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Supposing Truth Is a Woman?

A COMMENTARY

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Abstract

In this commentary I engage with Coleman and Bassi's significant intervention 'Deconstructing Militant Manhood'. My intention is a further problematization of what they identify as the exclusionary orderings of powerful gendered and heteronormative scripts within left-political organizations that otherwise identify with a project of contesting the inequities associated with patriarchal modernity. I draw on Nietzsche in considering the production and exclusion of societal 'truths', and the (im)possibilities of 'speaking truth to power', when what is empowered is so precisely through dismissal of difference. I affirm the significant political project of 'becoming-other', as a multiplicity of choices that do not collude with contemporary onto-epistemological order, at the same time as noting the seeming *impasse* of identity politics in shifting the juggernaut of broader disciplining structures.

Keywords

(anti-)globalization, Nietzsche, Other, patriarchy, subjectivity, truth

'Supposing truth is a woman – what then?' With this question, Nietzsche (1966 [1886]: 2) opens *Beyond Good and Evil*. He moves on to state that philosopher 'dogmatists' 'have been very inexpert about women'; that 'the gruesome seriousness, the clumsy obtrusiveness with which they have usually approached truth … have been awkward and very improper methods for winning a woman's heart'. And that certainly, 'she has not allowed herself to be won'.

These assertions encapsulate much that is pertinent in Lara Montesinos Coleman and Serena Bassi's engagement with 'Deconstructing Militant Manhood' (this issue). Nietzsche affirms the existence of 'truths' othered by those empowered through patriarchal discourse and transcendent ideals and institutions; he speaks of the apparent inability of empowered 'truths' to

engage the hearts of their others; and he notes the resistant subjectivities embodied by the category 'woman', interpreted here as one delineation of these others.[1] Foucault (1998 [1976]: 60, 70), drawn on extensively in Coleman and Bassi's contextualizations of power beyond the binary of power and resistance, iterates this *problematique* in his acknowledgement of 'the immense labour to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce ... men's (*sic*) subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word'. The implication here is of both the work that goes into producing the subjectivities required to sustain the assumptions and institutions that appear 'truth-full' in the modern world; and of the possibility that there exist experiences and subjectivities that are other to, and othered, by this production.

That these authors are men speaks of the hybridities and complexities infusing all binaries, including that of man and woman. As Nietzsche (1966 [1886]: 2) also states, 'there are only degrees and subtleties of gradation', despite the tendency of language to 'talk of opposites'. The reality perhaps is closer to a diversity of masculinities and femininities, that nonetheless are caught within a structuring ideological web of patriarchal capitalism: which today seems bolstered by the rewarding of a testosterone associated risk-prone finance (Sapienza *et al.* 2009) and virtualizing impetus; supported by hyper-techno-connectivity and the addictive immediate returns of apparent remote control (Guattari 2000 [1989]: 28–9, after Virilio 1994).

Coleman and Bassi speak to this conundrum by documenting and theorizing the structuring effects of two left-political contexts and their associated and privileged masculine identities. They term these the 'Man with Analysis', who deploys a patriarchal and authoritarian script that constrains engagement in a more conventional left-political organization; and that of the militant 'Anarchist Action Man', associated with a politics of engagement that emphasizes direct action and cause-related arrestable offences. Their contribution and analysis is pertinent since it illuminates ways in which organizations and individuals whose stated *raison d'etre* is to move beyond existing empowered structures that are exclusionary, in practice may reproduce many of the same exclusions they claim to be contesting. The article is valuable because it traces in revealing detail the styles, words, costuming and embodied practices via which such authoritative identities are performed and through which exclusions are unreflexively maintained. As such it highlights that it is in every moment and every act that power dynamics and disciplining subjectifications are both constituted, and might be refracted.

Many of their experiences and observations mesh with those I have also expressed regarding similar complex political spaces (e.g. S. Sullivan 2004, 2005a, 2005b). And additional feminist engagements with a range of left-political contexts speak corresponding truths: see, for example, Emma Dowling's (2005) and Laura Sullivan's (2005) detailed documentations of the politics and organization of the 2004 European Social Forum in London; and Niamh Moore's (2008) analysis of gendered activist engagement with a 1990s

eco/feminist peace camp at Canada's threatened Clayoquot Sound. When read in conjunction, these diverse studies bring into focus some of the privileged scripts and authenticities through which left-political engagement also can systematically (re)produce the very structures claimed for critique, contest and dismantling. They also complexify issues by pointing to the diversities of experience, interpretation and desire expressed by different women (and men) in these situations.

These might all be framed as feminist analyses of left-political organizations, practices, events and accepted performative scripts. As such they focus on engagements between men and women, and between particular masculinized and feminized identities and performances, to elucidate 'the gendered construction of (anti-)globalization politics' (Coleman and Bassi this issue: 225; also Eschle and Maiguascha 2010). As Coleman and Bassi (this issue: 225) state, 'global ordering' is made not only at macro and formal institutional levels, but also 'through more quotidian forms of power, constituted around gender [and sexuality] but also intersecting with hierarchies of race and class'. I would add here that this is additionally true of a current global and gendered ordering of non-human natures. By foundationally discounting the possibility of sentience and agency in these domains (Plumwood 2006), this 'orders out' both nature and othered nature knowledges, while simultaneously readying non-human natures for new rationalizations that align neatly with capitalist enterprise (O'Connor 1994; Robertson 2006; S. Sullivan 2009).

Specific strategies deployed to discipline engagement, in other words, are relevant for diverse spheres of immanence whose demotion as variously deviant, or whose rationalization into commodified forms of value, act to enhance the moment-by-moment onto-epistemological ordering of patriarchal and capitalist (hyper)modernity. We might think more broadly here of other others: of animist, shamanic and nomadic cosmologies (Moeller 2010; S. Sullivan 2010); of a sentient and spirited nature (Curry 2008); of consciousnesses that are 'mad' (Foucault 2004 [1961]); of a modern 'planning out' of ways of living that are land-entwined and low-impact (Hannis 2010); and of varied forms of commons and 'commoning' (Pedersen in press).

In calling for embodiments of the 'becomings-woman, -child, -animal, or -molecular', through which 'nature opposes its power, and the power of music, to the machines of human beings, the roar of factories and bombers', Deleuze and Guattari (1987 [1980]: 309) thus affirm the 'positive dialectic' (Ruddick 2008) immanent in the 'opposite of having an advantage'. With this they celebrate the political necessity of a radical 'becoming-other', rather than a becoming included; if to be included means to collude with onto-epistemological realities that are subjectively heretical and violating. As such, the search for 'an ontological basis of antagonism within Empire, but also against and beyond Empire', as Hardt and Negri (2000: 21) put it, is both feminist and a transgression of understandings of feminism as dictated by binary categories. It is this, rather than any knee-jerk essentializing that

woman = body = mother = caring = close-to-nature, or a counter and equally binary response that dispels any such connection between the categories 'woman' and 'nature', that animates an emancipatory and inclusive feminism to call for a cultivating of diverse 'truths' – experiential, reflective, verifiable, questioning – that reach towards modernity's 'untruths' (cf. Nietzsche 1966 [1886]: 9).

At this point, however, it can become hard not to feel the weight of what appears to be a structural and structuring, as well as theoretical, *impasse*. This is the age-old question of how can other (and othered) voices and registers 'speak to power'? How is this possible when the identities, practices and institutions that become empowered do so precisely by virtue of many consolidating moments of not listening (Irigaray 2002); and when participating in structures experienced as significantly alien feels distressing and can signal collusion? How might possibilities be created for women (and other others) to participate in and shape disciplining scripts, like those detailed by Coleman and Bassi, beyond hegemonized discourses of rights and equality in patriarchal organizational forms (which is not at all to depreciate the achievements of rights-based and liberation movements)? How is it possible to engender a multi-way ethics of listening, that might also move towards an ethics of hearing and of responsive connectivity that is intrinsically enhancing of life and diversity (Fox 2006)?

Detailed engagement with, and deconstruction of, the moments that create exclusionary orderings is essential in engendering understanding of these moments and possibilities for their refraction, and I applaud Coleman and Bassi for their intervention in this article. At the same time, I am struck by the power dynamics that also infuse their study and that seem little reflected on. It is unclear, for example, whether or not the political actors with whom they engaged were aware that these moments might become a published research output. This might be fine given that in ethnographic research the relevance of an experience indeed may come into focus only at a later date. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity here for reflecting on the ethics of constructing a post-hoc authoritative engagement, published in a context that is itself imbued with exclusionary languages, accepted language games and possibilities for access, and with little apparent invitation for those spoken about to also speak in this context. In this regard, and pragmatically, I wondered if the analyses documented by Coleman and Bassi have been distributed to the person(s) and groups concerned for comment and engagement? This could result in a very rich discussion in IFjP. One that is not only limited to some women talking with each other about their experiences of some men; in a context – a feminist journal of politics – that paradoxically is an empowered critical space for feminist voices that tend to be predominantly from those gendered as women.

To conclude this brief comment, then, I wonder more broadly whether we might go further still: both towards a more radical opening up of the onto-epistemological possibilities that are ordered in and ordered out in dominant

and domineering structures, and towards the possibilities of speaking different truths to power in such a way as to entice listening? Perhaps this becomes a feminist echo of Nietzsche's desire for a moving 'beyond'. Towards supporting 'the genius of the heart who silences all that is loud and self-satisfied', in producing truths in which 'not just man is the "measure of all things"' (1966 [1986]: 233, 11).

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Note

1   Hurst (2007) emphasizes a somewhat different reading by affirming an inability in Nietzsche's writing to be beyond the structuring of patriarchal ideology. Mine is closer to her acknowledgement of Derrida's interpretation of the feminine in Nietzsche's canon as functioning as 'a power of self-affirmation, which shakes off all ideology'; with

> [w]oman as the quintessential figure of Nietzsche's free thinker, who understands the truth that there is no truth, without nihilistic skepticism, but with the cheerful, self-affirmative, dionysiac power of inventive renewal that he endorses as the proper reaction to … abyssmal un-truth.
>
> (Hurst 2007: 52)

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