

UNCLOAKING THE UNIVERSAL CIVILIZED OR CULTURED MAN : EXPOSING THE HIDDEN DIMENSION OF GENDER IN PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEM- PORARY DISCOURSES ON CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT¹

Artikel ini mendaku bahwa setiap upaya yang hendak memikirkan ulang isu-isu sosial dalam konteks global saat ini akan selalu lemah manakala tidak melibatkan isu gender. Isu gender bukanlah hanya perspektif feminisme Barat, melainkan merupakan persoalan seluruh dunia. Ditunjukan bahwa tidak dimasukkannya

perspektif feminisme akan melahirkan konsepsi-konsepsi yang tidak tepat tentang “kodrat manusia”, yang akan berakibat pada melesetnya wacana filsafat dan politis tentang kebutuhan dan kepentingan yang mesti ditangani. Ditekankan pula perlunya wacana global –khususnya Posmodernisme dan Poskolonialisme- memerhitungkan buruh dan migrasi sebab dua gejala itu pun sangat menentukan bagaimana isu gender dipahami dan dihayati dalam situasi konkritnya.

Key Words:

•*Culture* •*Civilization* •*Ultimately Ethical* •*Rights of Categories*
•*Gendered Self* •*Queer* •*Feminization of Labour* •*Identity Politics*

Culture and “civilization” are loaded terms that reek of privilege. It is an important agenda to reflect on how our respective societies are impacted by the use of these concepts, as well as to find relevance in the way that these are articulated in the global scene. More importantly, it is vital that we make connections between such articulations and the contexts of individuals, and how personal and social transformations could effectively take place.

As Robert W. Cox explains (2002), “Civilizations represent continuities in human thought and practices through which different human groups attempt to grapple with their consciousness of present problems” (p. 1). Then it becomes increasingly important that we look into these thoughts and practices, as well as the configuration of such groups—as to who is included and who is not. This has always had a direct bearing on what may be considered as “problems” that are deemed worthy of “solving.”

Philosopher Albert Schweitzer (1987), made a pronouncement that the real essential nature of civilization is that it is “ultimately ethical” (p. xi) for “if the ethical foundation is lacking, then civilization collapses” (p. xii). The artistic and intellectual forces notwithstanding, Schweitzer is convinced that superficial concepts of civilization must give way to what he calls “the reverence for life” (p. 330). However, when one speaks about civilization in

moral terms, it becomes inevitable to be even more speculative and critical about what values we ought to uphold. What is troubling about claiming an absolute foundation in a set of principles (as in religion, Christianity or Islam, for example) or in a process (Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative), or even in theories about human nature, the human condition, and civil liberties (social contract theory, existentialism, human rights discourse) is the recognition that there are competing claims. Once a particular foundation is adopted, it has the ability to affect a great influence in the way institutions are regulated and the individual's life is lived.

With globalization, comes greater economic and cultural exchange, as evidenced by common place examples such as the flurry of electronic mail correspondences between organizer and conference participants. So too would be the quantity and quality of short message service (SMS) and instant messages (IM) exchanged via the ubiquitous mobile phones. The same could also be said about the human traffic as the global citizen engages herself in various excursions (temporary or otherwise) for various reasons (pleasure, labor, or resettling). Mass immigration and diasporas had modified the way that people made adjustments as they depart from their old lives and settle into the new. Multi-cultural nations preach tolerance of such diversity. However, in the global arena, the ethico-moral foundationalist is like the hydra that rears many heads. There is a cacophony of competing claims as each voice insists on their version of absolutes.

Zygmunt Bauman (2004), notes that what is referred to as the “postmodern times” challenge us to rethink and reformulate old problems, and that the “moral agenda” of our times consist of those which were not given much attention in the past. This includes, “the manifold moral issues arising from the present plight of pair relationships, sexuality and family companionships” (p. 1), among others. This suggests that Schweitzer's concern for the “ultimately ethical” could be expanded to issues that go beyond what may be narrowly understood as “the reverence for life.”² And although postmodern ethics is wary of moral absolutes, it does recognize the relevance of ethical concerns and the shifts in the way that we re/map such ethical dilemmas, i.e., where the rights of categories are similarly acknowledged. This now includes even those that have been previously glossed over or marginalized, viz., “ethnic, territorial, religious, gender, and even sexual-policy based” (Bauman, p. 45).

The focus of civilization in terms of ethnic and territorial disputes

among colonized subjects was thoroughly discussed by Edward Said. The field of post-colonial studies is attributed to the wide influence of his path-breaking book titled "Orientalism" (Kohn, 2006). This term, "described a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and discursive practices that were used to produce, interpret, and evaluate knowledge about non-European peoples" (Kohn, item #5) as Said found a way to apply Foucauldian techniques of discourse analysis. The dichotomy between the European and non-European is articulated in other ways, the most common of which is by splitting the hemispheres into West and non-West dichotomy where traditionally, the West had been "the model and the measure for social progress for the world as a whole" (Slater 2004, p. 9). Furthermore, as it is asserted that the division is more than just a geographical category, "the West is now everywhere" (Slater, quoting Nandy, *ibid*) this had been supplemented by the economic divisions of the First World/Third World³, developed/developing economies, and the more recent North-South distinction (Slater, p.10).

However, feminist critics (Lewis 1996, p. 15) are quick to assert that perspectives of race and class are inadequate without the component of gender and that if there are any transformative interpretations to be gleaned from historical inquiry, gender is a perspective that is too important to miss. Lewis asserts that, "gender could produce positions from which to enunciate alternative representatives of racial difference" (*ibid*), as she also accuses Said of falling into the trap of Orientalism when he refused to recognize the glaring absence of women in colonial discourse, therefore excluding women by omission (p. 18).

Although he does not commit the same sin of omission, a similar criticism is remarked about the Filipino philosopher, anti-colonial, and national hero Jose Rizal when one does a careful reading of his advice to Filipino women. As the author (March 2006) has written elsewhere, Rizal's understanding of justice, freedom, and autonomy that supposedly extends to all Filipino people is gendered in such a way that it is favorable only to Filipino men, but is narrowly defined when it applies to Filipino women. The kind of gender exclusion that is prevalent in these instances smacks of false universals that philosophers who are privileged to write about issues of ethnicity and colonial matters fail to understand. Their experience of subjugation under colonial rule does not integrate the vital aspect of gendered subjectivity.

Such subjectivities highlight the aspect of the gendered self. Identity politics as a catch-all phrase had been an important means for members of

certain marginalized groups in actively working towards social justice. It had been described (Heyes, 2002) as that which, “has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups . . . assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.”

In the Philippines, the history of the feminist movement is somewhat similar to the “waves” in the US where the First Wave consists of the early suffragettes who used enlightenment ideals in order to secure the right to vote in 1937. The Second Wave happened around the time when student activism was emerging during the Marcos dictatorship. Anti-imperialist sentiments also ran high due to the obvious ties that Marcos had with the US administration despite the many years of political repression through Martial Law. With the clamor for social change and in protest against political tyranny, and imperialism, Filipino feminists were then able to trace the link between the seemingly different but overlapping types of oppression. Hence, the kind of feminism that is dominant in my country is rooted in the nationalist discourse that is also known as Third World due to its concerns with economic as well as socio-political issues.

And while not all feminists (Heyes, citing Brown, *ibid*) rally around the banner of identity politics, there are those who find it useful as a strategy. Rights-based activism for example, does depend on identity politics in order to influence stakeholders in policy-making. In the Philippines, feminist groups (who identify as “women”) are largely credited for their lobbying efforts in influencing the legislative agenda.⁴ It is also the concern of Third World feminists to reflect and assess the serious impact that globalization brings to migrant women (and the families that they leave behind), as there are millions⁵ of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW), many of whom are nannies, nurses, maids, caregivers, mail-order brides, sex workers are exported to more affluent nations (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). The service of care that is tied closely with women's identities and capabilities, although compensated contributes to what is regarded as the feminization of labor. This resulted to shifts in distribution of paid and unpaid work in men and women. With globalization and the international demand for care-givers and nurturers, more women have the opportunity to receive compensation, though it is not always, just not humane.

It is also important to note that this exportation of the caring service

creates a vacuum in the families that women leave behind. Financial gain brought about by this type of service must be weighed along with losses that are not so easy to quantify. However, for impoverished countries like ours, it seems difficult to transcend identity politics as the concerns of feminists still revolve around economic concerns as one of the most basic. Hence, gender, race, and class issues are inexorably linked as feminists and activists face the opportunities and perils of globalization.

To rephrase this discourse in the Schweitzerian imperative would suggest that the “ethical” ought to be reconfigured in what is good not only for the “universal man” but also to recognize specific subjectivities and particulars. And while the typical OFW has to deal with vulnerability that aliens face everywhere they go, the specific experiences of diaspora that women OFWs-as-care-giver and nurturer, exposes not only economic and racial inequalities, but rather it also perpetuates gender inequalities (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003, p. 13). Thus, the “uncloaking” of the person's gender is truly vital in any discourse involving culture and civilization. It exposes who is within the bounds of what is “cultural” and those that are without, and how to address challenges that are framed in that map. Seeing that this framing is anomalous, we are then in a better position to reframe the discourse and seek more inclusion in determining what could possibly be “ultimately ethical.”

For Ehrenreich and Hochschild, bringing these invisible women to light is a first step in their de-marginalization, “Before we can hope to find activist solutions, we need to see these women as full human beings. They are strivers as well as victims, wives and mothers as well as workers—sisters, in other words, with whom we in the First World may someday define a common agenda” (p. 13). Defining a common agenda among one's own gender sure sounds lovely. But as someone who more than dabbles in activism, my personal experience had taught me otherwise. Even in the local feminist scene where I have worked with individuals and groups, there are still competing claims, a plethora of them. Feminists who believe that identity politics is useful also find themselves battling over what it truly means to be “woman” and “feminist.” Couple those terms with “Filipino” and “middle class” or “urban poor” and more so with identities like “straight” “lesbian” or “gay” and the overlaps in categories is further complicated.

With current debates surrounding the Department of Education's curriculum on sex education, the Catholic Church and the state are seeking absolutes, as both sides are making the pitch for morality on the one hand,

and responsible citizenship on the other. Discussions about who, when, how, why and exactly what young individuals ought to know about sexual matters is framed in what could be interpreted as heteronormative paradigms. If gender as a perspective is sometimes brushed aside as unimportant, sexuality is just as ignored and deliberately avoided as it is deemed as falling under the “private” realm. At worst non-heterosexual subjectivities (when their existence is acknowledged) are stigmatized as deviants, immoral, even criminal in some cultures. And while the nature and scope of discourses on culture, civilization and globalization are challenged by feminists by the inclusion of gender, the same is also necessary from the perspective of sexuality.

While one's erotic desires might seem as less important compared with the triumvirate of race, class, and gender, persons who strongly identify as “othered” in this manner will disagree. Unlike persisting inequalities in those categories, it is easy for the privileged to gloss over such inequalities that non-heterosexuals are subjected to.

It had been remarked that, “queerness is now global” (Cruz-Malave & Manalansan, 2002) as the homosexual taboo had to a large extent, given way to what is spectacular, hip or even cool. Manila has its share of gay bars, and a gray lifestyle as evidenced by the night life in Malate and the annual LGBT Pride Marches. Even *The Queer Eye for the Straight Guy Fab 5* is expected to tour Manila again this month to promote the new season of their hit TV show. In the Philippine scene, there had been a number of locally produced hit mainstream movies (not just indie flicks), as well as TV shows that regularly feature LGBT personalities, the most popular being the weekly drag performance of the “Balakubak Gang.” A case of coming-out of the closet that led to hogging the spotlight.

Hence, what used to be considered as “private” had become an object of spectacle, and more importantly, an object of consumption as “queerness” is commodified and marketed, where, “nonqueers invest their passions and purchasing power ... and through which queers constitute their identities in contemporary consumer-oriented globalized world” (ibid). Therefore the universal queer is hyped as the hip and fashionable upwardly mobile gay (man). In this sense, it is even more important for feminists who identify as lesbian to remain vigilant about such erasures and ensure visibility. Just as the (straight) woman is invisible in other discourse, so too are (non-straight) women even in queer sub-culture.

Although relatively young, the LGBT⁶ movement in the Philippines had become more visible by bringing the “private” into the “public.” These

groups have adopted the rights-discourse in battling homophobia, lobbying for the passage of the Anti-Discrimination bill, taking active part in policy discussions of AIDS, and most recently forming an LGBT party list. But apart from these special-interests LGBT groups have also formed alliances with non-homosexuals. Lesbian and gay activists have found that identity politics is promising as they work together in advancing their human rights, but so too as they forge alliances with other groups and NGOs such as those who seek the elimination of Third-World debt, care for the environment, religious and spiritual groups, as they have also been a regular fixture in State of the Nation Addresses protest rallies to press for large-scale reforms.

Filipino LGBTs are also networking with their international allies and it is one opportunity that local queers enjoy. However, although there are so-called models of gay culture such as those in more inclusive and “progressive” countries, the category of sexuality remains marginal in the local discourse on civilization. Such “exposure” also puts LGBTs in a precarious position, and a backlash is almost always inevitable. The Pope's repeated stance against gays and a rigid concept of human unions and kinship is a moral absolute decreed by the highest authority of the Catholic Church and as such, the Philippine faithful, approximately 80% of the nation's population, are expected to toe the line.

And yet for some Catholic gays and lesbians in the Philippines, this stance is interpreted as a failure to understand and appreciate the subjectivity of the queer other. Identity politics then becomes a strategy for various LGBT groups to strengthen their ties with one another while they remain open to having a dialogue with church officials, “despite the intimidating hateful language” (APP with Marinay, 2005). In our quest to find meaning in culture, civilization and globalization, Schweitzer's focus is still relevant. What is ‘ultimately ethical’ could be framed in a way that recognizes various identities (including gender and sexual identities) while also valuing contexts that are specific to geography and time periods.

The answer to what is “ultimately ethical” is a journey in itself. As a student and teacher of philosophy, an activist and a Filipino queer woman, I have yet to reach the end of that journey. The struggle for personal recognition is inherently tied to political recognition, and this is why I view identity politics as a useful strategy. It aids in uncloaking universal presuppositions as it tries to make room for more specific and under-articulated perspectives. However, I am also aware of its pitfalls. Exposure is a risk that renders one vulnerable. Just like the proverbial revolving door,

queers coming out sometimes find themselves going back inside the closet. But the discourse on culture and civilization is an arena that had long been inhabited by them, only that category was previously hidden.

End Notes:

1. This version of the abstract is slightly altered to expand the scope of “gender” as it seeks to include sexualities.
2. Especially since this phrase is generally taken to refer to human life only, specifically as the human species is regarded by Aristotle as the most highly ranked among all living creatures. See Peter Singer and his insistence on “speciesism” and the expansion of the rights-based ethics approach in valuing Jives to include non-human animals.
3. As Heyes (2002) remarked, the usage of “Third World” is problematic and it has been suggested that the term “Fourth World” may be used instead to describe the very poor living in highly developed and wealthy countries.
4. I am specifically referring to efforts of feminist groups and the passage of the Anti-Rape Bill (where the influential study that revealed 90% of women raped come from the poor sector) was cited in 1997, the Anti-Anti-Abuse of Women in Intimate Relations (AWIR) in 2003, and the ongoing efforts to push for the bill on Reproductive Health.
5. Almost 9% of 82.8 million Filipinos are living and working overseas, according to a 2003 study released by the Economic Resource Center For Overseas Filipinos. No data is available regarding the breakdown of genders.
6. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, LGBT is the acronym. Although the origin is American, Filipino activists had appropriated these terms in addition to identities that are decidedly local such as “bakla” (and its many stripes) and “tibo”.

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