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Issues of Race and Class in Women's Studies: A Puerto Rican Woman's Thoughts

By Angela Jorge


At the State University of New York/College at Old Westbury, where I am a tenured assistant professor, I am teaching for the first time a course called Machismo and the Changing Role of Women in Hispanic Culture. This course is also the first and only one of its kind, although Old Westbury has had a Women's Studies Program since 1971. This limited experience in women's studies in no way earns me the title of Puerto Rican feminist.

Since my lifestyle, my income, and my professional life separate me from my community and its daily struggle for survival, I do not even speak for the masses of Puerto Ricans. Nevertheless, I wish to share some thoughts on issues of class and race in women's studies.

My perception of women's studies is that it is focused primarily on white middle-class women, with some few courses on the struggles of Black and other non-European women. Therefore, I perceive two very basic needs in women's studies: the integration of all women into women's studies, and the redefinition of the goals of women's studies so as to address the needs of all women. In the course of this essay, I will raise several questions and, finally, attempt to answer the question: Is there merit in compartmentalizing the problems of minority women? Is it significant to separate (and label) their problems as women, as racial minorities, as poor people?

The Hispanic population of the United States is not monolithic. As a Puerto Rican woman, however, I am most concerned about the fact that, as recent statistics suggest, Puerto Rican women may become a minority among minorities. While Cuban immigrants, for example, received economic and emotional support from the U.S. Government and the American people as they fled the Castro regime, Puerto Ricans, the majority of whom are racially mixed, represent an uprooted peasant class. According to Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, in Beyond the Melting Pot, "The [economic] reconstruction of the island destroyed almost as many jobs...as it made. The fine needlework...was reduced by foreign competition, which paid even less than the miserable wages this provided in Puerto Rico. The increasingly mechanized sugar industry needed less labor all the time." Many of those uprooted have arrived at U.S. airports with nothing more than a cardboard suitcase, the name and address of a friend or relative, and the expectation of finding an unskilled laborer's job.

Different questions need to be asked especially about women. How does a Hispanic woman who has lived her childhood and teenage years in an indigenous cultural setting perceive herself and react to race and class conflict in American society? How does a Hispanic woman whose entire childhood and youth were lived in an inner-city community in the U.S., where people like her do not control the schools or the economic life of the community, perceive herself and react to race and class conflict? Finally, how does a Hispanic woman who has lived on one migrant farm after another react? Such realities, of course, shape many women's lives, including those of white women.

This was made apparent to me a few years ago, when I was an advisor to a young white woman of poor working-class background. She became my student in a basic Spanish course and, unlike any other student before or since, presented me with a unique challenge. This young woman suffered from a severe hearing impairment. Her handicap required that we meet for tutoring an additional four to five hours a week. It was during this time that we began to talk with each other, to share with each other, as women. As I began to find out more about her, I began to see the parallels between her life and mine. Among the similar experiences were: being on welfare; living in a foster home; receiving poor health care; receiving an inadequate public education; and the other hundred things in life that constantly remind you that you belong to the "have-nots." Our encounters gave me an opportunity to understand the similarities between white and minority poor people. The one basic difference between the two groups seemed to me that whites can be made to believe in the superiority of their status because of the privileges of their skin color.

Few Hispanics have the opportunity to engage in social intercourse with whites. Too often whites are our supervisors if we are in the labor force, our landlords if we are tenement dwellers, or the policemen that protect the lives and property of those who own our communities but do not live in them. Consequently, the vast majority of the Hispanic population know white America only through the distorted picture presented on television. The lens tells them that all white Americans live in luxury apartments or in suburban communities with perfectly manicured lawns, perfect spouses, and perfect children. The most serious family problem of whites seems to be the selection of the best soap to use on gleaming white skin, or the best toothpaste to choose for seemingly perfect teeth. That there are white welfare recipients, alcoholics, delinquents, prostitutes, and wife-beaters is something rarely acknowledged by the white media. Segregated public schools and public housing further assure the isolation and reinforce the distortion. How might people who live in different realities, including the distorted reality which is projected through the media, begin to communicate, to see the similarities, the common bonds of their struggles to overcome the oppression of class?

Entwined with questions of class and culture is the question...
of color. As a group, Hispanic women are women of color. Some are redheaded, some are blonde, but most are brunettes whose hair texture is more than just wavy or straight. Some have blue eyes or green, but the majority have black or brown eyes. Many have straight noses and thin lips, but many others have broad noses and full lips. How does the Hispanic woman who looks like the "dream girl" of every white American man feel about herself—compared to the Hispanic woman who is physically indistinguishable from the Black American woman? How do the vast majority of Hispanic women—representing innumerable hues—perceive themselves?

With the question of color, there is a vocabulary connoting social status that is rarely used in American English. In fact, the amount of miscegenation among Indian, African, and European peoples that took place in the Caribbean and Latin America, and its attendant connotation of social status, is alien to the U.S. experience. Most Americans perceive people as Black or white, with limited recognition of mulattoes. Hispanics, on the other hand, perceive themselves as white, as Black, and as everything in between.

That different questions about race and class must be asked is by now evident. In addition to these questions, others must be asked about the historical, political, economic, and social differences or similarities each group making up the Hispanic community has in relation to the others and in relation to American society. For instance, according to a 1976 government report, while 42.1 percent of Mexican American women and 49.7 percent of all other Hispanic women were part of the labor force, only 33.7 percent of Puerto Rican women sixteen years of age and over were actively participating in the labor force. Since 33.2 percent of Puerto Rican families are headed by women, compared to 14.4 percent of Mexican American families, a disproportionate percentage of Puerto Rican women and their families seem locked into dependency on welfare. Why is this so, although both groups of women are poor and share a common language and culture? Several reasons not traditionally offered may help to explain why the differences exist.

First, unlike Mexican Americans whose ancestors lived in the southwest region hundreds of years before the arrival of the "Americanos," Puerto Ricans uprooted themselves to come to a strange land, seeking to adapt to a strange climate, topography, habitation, and lifestyle. Second, the Puerto Rican community in New York was the victim of an unprecedented urban renewal program in the 1950s and 1960s. Urban renewal destroyed local Puerto Rican-owned businesses, primarily grocery stores, and forced people to live in twenty-story buildings. Furthermore, in order to acquire an apartment in public housing, the extended family concept had to be given up. The extended family as we had known it and sometimes reconstructed it in the older tenement buildings could not survive the new housing. It became necessary to explain and justify every member of the family unit. Extending a helping hand to a friend, neighbor, or relative who had arrived from the island with no job or place to live had to be done guardedly.

A third reason to be considered is that the Mexican American belongs to an apparently homogeneous group, the result of Indian and European intermingling. The African element in the Mexican American is not as visible as among Puerto Ricans. The Puerto Rican uniquely represents "a large migration of citizens from offshore, distinct in culture and language and also facing the problem of color prejudice." Finally, Puerto Rican women have been victims of an organized campaign of sterilization. A 1976 report on the sterilization of Puerto Rican women in Puerto Rico states that "more than 35 percent of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age have been sterilized—the highest rate of female sterilization in the world." As if this were not enough, Puerto Rican women were also the human guinea pigs used in experiments involving the pill. We are only in recent years beginning to learn about the effects of hormonal therapy on women and their children.

Thus far in this essay, I have raised questions about race and class with respect to Puerto Rican women, a group viewed collectively as Black and poor. I have been interested in providing material helpful to answer the question I raised in the beginning: Is there any merit in the intellectual compartmentalizing of the problems of minority women? Should one separate their problems as women, as a racial minority, as poor people? While there is merit in undertaking such analysis, I believe, those compartmentalizing the problems and the needs of minority women should avoid judging their varied importance or attempting to establish priorities among them, or among the strategies developed to eliminate them. Similarly, I believe that women's studies needs to address issues of class and race more meaningfully and more broadly, for if it does not, the women's movement will essentially remain two movements: one of non-European women raising questions which are fundamental to their survival; and another movement of white middle-class women attempting to make some superficial changes but essentially supporting a social structure that perpetuates racism, sexism, and class bias.

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