The way I dealt with this in the past was by highlighting differences when I saw the desire to homogenize, pointing out similarities when students fashioned the Other, and showing the actual and potential damage done by development policy based on either approach. This helps, but I have come to believe it is not enough, because the author- ity of the text, such as that of modernization or of case studies, is only challenged in the margins.

What I want the students to see is that, although there are certainly many similarities among women (e.g., mothers love their children everywhere), there are also many differences: Mothers love their children, but how they love, how they show their love, and what that love signifies to them and their children is likely to be very different across cultures and is historically specific. Culture matters. History matters.

To get at the problems I have posed here, both in theory and in classroom practice, I now incorporate in my course a substantial sec- tion on poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist critiques that address exactly these issues. As I discussed previously, Chandra Mohanty gives an explicit analysis of how the literature on women and development produces a problematic universal third world woman. In placing social science discourse on development as a part of the larger colonial project, Mohanty allows us to raise questions about the importance of positioning. What interests are served in the creation of a third world woman who is by definition in need of being saved (especially from an equally homogeneous third world man), and incapable of saving herself? The role of savior is left to the first world. Trinh Minh-ha, in her film Reassemblage (1982), and her book Woman, Native, Other (1989), addresses the power of first world narratives to define the third world, the dangers of such representations, and the losses incurred in accepting them. What happens to a theory of modernization when faced with Trinh's comment: "Sarcey twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped?" Anna Lowenhaupt Ting's ethnography of the Maratus of Indonesia demonstrates the complexity of culture and the profound limits of traditional views of development when contrasted with this complexity. What does it mean for a universal concept of development when not only progress but also marginality are understood as socially constructed categories?

When placed in the context of the traditional literature on women and development, I hope to use such works not only to question and analyze the assumptions underlying this literature (as well as the students' understanding of the third world and third world women), but to begin to pose alternatives. What would development and development policy look like if it acknowledged diversity and empowered diverse peoples to define and enact their own ideas of development? Would it resemble in any way our current understanding and practice? How would it differ and in what ways would this change women's lives?

This material is difficult on a number of fronts. It is hard to read, because in attempting to escape imposed ideologies and narratives of development, it must use unfamiliar language and challenge assumptions students often did not know were there. It is also difficult politically. The idea that development as traditionally understood may be part of the problem is a hard one for an undergraduate to face. And one of the dangers of attention to difference, especially in a culture generally intolerant of diversity, is that the students will shut down and "I can never understand them." These works not only acknowledge diversity but also invite engagement with it, however, and many students accept the invitation.

I do not believe that I have solved the problems I am pointing out here. The literature on women and development did not create ideologies of essentialism, ethnocentrism, or intolerance of diversity.
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Students come to my classes with these ideologies in place, and I myself must struggle with them as a specialist in the field. But the course can be taught in such a way that it leaves such ideologies unchallenged, or it can challenge them by addressing their presence. This challenge cannot eliminate the problem, but it can provide an alternative framework that allows further challenges.

NOTES

1. I continue to use the highly problematic terms *third world* and *first world* in this context, in part because the oppositions they represent (and construct) make their way inevitably into courses on women and development. That these terms must be deconstructed does not obviate their power. At the same time, political resistance to first world domination has been and continues to be organized on the basis of an "imagined community" of peoples in the South, as Chandra Mohanty (1991a, 4) points out. For further discussion of the issues at stake here, see also Mohanty’s essay (1991b), “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.”

2. My own background is in economics, with specializations in women and development as well as Latin American studies, but I also have longstanding interests in feminist and postcolonial theories. I have taught courses in women and development at two small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast and at a midsize public university in the South, in departments of economics, international studies, and interdisciplinary studies. I have also taught short units on this material in courses on environment and development, farm workers in the United States, introduction to Latin American studies, and postcolonial theories of imperialism. I am thus basing this paper on what may be a unique experience of teaching women and development at the undergraduate level in a variety of institutional settings with differing disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts.

3. For an excellent history of WID, see Irene Tinker (1990), “The Making of a Field: Advocates, Practitioners, and Scholars.”

4. There has been a corresponding change in course titles across the country. I maintain the title of my course as “Women and Development” to avoid as much as possible the inevitable danger of de-emphasizing the importance of women’s concerns, though I certainly incorporate a gender and development approach.

5. For example, Ann Leonard’s 1989 anthology, *Seeds: Supporting Women’s Work in the Third World*.


7. Or, in Gayatri Spivak’s (1988, 296–97) terms, “white men saving brown women from brown men.” In this case, white women may be the operative agents.

8. This quotation is from Trinh’s film *Reassemblage*, reprinted in *Framer Framed* (1992, 96).

WORKS CITED


SYLLABUS: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

Women’s experiences in the process of “development” in the third world have been very different from those of men. Policies that have benefited men have tended to have limited or even negative effects on women, and those that have generally negative effects have tended to hurt women more than men. At the same time, however, women have come to be recognized as vital to the success of most development projects, even those from which they will not benefit. Beginning with fundamental questions addressing the meaning of development and the importance of perspective in defining the success of a policy, this course will analyze the lives and welfare of women in the South and consider alternative definitions and approaches to development which may take into account their perspectives. Topics to be covered will include work, income distribution, household formation, health and population, education, the environment, structural adjustment, and feminist critiques of the design, implementations and evaluation of policy. We will also consider the contribution postcolonial feminist theory can make to a discussion of the problems and possibilities of development as currently understood and practiced.

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I choose not to capitalize the terms first world and third world because I believe that capitalization transforms these terms into proper names that further rigidify highly problematic assumptions about the postcolonial world, while contributing in particular to the homogenization of the so-called third world.

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Weeks 5 and 6. Population, Education, Environment


Week 7. Small Project Experiences


Week 8. Restructuring the Economy


FILM: TRANSFORMING THEM INTO US, 1990, MICHAEL CAMERINI, CHERYL GROFF, AND SHIREEN HUQ, PDR PRODUCTIONS.


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Week 7. Small Project Experiences


Week 8. Restructuring the Economy


FILM: HELL TO PAY, 1988, ALEXANDRA ANDERSON AND ANNE COTTRINGER, WOMEN MAKE MOVIES.

Weeks 9 and 10. Legacies of Colonialism
Dangarembga, Nervous Conditions.

Weeks 11–14. Questions of Representation
Tsing, In the Realm of the Diamond Queen.

Week 15. Alternative Visions?

INTERNATIONALIZING FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES

AMY KAMINSKY

The job description for a position in the department of women's studies at the University of Minnesota that I answered in 1983 called for a feminist scholar in the humanities whose work dealt with an area of the developing world. In other words, I was hired to bring an international humanities perspective to a women's studies department whose small core faculty already boasted a distinguished historian of Africa, Susan Geiger. Susan's presence and mine meant that the department could regularly offer courses on women and world cultures, African and Latin American women writers, women's life stories in the developing world, and women in revolutionary struggles. Nevertheless, the general courses offered in women's studies, even when we taught them, tended to focus on domestic issues and texts. When Geiger led a workshop to bring multiracial and international gender perspectives to lower division courses, I participated in it, redesigning Introduction to Women's Studies. The vagaries of curricular needs and faculty distribution in core courses were such that it was years before I taught the course I redesigned. Yet the exercise was far from futile, for the interaction with other faculty concerned with broadening the scope of the institution's courses, together with the range of new ideas, new materials, and new pedagogical methods to which I was exposed, all have served me well in my teaching generally. Trained as a critic of Latin American literature, I learned about communities of color in the United States as well as about issues concerning women from Asia and Africa, all of which have had an effect on my teaching and thinking. Having the opportunity to engage with colleagues on questions of content and pedagogy was of enormous benefit to me. More recently, I undertook the revision of a feminist pedagogy course.

There are five elements of an internationalized, gender-aware curriculum that an instructor needs to deal with. The first is simple information on women in different world regions. Demographic maps, ethnographies, statistical data, histories, and women's expressions of their own lives in their oral stories, their literary writing, and their visual depictions are all means of gaining such information. Second is a focus on feminist consciousness (a term I use very broadly) as it emerges in different world regions and among differently placed women in those regions. What traditional roles do women fulfill, and what is the relation of those roles to relations of power? How do...