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Contextualizing feminism — gender, ethnic and class divisions

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis

Introduction

'Sisterhood is powerful.' 'Sisterhood' can also be misleading unless contextualized. Black, minority and migrant women have been on the whole invisible within the feminist movement in Britain and within the literature on women's or feminist studies.

This paper attempts to explore the issue of the interrelationship of ethnic and gender divisions.¹ Not only is such an attempt long overdue theoretically but it also raises political issues which must be central to feminist struggle.

Our analysis serves to problematize the notion of 'sisterhood' and the implicit feminist assumption that there exists a commonality of interests and/or goals amongst all women. Rather we argue that *every* feminist struggle has a specific *ethnic* (as well as class) context. Although the notion of the 'ethnic' will be considered later in the paper we note here that for us it primarily relates to the exclusionary/inclusionary boundaries of collectivities formed round the notion of a common origin.² The 'ethnic' context of feminist struggles has been systematically ignored (except in relation to various minorities, especially 'black') and we suggest this has helped to perpetuate both political and theoretical inadequacies within feminist and socialist analyses.

The black feminist movement has grown partly as a response to the invisibility of black women and to the racism of the white feminist movement. Recently several books have appeared, mostly American which discuss black women and feminism. Bell Hooks puts her case against white feminism clearly when she states:

In much of the literature written by white women on the 'woman question' from the nineteenth century to the present day, authors will refer to 'white men' but use the word 'woman' when they really mean 'white woman'. Concurrently, the term 'blacks' is often made synonymous with black men (1981: 140).

In addition she points out that there has been a constant comparison of the plight of 'women' and 'blacks' working with these racist/sexist assumptions and which has diverted attention from the specificity of the oppression of black women. We share this critique of white feminism which is found within the black feminist movement in Britain also. However we want to broaden out the frame of reference of the existing debate. Within black feminism the most dominant approach defines black women as suffering from the 'triple oppression' of race, gender and class. This approach is inadequate, however, both theoretically and politically. Race, gender and class cannot

be tagged on to each other mechanically for, as concrete social relations, they are enmeshed in each other and the particular intersections involved produce specific effects. The need for the study of the intersection of these divisions has been recognized recently by black feminists.³

We also suggest, however, that the issue of the interrelationship of the different social divisions cannot focus only on black versus white women's position. This has the theoretical effect of singling out 'racism' as applicable only to 'black' women and focusses then on the colour rather than on the structural location of ethnic groups as determinants of their social relations. In addition an exclusive focus on 'racism' fails to address the diversity of ethnic experiences which derive from other factors like economic or political position. The notion of 'black women' as delineating the boundaries of the alternative feminist movement to white feminism leaves non-British non-black women (like us – a Greek-Cypriot and an Israeli-Jew) unaccounted for politically. Although we recognize the impetus behind the black women's movement and the need for its autonomous organization, black feminism can be too wide or too narrow a category for specific feminist struggles. On the one hand, there are struggles which concern all migrant women, like those against immigration laws, and on the other hand there are struggles which might concern only Sikh Indian women for instance.

For these reasons, our paper will use the notion of ethnic divisions rather than the black/white division as a more comprehensive conceptual category for struggling against racism. One of our tasks will be to consider the links between the concepts of racism and ethnicity as well as attempting to relate ethnic divisions to those of gender and class.

The marxist tradition of analysis which has informed much of socialist-feminist analysis has been partly responsible for the invisibility of ethnic divisions (as well as the feminist tradition itself which assumes unitary and biological roots to 'women'). Contemporary marxist analysis has indeed recognized the importance of relating ethnic to class divisions and gender to class divisions but there has been little attempt to link ethnic and gender divisions to each other. In addition Marxism has had difficulty in analysing ethnic or gender divisions without reducing them to some form of class division. Because of the significance of this tradition of analysis for us we shall present a critique of Marxism as a necessary preliminary to developing our own position.

We shall then present an exploratory framework for analysing the interrelationship of ethnic and gender divisions. We shall briefly examine these divisions within two central areas of feminist analysis, employment and reproduction. The paper will conclude by considering some of the implications of the analysis presented for the western/Third World feminist debate.

Ethnic and Gender Divisions and Marxism

As already noted Marxism has particular difficulties in analysing non-class social divisions. The marxist concept of the mode of production is based on an abstract model of relations that does not signal the concrete groups of people within it. It does however establish a firm grounding for class divisions in as much as the concept of class is hierarchically incorporated within a systematic theory whose central concept is that of mode of production. But ethnic divisions and gender divisions cannot be situated within this theory for they are not essential constituents of it – the theoretical basis for them is missing.⁴ The abstract level of analysis in Marx's *Capital* presents problems for the analysis of concrete social relations including those of class. In some

versions of Marxism found in economic approaches, classes as concrete groups of people are reduced to the workings of the economy or the 'needs' of capital. We do not accept the depiction of class in concrete analysis as reducible to its own dynamics as found within the sphere of the economy. Indeed much recent analysis has treated classes as concrete historical groupings whose actual practices are not reducible to mode of production effects. We would take issue with a reductionist position that sees a necessary relationship between, for example, class determination and political/class position. Particularly we reject this not only because of the usual reasons given by Marxists, i.e. the separate effectivity of the ideological and political realms, but also because we consider the intersection between class, ethnic and gender divisions as important in the development of particular forms of political consciousness and action.

Unlike the analysis of class which finds a theoretical basis in Marxism despite the difficulties encountered in concrete analysis, different problems are presented in the analysis of gender and ethnic divisions. When these categories are used by Marxists they often involve very common-sense usages since Marxism has not systematically concerned itself with them as theoretical constructs. This has led to very unclear and unspecific usages and shifts in meaning from, for example, identifying gender with a biological constituent and at other times seeing it as a social construct or race as historically produced and yet as basically organized around the ascriptive characteristic of 'blackness'.

Because of Marxism's failure to specifically deal with gender and ethnic divisions, marxist-feminists and marxist anti-racists have attempted to ground them within economic relations, although marxist-feminists particularly have sought to do so in a non-class reductionist way.

Ethnic and gender groups have been seen as structured by the 'needs' of capital for migrant labour or cheap labour. The reserve army of labour debate is an example of this.⁵ In addition there has been a tendency to reduce these groups to fundamentally class groupings. For example we have seen attempts to theorize black people in Britain as a class fraction, or an underclass and migrants in Europe as a 'class stratum' of the working class. This approach empirically fails to note the differentiation within the ethnic or migrant category, both in terms of ethnicity and gender and in terms of economic, political and ideological location. In addition this reduction to class can only present gender and ethnic identities as some form of 'false-consciousness' – as illusory. For example some attempts to theorize ethnicity have seen it as a form of incipient class consciousness whose essential project develops into that of class.⁶ (Interestingly the notion of women as a class is mostly systematically presented by Delphy (1977) from a radical-feminist position.)

The marxist theorization of the state, ranging from the classical marxist tradition of Engels, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg to more recent developments (instrumental, coordinator functional and state derivation approaches) presents a different problem for the analysis of ethnic divisions.⁷

Marxist theories of the state have tended to identify the boundaries of the national collectivity with that of the relations of production. This is found in Marx's own assumption concerning the overlapping of the boundary between civil and political society. In Marx's words 'In the state the whole civil society of an epoch is epitomized'. For Marxists, on the whole, the rise of the nation-state is actively bounded by the relations of production and conditions of class conflict. For example the classical analysis of Engels of the emergence of the state depicts it as a result of society's entanglement in insoluble class antagonisms (Engels, 1972). Thus marxist analyses have been sensitive to differential access to power of different classes but not to other forms of differential access based on gender or ethnic, national or racial divisions.⁸

These assumptions are not seriously challenged by the various recent marxist theorizations of the state.

Our view is that it is not sufficient to assert as Schermerhorn (1970) does that each nation-state in the modern world contains sub-sections or sub-systems. It is also the case that in almost all social formations there are sections of the population that are to varying degrees excluded from political participation and representation. This exclusion operates at least partially in a different manner from the exclusion of 'classes' of the dominant national or ethnic group. For example, the new Nationality Bill in Britain presents exclusion not on the basis of class (as does legislation concerning private property for example) but on the basis of ethnicity and gender.

A further problem within some marxist literature is the suggestion that internal ethnic divisions are ideological in the sense of 'false' or non-real. The attempt to theorize a distinction between historical (i.e. real) and non-historical (i.e. non-real) nations assumed that if an ethnic minority was able to obtain a separate and independent state, then it was based on a real and historical origin and other minorities were non-historical and only 'ideological'.

All three divisions have an organizational, experiential and representational form, are historically produced and therefore changeable, are affected by and affect each other and the economic, political and ideological relations in which they are inserted. Relations of power are usually found within each division and thus often the existence of dominant and subordinate partners. They are all therefore framed in relation to each other within relations of domination. They may thus involve political mobilization, exclusion from particular resources and struggles over them, claims to political representation and the formation of concrete interests and goals which may shift over time. It is not a question therefore of one being more 'real' than the others or a question of *which* is the most important. However it is clear that the three divisions prioritize different spheres of social relations and will have different effects which it may be possible to specify in concrete analysis. However we suggest that each division exists within the context of the others and that any concrete analysis has to take this into account.

Firstly, we shall briefly comment on these divisions, clarifying the sense in which we use them and noting some of the main differences amongst them. Secondly, we shall begin to situate them in relation to each other in the spheres of employment and reproduction, two central areas of feminist analyses. We shall particularly note the links between gender and ethnic divisions since this has rarely been considered.

Class, Gender and Ethnic Divisions

As socialists working within a broadly marxist-informed analysis we see class divisions as grounded in the different relations of groups to the means of production which provides what has been called a group's class determination. However class mobilization cannot be read from class determination for class goals are constructed through a variety of different mechanisms with ideological practices having a central role in this. Concrete class groupings may be composed of both men and women, of black and white and different cultures and ethnic identities. These concrete groupings are constructed historically. At times there may be a coincidence of class and gender or ethnic position (and at other times there maybe cross cuttings). For example, some fractions of the working class may be primarily composed of women or black people. This may reflect economic, political and ideological processes but may also be structured through struggle and negotiation between the groups themselves and in relation to the state. Classes are not homogeneous ethnically, culturally or in terms of gender in

most cases but class fractions may constitute some kind of homogeneity.

Gender divisions relate to the organization of sexual difference and biological reproduction and establish forms of representation around these, although their concrete contents will include notions of the appropriateness of wage-labour, education and so on to men and to women. Usually sexual difference and biological reproduction (the ontological basis of gender) are represented as having necessary social effects (from say 'sexual intercourse' to 'class position'). Gender divisions thus usually work with a notion of a 'natural' relationship between social effects and sexual differences/biological reproduction. We do not accept such a depiction nor that biological *reproduction* is an equivalent material basis for *gender* to that of *production* for *class*. Indeed the attempt to discover a feminist materialism in the social relations of reproduction fails precisely in the attempt to superimpose a materialist project onto a different object and reproduce its terms of reference.¹⁰ Finally the end result is indeed to reduce these social relations to their material base (biology) just as within marxist materialism the reduction is to 'mode of production'.

Rather we reject both biological reductionism and class reductionism. We are suggesting that there is an *object* of discursive reference in the sphere of gender divisions which relates to groups of subjects *defined* by their sexual/biological difference as opposed to groups of subjects defined by their economic production difference as in class. Gender divisions are 'ideological' to the extent that they do not have a basis in reproduction, but reproduction is represented as their basis. However, the ideological nature of gender divisions does not mean they do not exist nor that they do not have social origins and social effects or involve material practices.

Unlike class and gender divisions, ethnic divisions are difficult to ground in some separate sphere of relations. This makes the various marxist and sociological attempts to try to find systematic conceptual differences between national/ethnic and racial groupings even more problematic. This attempt is never successful because it is impossible to systematically ascribe particular and different realms to them. Migration, conquest and colonization have developed a vast heterogeneous body of historical cases.

The only general basis on which we can theorize what can broadly be conceived as 'ethnic' phenomena in all their diversity are as various forms of ideological construct which divide people into different collectivities or communities. This will involve exclusionary/inclusionary boundaries which form the collectivity. In other words although the constructs are ideological, they involve real material practices and therefore origins and effects. Whether the boundaries are those of a tribe, a nation or a linguistic or cultural minority, they will tend to focus themselves around the myth of common origin (whether biological, cultural or historical). Although sometimes there will be other means of joining the collectivity than being born into it (like religious conversion or naturalization), group membership is considered as the 'natural' right of being *born* into it. The salience of the collectivity and the social relations involved can vary greatly.

Ethnicity is not only a question of ethnic identity. This latter does not exhaust the category of the 'ethnic' nor does it necessarily occur. Ethnicity may be constructed outside the group by the material conditions of the group and its social representation by other groups. However in practice ethnic identity and often solidarity may occur either as a pre-requisite for the group or as an effect of its material, political or ideological placement. In addition ethnicity involves struggle, negotiation and the use of ethnic resources for the countering of disadvantages or perpetuation of advantages. Conditions of reproduction of the ethnic group as well as its transformation are related to the divisions of gender and class. For example, class homogeneity within the ethnic group will produce a greater cohesion of interests and goals.

The concept of ethnicity has too often been identified in Britain with the Ethnic School tradition which tends to concentrate on issues of culture or identity and has come under a great deal of justified attack for ignoring racism and the structural disadvantages of minority ethnic groups.¹¹ However our use of the term ethnicity has as a central element exclusion/inclusion practices and the relations of power of dominance/subordination that are aspects of these. Majority groups possess an ethnicity as well as minority groups. Ethnicity and racism share both the categories of exclusion and power but racism is a specific form of exclusion. Racism discourses posit an essential biological determination to culture but its referent may be any group that has been 'socially' constructed as having a different 'origin', whether cultural, biological or historical. It can be 'Jewish', 'black', 'foreign', 'migrant', 'minority'. In other words any group that has been located in ethnic terms can be subjected to 'racism' as a form of exclusion. The 'Racist' category is more deterministic than the mere 'ethnic' category.

Concerning the difference between ethnic and national groups, it is often a question of the different goals and achievements of the collectivity. The nationalist project is more strictly political for its claims will necessarily include rights to separate political representation or to territory (as in the case of Palestinians and Jews in Israel and Turkish-Cypriots and Greek-Cypriots in Cyprus).

We consider that gender and ethnic divisions particularly are underpinned by a notion of a 'natural' relation. In gender divisions it is found in the positing of necessary social effects to sexual difference and biological reproduction and in ethnic divisions by assumptions concerning the 'natural' boundaries of collectivities or the 'naturalness' of culture. In capitalist societies like Britain very often the 'natural' ideological elements of gender and ethnic divisions are used to 'naturalize' unequal class divisions. Gender and ethnic divisions are used as legitimizers in two major ways.

In patriarchal white societies it is perceived as 'natural' that men will occupy a higher economic position in the labour market than women and white people than black people. For example notions of women's sexual difference (more 'submissive', 'feminine', 'intuitive', 'expressive', 'dextrous') and their 'essential mothering role' are used and are often manipulated for economically justifying (explaining) women's position (at times by women themselves). Racism and ethnicity also have a role in justifying the economic/class subordination of black people. For example arguments about the cultural choices of ethnic groups – and racial stereotypes about Asian men (money-seeking) and Afro-Caribbean men (work idle) – are used to account for their economic position. The second way in which the 'natural' elements of gender and ethnic divisions are used is as rallying points for political struggle against class inequality as well as gender and ethnic inequalities. This is the case in most anti-imperialist struggles where notions of national identity are used. The black power movement has often used racial/ethnic identification partly as a counter to existing racial stereotypes and oppressions (for example in black nationalism the identification with Africa and in black power the 'black is beautiful' rhetoric and more recently, culturalist and religious revivals such as Rastafarianism). As regards gender, feminists have used women's 'nature' as a rallying point, particularly with reference to the positive values of women's culture and 'nature'. However, using ethnic and gender categories in this way as rallying points for political mobilization in class-related struggles can present a problem for class unity.

As well as ethnic and gender divisions being used for class goals, class divisions can provide the material conditions for ethnic and gender groups, for these will give unequal access to economic resources. State practices may exclude class, ethnic and gender groupings in different ways, structure their relationship to each other and give differential political power to different groups. Therefore when we analyse specific

historical cases these divisions often cannot be separated.

We have suggested that the 'natural' ideological aspects of ethnic and gender groupings inform class relations. In addition we would suggest that ethnic and gender divisions are more socially immutable. Whereas it is possible theoretically for subjects to change class position (although empirically it may be difficult), it is not so for gender or ethnic position (especially for the 'racial' category). Gender position is fixed (apart from transexuals) and generally one is 'born' into one's ethnic position. In particular cases, women can become 'honorary' men (when men are not available for example to do 'male' work as in war) or religious conversion can occur. But the major mechanism is ascriptive for both ethnic and gender divisions.

The Relations between Gender and Ethnic Divisions

We suggested above all that three divisions are intermeshed in such a way that we cannot see them as additive or prioritize abstractly any one of them. Each division presents ideological and organizational principles within which the others operate, although in different historical contexts and different social arenas their role will differ. The fusion of gender and class and ethnicity and class will also operate in the relationship between gender and ethnic divisions.

For example if we consider the household we will find gender divisions will differ according to ethnicity. Ethnically specific definitions of women's and men's roles underlie the sexual division of labour in the family. Such aspects as mothering, housework, sexual obligations, obedience and submissiveness to male commands (and indeed to other members of the family) will differ according to ethnicity (as well as class of course). We would suggest that ethnic divisions are particularly important in the internal gender divisions within the household and family therefore, although state practices will affect them.

If we consider the sphere of employment – the more public or external sexual division of labour – this will be affected particularly by the gender divisions of the majority ethnic group. Values and institutionalized practices about women's 'nature' and 'role' present constraints to men and women from minority/subordinate ethnic groups despite their own gender ideologies.

Another link between ethnic and gender divisions is found in the way in which the *boundary* of ethnicity depends on gender. The definition of membership within the ethnic group often depends on performing gender attributes correctly. Both identity and institutional arrangements of ethnic groups incorporate gender roles and specify appropriate relations between sexes such as, for example, who can marry them. A Greek-Cypriot girl of the second generation is regarded as 'Kypraia' usually when she conforms to rules about sexually appropriate behaviour – otherwise she becomes excluded. The definition of boundaries is far from being an internal practice alone. If we consider racial stereotypes we can see the centrality of gender roles; for example stereotypes about the 'dominant' Asian father and the 'dominant' black mother, or stereotypes about black men and women as sexual 'studs'. These all indicate the reliance on gender attributes for specifying ethnic difference. We want to briefly suggest some more specific links between ethnic and gender divisions in employment and reproduction.

Employment

The internal gender divisions of an ethnic group will also affect the participation of

men and women of the group in the labour market. Men and women of a specific ethnic group will tend to hold particular but different positions in the labour market; for example Afro-Caribbean men in the construction industry and on the buses, Afro-Caribbean women as service workers in manufacturing and as nurses, Asian men in textile firms and Asian women as outworkers in small-scale dress-making factories. A sexually differentiated labour market will structure the placement of subjects according to sex but ethnic divisions will determine their subordination within them — so, for example, black and white women may both be subordinate within a sexually differentiated labour market but black women will be subordinated to white women within this.

We would suggest that within western societies, gender divisions are more important for women than ethnic divisions in terms of labour market subordination. In employment terms, migrant or ethnic women are usually closer to the female population as a whole than to ethnic men in the type of wage-labour performed. Black and migrant women are already so disadvantaged by their gender in employment that it is difficult to show the effects of ethnic discrimination for them. When examining the position of ethnic minority men in the labour market, the effect of their ethnic position is much more visible. This may lead to a situation where for example Afro-Caribbean or Asian women have at times had greater ease in finding employment — as cheap labour in ‘women’s work’, whether it be nursing, assembly-line or clerical work — than the men.

But the interrelationship between ethnic and gender divisions in employment goes beyond the mere differentiation in employment of ethnic subjects according to their gender. This additional dimension however is even less stressed in the literature on ethnic and race relations. The economic and social advancement of a migrant group may depend partly on the possibility of using the *household* and in particular the women within it as a labour resource. The extent to which migrant ethnic men have become incorporated into wider social production and the form this takes may also depend on the use of *migrant* women’s labour *overall*. Men from different migrant/ethnic groups have been incorporated differently economically. Afro-Caribbean men for example are in the ‘vanguard’ of British industry in large-scale production (Hall et al, 1978:349). Asian and Cypriot men on the other hand have had a greater tendency to go into small-scale entrepreneurial concerns and into the service sector of the economy. In particular, entrepreneurial concerns both within the formal and hidden economy depend on the exploitation of female wage-labour and in particular on kinship and migrant labour. Ethnic and familial bonds serve to allow the even greater exploitation of female labour (Anthias, 1983). The different form of the family and gender ideologies may partly explain the differences between Afro-Caribbean employment patterns and those of Asians and Cypriots.

Reproduction

We want now to turn to the area of reproduction and briefly consider it as a focus for the interrelation of gender, ethnic and class divisions.

The concept of reproduction itself is a problematic one. This partly derives from the inconsistent and heterogeneous treatment it has received in the literature.¹² Edholm et al (1977:103) suggest that the notion of reproduction might be read as assuming that ‘social systems exist to maintain themselves through time (to reproduce themselves) and secondly, that all levels of the system must be maintained through time in the same way’. This assumption indeed, would have all the pitfalls of the functionalist approach to social analysis. The reproduction of people and collectivities

is directly shaped by the historical and social context in which it takes place. Nor is it an homogeneous process, and contradictions and conflicts are found not only in the reproduction of various entities that partially overlap each other but also in the form of the reproduction process itself.

Women not only reproduce the future human and labour power and the future citizens of the state but also ethnic and national collectivities. As in other aspects of the gender division of labour, the ethnic and class position of women will affect their role in the reproduction process. Questions concerning who can actually reproduce the collectivity and under what conditions are often important here. Such things as the legitimacy of marriage, the appropriate religious conviction and so on are often preconditions for the legitimate reproduction of the nation or collectivity. The actual degree and form of control exercised by men of ethnic collectivities over their women can vary. In the Muslim world for example and in Britain under the old nationality law, the ethnic, religious or national position of women was immaterial. In other cases, like in the Jewish case, the mother's origin is the most important one in delineating the boundaries of the collectivity, and this determined the reproduction of the Jewish 'nation' (Yuval-Davis, 1980). This clearly does not mean such women have greater freedom but only that they are subject to a different set of controls.

As in other areas, the links between gender divisions and ethnic divisions can be and often are subject to the intervention of the state. For example, in Israel even secular people have to marry with a religious ceremony and according to traditional religious rules, in order for their marriage to be recognized by law. In the most extreme cases, the way the collectivity is constituted by state legislation virtually prevents inter-marriage between collectivities. In Egypt, for instance, while a Christian man can convert to Islam, Muslim women are prevented from marrying Christian Copts – if they do, they are no longer part of the Muslim community nor are they recognized as part of the Christian community and they virtually lose their legal status. The state may treat women from dominant and subordinate ethnic collectivities differently. For example, the new nationality law in Britain has given autonomous national reproduction rights to white British women, while totally withholding them from many others, mostly black women.

This differential treatment does not relate only to ideological or legal control of reproduction. The infamous contraceptive injection Depo-Provera has been given in Britain and elsewhere virtually exclusively to black and very poor women, and a study found more birth control leaflets in family planning clinics in Asian languages than in English (see Brent Community Council, 1981). In Israel, Jewish families (under the label of being 'relatives of Israeli soldiers') receive higher child allowances than Arab ones, as part of an elaborate policy of encouraging Jewish population growth and discouraging that of Arabs. Indeed the Beveridge Report in Britain justified the establishment of child allowances in order to combat the danger of the disappearance of the British race (1942:154).

On the other hand, reproduction can become a political tool at the hand of oppressed ethnic minorities. A common Palestinian saying is that 'The Israelis beat us at the borders and we beat them at the bedrooms' – Palestinian women, like Jewish ones (and with a higher rate of success due to various material and ideological factors) are under pressure by their collectivity, although not by the state, to reproduce and enlarge it. It is a fact, for example, that no Palestinian children in Lebanon were allowed (unlike Vietnamese children under similar circumstances) to be adopted by non-Palestinians — all the children are looked on as future Palestinian liberation fighters. In other words, the control of reproduction can be used both as a subordinating strategy – by dominant groups against minority groups – as well as a 'management' strategy by ethnic collectivities themselves.

We started the section by pointing out that the process of reproduction of human subjects, as well as of collectivities is never unitary. We want to emphasize that this is the case also concerning the participation of women themselves in the control of reproduction. We can point out that virtually everywhere, the interests of the nation or the ethnic group are seen as those of its male subjects, and the interests of 'the state' are endowed with those of a male ethnic class and not just a class which is 'neutral' in terms of ethnicity and gender. However, very often women participate directly in the power struggle between their ethnic collectivity and other collectivities and the state, including by voluntarily engaging in an intensive reproductive 'demographic' race. At the same time women of dominant ethnic groups are often in a position to control the reproductive role of women of other ethnic groups by state welfare and legal policies, as well as to use them as servants and child minders in order to ease part of their own reproductive burden.

This last point leads us to consider the political implications of the above discussion concerning feminist politics and the commonality of feminist goals.

Political Implications

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, our interest in the subject is far from being merely academic. It originates from our own frustration in trying to find a political milieu in which ethnic divisions will be seen as an essential consideration, rather than as non-existent or as an immovable bloc to feminist politics.

The theoretical part of this paper pointed out how misleading it is to consider gender relations without contextualizing them within ethnic and class divisions. Once we take the full implications of this into account, the mystification of the popular notion of 'sisterhood' becomes apparent. As we pointed out there can be no unitary category of 'women'. The subordination of women to men, collectivities and the state operates in many different ways in different historical contexts. Moreover, very often women themselves participate in the process of subordinating and exploiting other women.

One major form of women's oppression in history has been their invisibility, their being 'hidden from history'. The invisibility of women other than those who belong to the dominant ethnic collectivity in Britain within feminist analysis has been as oppressive. Except for black feminists who fought their own case in isolation, minority women have been virtually absent in all feminist analysis. Anthropological and historical differences in the situation of women have been explored, but only in order to highlight the social basis of gender relations in contemporary Britain. The heterogeneous ethnic character of the latter has never been fully considered.

Recently there have been some signs of a developing awareness of the need to take into account ethnic diversity. Earlier writings by socialist-feminists like Michèle Barrett (1980) and Elizabeth Wilson (1977) on women in Britain had completely ignored minority, migrant, ethnic or black women. In the introduction to their latest books however (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Wilson, 1983) they acknowledge that they do not deal with 'ethnic' women or families. This recognition is clearly no substitute for an attempt to situate ethnic divisions when analysing 'the family' in Britain.

On the political level some concessions have been made within the last few months to the black feminist movement. For example, the inclusion of black women in the Spare Rib Collective and on the Women's Committee of the Greater London Council are unprecedented and very important political achievements. However, these concessions to black feminists are not a substitute for a coherent self-critique

and analysis of the white feminist movement in contextualizing its own ethnic interests.

When we talk about the need of white feminists in Britain to recognize their own ethnicity, we are relating to questions as basic as what we actually mean when we talk about 'feminist issues'. Can we automatically assume, as has been done by western feminist movements, that issues like abortion, the depiction of the family as the site of female oppression, the fight for legal equality with men and against sex discrimination and so on are *the* feminist issues? Maxine Molyneux (1983) has recently argued that what separates Third World and western women is not so much the specific cultural or historical contexts in which they are engaged but differences of a theoretical and political nature.

Different theoretical and political positions exist, of course, as Maxine claims, both in the West and in the Third World. But feminist goals cannot be the same in different historical contexts. For instance, the family may *not* be the major site for women's oppression when families are kept apart by occupying or colonizing forces (as in Lebanon or South Africa), abortion may *not* be the major issue when forced sterilizations are carried out, nor is legal equality for women the first priority in polygamic societies where there is no independent autonomous mode of existence open to women whose husbands marry other younger and more fertile women. In their paper on the South African women's movement, Judy Kimble and Elaine Unterhalter (1982) suggest that 'the analysis and objective of western feminism cannot be applied abstractly and universally'. Western feminist struggles cannot be seen as dealing with 'the feminist issues' but with culturally and historically specific issues relevant mainly to middle class white women who have their own (invisible to them?) ethnicity. Judy and Elaine stress an essential point. However, it seems that in their search for an alternative perspective, they go to the other extreme and end up in fact with a circular argument – that feminist struggles in the context of national liberation movements are to be found in what the women in these movements do. In other words, once we stop perceiving western white feminism as providing the ultimate criteria for defining the contents of feminism, we are faced with the problem of how to politically evaluate various women's struggles.

The beginning of a possible approach might be found in an article by Gail Omvedt (1978) in which she suggests that there is a differentiation between 'women' struggles and 'feminist' struggles, in as much as the latter are those that *challenge* rather than *use* traditional gender divisions within the context of national or ethnic struggles.

We would add, however, that the challenge has to be, in our opinion, directed to both women's and men's work. All too often, in national liberation struggles, as in other periods of social crisis, women are called upon to fulfill men's jobs, as men are otherwise engaged at the front (as in war). This expansion in women's roles is seen too often as an act of women's liberation rather than as another facet of women's work. When the crisis is over, women are often assigned again to the more exclusively feminine spheres of women, to the surprise, as well as disappointment, of all those who have seen in the mere participation of women in the 'struggle' (whether in the Israeli Kibbutz, Algiers or Vietnam), a feminist achievement. We claim therefore that the challenge has to be to the actual notion of the sexual division of labour rather than only to its specific boundaries.

This is far from being simple, because so many, if not all ethnic cultures, as we have noted before, have as central the construction of a specific form of gender division. It is too easy to pose the question, as many anti-imperialist and anti-racist feminists do, as if the origin and site of their oppression is only constructed from above, by white male sexism.

Ethnic and gender liberation struggles and solidarities can cut across each other

and be divisive. We do not believe that there is one 'right' line to be taken in all circumstances. The focus or project of each struggle ought to decide which of the divisions we prioritize and the extent to which separate, as opposed to unified, struggle is necessary. Political struggles, however, which are formulated on an ethnic or sexual essence, we see as reactionary. Nor do we see it as a viable political option for women of subordinate collectivities to focus all their struggle against the sexism of dominant majority men.

The direct conclusion from our analysis in this paper is that any political struggle in relation to any of the divisions considered in this paper, i.e. class, ethnic and gender, has to be waged in the context of the others. Feminist struggle in Britain today cannot be perceived as an homogeneous struggle, for the participation and oppression of women, both in the family and at the work site, are not homogeneous. White middle class feminists have to recognize the particularity of their own experiences, not only in relation to the Third World but also in relation to different ethnic and class groupings in Britain and integrate this recognition into their daily politics and struggles. Only on this basis can a valid sisterhood be constructed among women in Britain.

Notes

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- 1 Our analysis in this paper has benefitted much from discussions with and feedback from our colleagues in the Sociology Division at Thames Polytechnic who are working with us on the Ethnic and Gender Division Project and we would like to thank them all. We should also like to thank all those who participated in the Gender and Ethnic Divisions seminars arranged by the Sociology Division. Additionally we would like to thank the Sex and Class Group of the CSE, and the Feminist Review Collective, especially Annie Whitehead and Lesley Caldwell, for their insightful comments after reading the first draft of our paper.
- 2 The term 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' have come under a great deal of attack recently for mystifying racist social relations. However, as we argue later, we do not use these concepts within a mainstream sociological tradition. For a critique of these terms see for example E. Lawrence (1982).
- 3 In a series of seminars organized by the Thames Polytechnic Sociology Division on Gender and Ethnic Divisions, Valerie Amos, Pratibha Parmar and Amina Mama all presented analyses that stressed the importance of studying the way in which the fusion of ethnic, gender and class divisions for black women gave a specificity to their oppression.
- 4 For the problems of theorizing gender divisions using a marxist framework see H. Hartmann (1979). For problems of theorizing race in Marxism see particularly J. Gabriel and G. Ben-Tovim (1978).
- 5 See V. Beechey (1977) for an attempt to apply the concept to women. See S. Castles and G. Kosack (1972) for an analysis of migrants as a reserve army. For a critique of such attempts see F. Anthias (1980).
- 6 For critical reviews of this position see J. Kahn (1981) and J. S. Saul (1979).
- 7 For a review of marxist theories of the State see Bob Jessop (1982).
- 8 Socialist-feminist analysis of course is an exception to this. For example see the work of E. Wilson (1977).
- 9 For example H. B. Davis (1973:31) states 'Engels was using the theory of "historyless peoples" according to which peoples that have never formed a state in the past cannot be expected to form a viable state in the future'.

- 10 This approach is found for example in Z. Eisenstein (1979).
 11 For a critique see J. Bourne and A. Sivanandan (1980).
 12 See M. Mackintosh (1981), F. Edholm et al. (1977) and N. Yuval-Davis (1982).

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