

Feminism, Feminist Scholarship, and Social Integration of Women: The Struggle for African-American Women.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the intellectual and scholarly basis of the struggle for social integration of African-American women into American society. Feminism is viewed as the broad context within which this struggle must be conceived, understood, and sustained. Because the struggle is conceptualized as intellectually driven, the paper begins by critically examining feminist scholarship and the contention that feminist scholarship provides the basis for social integration of African-American women into male-dominated American society.

A distinct contribution of this paper to the current scholarship is a proposed framework for a process of social integration of African-American women, one which draws on the works and experiences of African-American women in general, and those in academe in particular. The proposed framework requires a true, meaningful, intellectual revolution at the level of: 1) all African-American women, irrespective of social class; 2) all white and African-American scholars; and 3) all American women and men.

Key Words: African-American women, womanism, feminist scholarship

Introduction

The domination and oppression of women, achieved primarily through discriminatory and exclusionary practices, have been the subject of several studies whose impact has been well-documented (Anderson and Collins 2004; Collins 1990; 1998; Jaggar 1983; Laslett and Thorne 1997; Lotz 2003; Rhode 1990; Wallace 2000; Wood 2003). The crippling effects of the domination and oppression notwithstanding, women continue to struggle and to make great strides toward eliminating these practices and gaining parity status at the cultural, social, political, economic and global levels. In this struggle women have utilized several strategies. Prominent among these strategies are social movements, political activism, and intellectual expression. The intellectual struggle has been wide-ranging, involving interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to present social reality and the world from a woman's point of view (Harding 2000; Julia 2000; Kelly 1984; Ritzer 2004; Wood 2003). For many, most of this scholarship is new because, historically, men have succeeded in systematically excluding women's contributions from major textbooks (Laslett and Thorne 1997; Ritzer 2000, 2004). This systematic exclusion has sometimes forced feminist scholars to go beyond pure academic endeavors. Some become activist, and in some cases, even radical in order to get their point across to the masses as well as lay the foundations for the pragmatic and reformist tradition in American sociology (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2002:14) that has produced profound change in the lives, circumstances/ and conditions of many women. This radical activism is precipitated as well as justified by women's subordinate status and the discrimination directed toward them in every institution in society.

There is ample evidence that feminist scholarship has provided a vital intellectual framework for feminism's successes for women's liberation, as evident in the cultural,

social, political, economic and academic realms. In virtually every academic discipline today women scholars are asserting themselves and making major contributions to their disciplines. However, despite the proliferation of feminist scholarship, their unique and valuable contributions to the advancement of their disciplines, and women's continuous struggle for recognition and inclusion, feminist scholarship and women in general continue to be marginalized and degraded as other in a male-created culture. Consequently, it is males that assume the role of "gatekeepers" in different academic disciplines (Barsky 1992; Ritzer 2000, 2004; Smith 1987; Wood 2003). As a result of this situation, some feminist scholars have come to view their recognition and acceptance in academe as instrumental and as one of the keys to a successful integration of women into society's social fabric.

The basic research question for this paper is: How can the social integration of African-American women into American society be realistically, meaningfully and substantively achieved? With this basic question as the guide, this paper focuses on feminist intellectual and scholarly pursuits as the basic framework of the struggle for this difficult and challenging task of integrating African-American women into American society. The paper utilizes feminism as the broader context within which this struggle must be conceived, understood, and sustained. Because the struggle is conceptualized as intellectually driven, the paper begins by critically examining feminist scholarship and its implication for women's social integration in general and the social integration of African-American women in particular. The central thesis, which constitutes the distinct contribution of this paper to current scholarship, is that a realistic, meaningful and substantive integration of African-American women into American society is achievable through the proposed framework which involves a process that is intellectually driven and as such it does require the following three stages: 1) the integration of all African-American women into the African-American feminist movement, which is currently structured and led by prominent, powerful middle-class African-American female scholars; 2) the integration of African-American female scholars into the American feminist scholarly movement, currently structured and led by prominent, powerful middle-class white female scholars; and 3) organized struggle for the integration of all women into an American society dominated by a few prominent, powerful men, a struggle organized and led by prominent, powerful middle-class female scholars of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. This central thesis of the paper, as stated above, is based on the following two underlying premises: 1) Knowledge purposefully acquired and appropriately applied is power and power wisely and purposively exercised is key to achieving meaningful, substantive goals; and 2) social policy based on knowledge, acquired through intellectual and scientific research processes, is generally most effective. Before embarking on the subject matter of this paper, it is necessary to first of all provide operational definitions of the following key terms as used in this paper: 1) feminism; 2) feminist scholarship, and 3) social integration of African-American women.

Operational Definitions

Feminism

Feminism as used in this paper combines the following two definitions: 1) in its narrowest sense, feminism is a complex set of political ideologies used by the women's movement to advance the cause of women's equality and put an end to sexist theory and the practice of social oppression; and 2) in a broader and deeper sense, feminism is defined as a

variety of interrelated frameworks used to observe, analyze, and interpret the complex ways in which the social reality of gender inequality is constructed, enforced, and manifested from the largest institutional settings to the details of people's daily lives which includes feminist scholarship (Ali, Coate and Goro 2000; Barsky 1992; Bryson 2002; Johnson 1995; Ritzer 2000; Segal 1999; Zalewski 2000). The second definition implies as well as includes feminist scholarship. The two definitions combined capture the essence of feminism, the praxis dimension, and the essence of feminist scholarship, the theoretical, academic, and intellectual dimension of feminism.

Feminist Scholarship

As used in this paper, feminist scholarship is defined as a set of facts and ideas acquired by those whose academic and intellectual orientation and interests are directed toward women's issues and problems in general and in particular those originating from oppressive, exclusionary, and discriminatory practices built into societal institutions, especially institutions such as the family, economy, religion, and the political, judicial and educational systems. In other words, feminist scholarship refers to the body of knowledge and learning acquired through studying, investigating, and observing these women's issues and problems specified above by those who are interested and do specialize in them. These scholars' objective is not just to produce knowledge about these issues and problems for the sake of knowledge but to ensure that the knowledge is of use to themselves as the investigators as well as to all those interested in finding solutions to these women's issues and problems. The ultimate goal of feminist scholars interested and specialized in the issues and social problems specified above is to contribute to the improvement of society and the lives of all irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin and other related variables (Barsky 1992; Collins 1998; 2004; Julia 2000; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2002; Pearsall 1999; Ritzer 2000; Segal 1999; Smith 1987; Zalewski 2000). As defined here, feminist scholarship implies feminism in that it provides the intellectual and academic frameworks and tools for feminism as well as the platform and foundation for praxis.

Social Integration

Social integration, as used in this paper, is defined as a true, meaningful, substantive inclusion and incorporation of all women into all of society's institutions, accomplished through a process that requires the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the establishment of what Habermas (1985, Vol. II: 139) refers to as communicative action which is not only a process of reaching understanding;actors are at the same time taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm and renew their membership in social groups and their own identities. Communicative actions are not only processes of interpretation in which cultural knowledge is tested against the world; they are at the same time processes of social integration and of socialization. This definition recognizes, acknowledges, and takes into account the differences in standpoint not only between men and women but also among women, hence the need for communicative action which ensures meaningful socialization and subsequently meaningful, substantive social integration. Implicit in this definition is the sharing of power that requires and is dictated by a true intellectual revolution brought about by sound scholarship and intellectual discourse, involving the following three levels, all contingent upon and facilitated by Habermas's

communicative action: 1) intellectual revolution among all scholars and intellectuals, both female and male; 2) intellectual revolution among all female scholars and intellectuals; and 3) intellectual revolution among all females, scholars and non-scholars, facilitated by female scholars and intellectuals.

Feminism, Feminist Scholarship and Social Integration of African-American Women

As the central thesis of this paper suggests the social integration of the African-American woman into the fabric of American society is an intellectually driven process and must therefore be understood and framed within the broad context of the feminist intellectual movement. This intellectually driven process provides the basis of the discussion that follows in this section. The main goal of this discussion is to establish interconnections among feminism, feminist scholarship and social integration of African-American women.

The fundamental distinguishing feature of feminist scholarship is gender. Feminist analyses are first and foremost woman-centered (Lengerman and Niebrugge 1985; Pearsall 1999; Ritzer 2000, 2004). The woman is the starting point. Implicit in this focus on womanhood is the assumption that women are a monolithic group, that they all have the same experiences vis-à-vis men. It also assumes that society is stratified along one main dimension: male and female, where males dominate, subjugate, and oppress women. On the basis of these assumptions, many feminist scholars purport to speak for all women, irrespective of social class, race, age, nationality or culture for that matter. Based on this approach, gender becomes the single most important unifying variable that brings women of the world closer to one another. This suggests that within the same national context or society, such as the United States, women will rally around their womanhood, unite and work together to fight for their common good and interests in the face of male domination, oppression, and resistance (Castro 1990; Wallace 1989, 2000). Feminist scholarship is therefore expected to provide the understanding and hence unite women for political action and subsequently ensure the social integration of women into male-dominated society.

This sounds very liberating, lofty, and promising as the first step toward the integration of women in general and minority women in particular into the American social order. According to the proponents of the unifying power of womanhood, the integration of the African-American woman into the American society, for example, will become an accomplished reality since the barriers imposed by race and social class are deemed to have been broken down by the unifying forces associated with womanhood.

How realistic are these promises of emancipation and integration of the African-American woman into the American society as articulated by the proponents of this posture? How, specifically, will this integration be achieved? These promises do not seem to be consistent with the social reality most women are confronted with on a daily basis. This daily reality points to dissent among women arising from factors such as ethnicity, national origin, religion, culture, sexual orientation, and especially social class, and race which are the focus of most of our discussion and illustrations in this section. As demonstrated by the insightful works of Anderson and Collins (2004); Collins (1990, 1998); Harding (2000); Hooks (1981, 1984); Lotz 2003; and Whelehan (1995), reliance on the unifying and integrating forces, engendered by womanhood, is overly simplistic at best and unrealistic at worst. Hooks (1984) argues that white feminism is fundamentally racist in two important ways: 1) it draws endless analogies between "women" and "blacks"; and 2) it assumes that

the word woman is synonymous with white women, since women of other races are always perceived as others and as dehumanized beings that do not fall under the heading "women".

Some have argued that although white feminists might assume that identifying oneself as oppressed frees one from being an oppressor, such women still retain racist assumptions which weaken their notion of a universal sisterhood, since women of color are already erased (Code 1991; Hooks 1984). According to Whelehan (1995), black feminist writers are uncomfortable with the term "feminism" because it tends to connote a white middle-class world view.

Some are concerned that feminism is not only creating divisions among white and African-American women, but that it also tends to create a rift between black women and black men. Alice Walker coined the epithet "womanist" to signal many black women's concern that feminist politics might potentially create divisions between black women and black men (Whelehan 1995). Even organized African-American feminist movements, such as the National Black Feminist Organization, are doomed to failure from the start because they are consciously set up in relation to white feminist negation of black women's experience, and therefore primarily readjusting feminism's scope (Whelehan 1995).

The concern about the unifying energy of womanhood is clearly echoed by Harding when she points out that *feminist time* remains far less problematic for me at this point than *women's time*; the intersectional and multicultural issues are enough to make me doubt the usefulness of the latter terms falsely unifying energy (2000:1043-1044).

In a critical examination of the media's influence on third-wave feminism and the challenges for the next century of feminist endeavor, Lotz (2003:1) points out *that feminists must not be misled by simplistic popular media constructions of third-wave feminism, but should consider uses emerging in other national contexts for more productive theory building.*

The process of social integration for African-American women is complicated further by the intersection and interplay of social class, race, and gender (Collin 1990, 1998). Social class, rather than gender, appears to be the defining as well as the determining factor in this emancipation and integration project because women of the same social class are likely to have similar interests, tastes, and most important, values which tend to overwrite even their basic cultural values. These commonalities, we contend, are very likely to provide the tools for unity and integration. For example, Bourdieu (1992) has provided documented findings and argued that those likely to succeed educationally and subsequently economically are the children of the middle-class because the middle-class succeeds in reproducing itself. This class reproduction is ensured by an educational system whose values simply reflect those of the middle-class.

In the United States females make up 24 percent of the middle-class. But African-American females make up only three percent of the middle-class (Annual Demographic Survey of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau 2002). This suggests that the integration of African-American women into the American society is likely to be easier, more meaningful, more successful, and really substantive if feminists were to take the necessary precautions and steps, through Habermas's communicative action, to ensure that African-American women acquire higher levels of education. With higher levels of education, they are likely to then move up into the middle-class, thereby acquiring and sharing values of this class with white women of the class. Of great significance, membership in this class also bestows power upon women, empowering them politically,

socially, culturally, economically, and academically, thus breaking down the artificial barriers to women's true, meaningful, substantive integration erected by men. The fact that there are few African-American women in the middle-class stems from a biased social class stratification system, not from their womanhood since there are more white women proportionately in this class than African-American women. This points to the fact that the race variable remains a significant, determining factor.

Even among African-American women only, Collins (1990) argues, a middle-class African-American woman cannot realistically claim she speaks for or represents the views and experiences of all African-American women because their life experiences, world views, and values are different. Assuming that through the processes of self-definition, self-determination and self-actualization, as Collins (1990) proposed, African-American women opt for integration into the American society by moving up as a group into the middle class then they must seek to fight for the right to education for all African-American women as the key to achieving this goal. Do the differences, dissent, and disunity among women, evident in the preceding discussion in this section, suggest that social integration of African-American women cannot be achieved? It is this question that drives and guides our discussion in the next section.

Framework for Social Integration of African-American Women

Building on the theoretical ideas and frameworks provided by Collins (1990, 1998); Harding (2000); Hooks (1984); Lotz (2003); and Whelehan (1995), a framework for the social integration of African-American women, which is the distinct contribution of this paper to the current scholarship, is proposed below. As proposed and discussed in this paper's main thesis earlier, the social integration of African-American women is conceptualized as driven by an intellectual revolutionary process. As an intellectual process, it requires three revolutionary stages, all dictated and facilitated by Habermas's communicative action. First and foremost, this process requires that every social class barrier be eliminated both conceptually and substantively. Social class barriers breed disunity and create a rift between prominent African-American feminist scholars or elite and other African-American women. For these social class barriers to be eliminated, a true intellectual revolution must occur, one that creates a common sense of purpose and a meaningful sense of belonging among all African-American women. The ideas of scholars such as Collins (1990), we contend, will trigger this general intellectual revolution. This means that all African-American women, irrespective of social class, must have to begin by going through processes of self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization. This is expected to provide African-American women with sound knowledge of themselves, knowledge that is crucial for self-understanding as well as the recognition of their differences and common experiences as a group. As a group, they are then likely to define and determine who they are and who they really want to become.

Second, racial and social class barriers existing between whites and African-Americans must be eliminated. Racial and social class barriers tend to separate middle-class white feminist scholars or elite from their African-American counterparts. From this paper's approach, the distance between white and African-American women is not only created by racial differences but, more important, by social class. Middle-class white and African-American women, although of the same social class, experience further class stratification both substantively and conceptually, dictated by race not social class. This intra-class

stratification can only be meaningfully eliminated through a true, intellectual revolution, triggered by communicative action. Once these barriers are removed, both white and African-American scholars will, through communicative action, be able to promote and facilitate the process of mutual understanding among all the women of both groups. This, it is hoped, will create a true sense of oneness and common purpose that is likely to produce meaningful social cohesion, a real powerful, unifying, and integrating force to reckon with.

Third, a true united front, composed of all women, irrespective of social class, ethnicity, race, age and other stratification variables must be crafted. The formation of such a united front must be driven by women's recognition of the pervasiveness of domination and exclusionary schemes developed, fostered, and maintained by prominent, powerful men. At this level, true awareness of a shared, common purpose and agenda, created through the intellectual revolutionary process, is expected. It is this united front that will create the general awareness of and sensitivity to the plight of women both among women and among men. The unity forged by the awareness of and sensitivity to the plight of women will then create the social conditions necessary for true, meaningful, and substantive social integration of women and hopefully humanity into a transformed society which eliminates and replaces this present one that is dominated by a few privileged, powerful males. This is to suggest that a realistic process, designed to integrate African-American women into American social order, must be framed and understood within this broad, inclusive framework.

Four, a true intellectual revolution involving both men and women, triggered by Feminist scholarship and the united front discussed above are imperative. It is one that will bring men to the bitter realization, as pointed out by Hegel (1967) that the master is not free as long as the slave is enslaved. As the works of Collins (1990, 1998); Harding (2001); Hooks (1981, 1984); Lotz 2003 and Whelehan (1995) suggest, the process proposed above for the social integration of African- American women into American social order is neither easy nor simple. It is a process that is complex and complicated. For this process to be successful, a drastic and complete intellectual revolution has to occur. This revolution must involve not only women of all social, racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds but also men of all social, racial, ethnic, and cultural origins. The work of Collins (1990, 1998) clearly demonstrates that the integration of the African-American women into the American society cannot be achieved simply by focusing on their womanhood as the force which unites all American women. It suggests that race and social class are very important factors to consider.

Education is one of the main substantive determinants of social class and social class accounts for most of the disunity that exists among women. Those of higher social classes tend to systematically dominate and exclude those of lower social classes, irrespective of their gender and race. This then suggests that the social integration of African-American women is going to require an educational process that creates the conditions for and facilitates meaningful intellectual revolution through communicative action. We contend that this is the single most important prerequisite for realistic, meaningful, and substantive social integration of African-American women.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social integration for African-American women, as conceptualized in this paper, raises serious, fundamental questions not only about feminism as a political, social, intellectual, and scholarly undertaking but also about the capitalist economic system, the

broader context which produced the social conditions considered to have precipitated the birth, expansion, and development of feminism. The following are four of these questions which will drive and guide most of the discussion in this section: 1) Can a true, meaningful, substantive inclusion and incorporation of all women into all of society's institutions, accomplished through a process that requires the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the establishment of what Habermas (1985, Vol. II: 139) refers to as communicative action, be realistically achieved within a capitalist economic system?; 2) Does the capitalist economic system provide the kind of environment that allows for the types of processes that actors engage in to reach understanding while at the same time taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm, and renew their membership in social groups and their own identities?; 3) Does the capitalist economic system allow for communicative actions that are not only processes of interpretation in which cultural knowledge is tested against the world but are at the same time processes of social integration and socialization?; and 4) Can feminism and feminist scholarship, as processes whose broader context is a capitalist economic system, provide a viable basic framework that is needed to achieve women=s social integration?

With respect to questions one and two, eliminating all forms of discrimination and creating a framework for communicative action is difficult at best and impossible at worst, since the capitalist economic system is based on and promotes social inequalities and therefore would not provide an environment that would allow for the types of processes that actors *will* engage in to reach understanding while at the same time taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm and renew their membership in social groups and their own identities. However, based on the intellectual revolution proposed and discussed in the framework for social integration section above, eliminating all forms of discrimination and creating a framework for communicative action is a realistic, achievable goal because implicit in the proposed intellectual revolution is the transformation of the capitalist economic system which, we contend and argue in this paper, is attainable because according to Hegel (1967), in the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, the master is not free as long as the slave is enslaved. Hegel insightfully pointed out that to be recognized, both by others and by oneself, as a complete human being requires that subjects enter into a process of communicative interaction which makes it possible for the identity of all to be *freely* acknowledged. Hegel argued further that the institution of slavery denies the master=s liberty as much as it does the slave's. From this perspective, patriarchy, discrimination directed toward women, and the systematic exclusion of women from participating in various societal institutions are all made possible and facilitated by the capitalist economic system. Therefore for the master, in this case men, to acquire and maintain *his* liberty, the transformation of the capitalist economic system into a system that is consistent with the kinds of processes mandated by communicative interaction or communicative action is imperative.

With regard to question three, there is ample evidence which suggests that the capitalist economic system does not allow for communicative actions that are not only processes of interpretation in which cultural knowledge is tested against the world but are at the same time processes of social integration and socialization. For instance, although Marianne Weber saw capitalism possibly offering some emancipation for women in its acceleration of individualism and its erosion of ancient relational patterns like patriarchy (Thomas, 1985; Ritzer, 2004), she recognized the fact that the interaction of capitalism and

patriarchy creates barriers to the attempts of women, especially non-elite women to seek greater liberty and autonomy,@ (Ritzer, 2004: 300). Capitalism has contributed to the birth and development of a Feminism that is itself divisive, exclusive, discriminatory, racist, and elitist as demonstrated by the works of Collins (1990, 1998); Harding (2001); Hooks (1981, 1984); Lotz (2003) and Whelehan (1995) discussed earlier. One of the basic theses of this paper is that the capitalist economic system is the main reason why communicative actions are neither processes of interpretation in which cultural knowledge is tested against the world nor processes of social integration and socialization. As such it is naive to expect feminism to provide for the kind of socialization that is conducive to women=s social integration.

With respect to question four, which is closely related to question three, feminism and feminist scholarship, as processes whose broader context is a capitalist economic system, face uphill battles in and major obstacles to their struggles to provide a viable basic framework that is needed to achieve women=s social integration. Due to the divisive nature of the capitalist economic system, feminism and feminist scholarship have failed to forge a universal female view (Davidson, 1988; Ritzer, 2004). Consequently, current feminist scholarship represents the views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of prominent, powerful women of a particular social class. For example, white middle-class heterosexual women use the term woman as a monolithic category that is useful in opposing male domination. However, they tend to ignore their own acts of domination directed toward women who are neither of their class nor race and whose views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences are different from theirs (Collins 1990, 1998; Harding 2001; Hooks 1981, 1984; Lotz 2001; and Whelehan 1995).

Conclusion

Despite the uphill battles and major obstacles feminism faces, we conclude that the social integration of African-American women, as conceptualized and defined in this paper, is achievable thanks to the framework for social integration proposed and discussed earlier as the distinct contribution of this paper to the current scholarship because: 1) the framework is driven by feminist scholarship; 2) the framework is grounded in the power of the human mind and intellect; 3) the framework conceptualizes and considers every social reality as socially constructed and this framework is driven by the idea that just as the human mind constructs social realities, through the dialectical processes involving the mind and the social environment, it is equally capable of de-constructing those social realities; and 4) the capitalist economic system, one of such social realities that presents a major obstacle to the realization of social integration for women in general and African-American women in particular, will be de-constructed thanks to the power of the human mind and intellect and a new system or social reality will be socially constructed, a new system or social reality that will create the necessary conditions that are conducive to communicative interaction, the prerequisite for socialization and social integration.

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