

Missionary Positions

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Postcolonial feminist scholars have described some Western feminist activism as imperialistic, drawing a comparison to the work of Christian missionaries from the West, who aided in the project of colonization and assimilation of non-Western cultures to Western ideas and practices. This comparison challenges feminists who advocate global human rights ideals or objective appraisals of social practices, in effect charging them with neocolonialism. This essay defends work on behalf of universal human rights, while granting that activists should recognize their limitations in local cultural knowledge.

Philosophers have only interpreted the world,
in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

—Karl Marx

The hearts of innumerable men and women responded
with idealistic fervor to [Cecil Rhodes's] clarion,
because it went without saying that it would be good
for Africa, or for anywhere else, to be made British.
At this point it might be useful to wonder which
of the idealisms that make our hearts beat faster will seem
wrong-headed to people a hundred years from now.

—Doris Lessing

Normative political philosophers attempt to define such concepts as justice, legitimacy, rights, human need, freedom, and oppression. These concepts are held to apply universally to all human beings in virtue of their humanity.

Therefore, the simple fact that some injustice occurs far away or to people who do not share a tradition with one does not mean that one is absolved of any responsibility to right that injustice. In the sphere of nations, the genocide in Rwanda and shameful failure of the community of nations to prevent the atrocities are widely agreed to have changed the world's thinking about obligations to intervene and rescue. Such violations of human rights impose obligations on bystanders who have the power to prevent them. This holds with even greater force when one's political or economic security depends on structures that are implicated in some injustice (Pogge 2002).

Feminism, at least as I understand it, implies a normative political philosophy that opposes oppression, and therefore feminists must be concerned about oppressed persons everywhere. What does this mean for feminist theory and activism? Every nation and every culture oppresses women. Yet, there are clearly some subgroups of women who are better off than others. Many of us are feminists. These facts suggest that those feminists who are better off than others ought to intervene to prevent injustice against women wherever possible. What is the scope and what are the limits of such feminist humanitarian intervention? Political activists and international human rights workers put these concepts to work in their efforts to change political and material conditions under which persons live. However, many interventions that have invoked the name of justice or goodness in the past have been insulting, harmful, and even disastrous. How do we avoid making such mistakes?

Postmodern and postcolonial theorists object that normative political theory is imperialistic because it attempts to set out a universalistic conception of these considerations, and ignores the needs and interests of people who live in non-Western cultures and members of oppressed groups of Western societies. Such persons, they argue, may see the constraints on freedom and rights that Western political philosophers object to as positively constitutive of their lives. This charge is familiar to feminists, who have debated the role and aims of feminism in various cultures and internationally for decades. For example, it has been argued that female genital cutting enhances female pride and sisterhood in the cultures in which it is practiced, and therefore ought not to be condemned as harmful or misogynistic in those contexts. Other critics charge that the very impulse to intervene or rescue is imperialistic because it implies a sense of superiority. Normative political philosophy in general and feminism in particular must defend itself against charges of imperialism since it threatens the very soul of the enterprise. Since we should not be willing to retreat to isolationism, we must discern the kinds of humanitarian interventionist projects that relieve oppression and make lives better from those that need to be changed or stopped because they exacerbate or create new kinds of oppression.

This essay defends a version of feminist normative political theory, namely, a broadly conceived liberal feminism, against objections that would paralyze

progressive intervention. Liberal feminist political theorists argue in favor of changing oppressive institutions that curtail women's freedoms and violate their rights. Global and postcolonial scholars describe some Western feminist activism and theory as imperialistic. They draw a comparison to colonial missionary work by Christian missionaries from the West, who aided in colonization and assimilation of non-Western cultures to Western ideas and practices. This comparison challenges cosmopolitan and liberal feminists, who advocate global human rights or objective appraisals of social practices, in effect charging that they try to impose "imperial feminism" (Narayan 1997, 57) or that their methods are neocolonialist. Here, I examine the charges of imperialism and neocolonialism on the one hand, as against ideals of objective and universal human rights on the other. I argue that universal and objective standards of human rights are preconditions for global and postcolonial feminist work to continue, granting that theorists and activists should recognize that the universal may be instantiated in different ways in different communities.

I pursue three lines of response to the postmodern and postcolonial objections. First, I argue that distinctions can and must be drawn between and among four positions: (1) imperialism, which seeks to impose a universal standard that merely serves the interests of the imperial power; (2) "missionism," which attempts to change the deepest spiritual commitments of the subjects of the work; (3) Eurocentrism (Americentrism?), which imposes its aesthetic and cultural norms on others; and (4) humanism, which tries to help the oppressed find a path out of their oppression. I propose a set of guidelines to distinguish the fourth from the first three in theory, although I admit that it may be difficult to distinguish them in practice. Second, I argue that the postcolonial theorists assume a mistaken essentialist notion of culture. This response argues that external interferences in cultures are inevitable, but does not itself show which ones are morally acceptable. The final response I make in the paper is from empirical evidence. I argue that there have been successful cases of humanistic (nonimperialistic, non-"missionistic," non-Eurocentric) intervention in oppressive practices. All of these responses show that humanism is possible, but that humility and caution are required in order to avoid the excesses and failures of missionism or collusion with the violence of imperialism or the ignorance of Eurocentrism. Thus I conclude that activist zeal should be tempered by recognizing (and rectifying) activists' limitations in local, cultural knowledge.

Feminist interventions are only one type of international human rights intervention that may be challenged by postcolonial and postmodern objections. Humanitarian intervention has become an important topic of recent political philosophy in response to changes in the global political environment since the end of the Cold War. One of the aims of this literature is to determine the conditions of the legitimacy of military intervention by the international community in sovereign countries' internal affairs. The Iraq war renders these issues

particularly salient at this moment. Other important cases include NATO's military interventions in Kosovo and Bosnia, the failure of the UN to intervene in Rwanda in time to prevent genocide, the U.S. war to liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban, and future potential interventions in many other countries that suffer from massive human rights violations. In some cases of intervention, like that of Iraq, it can be argued that the victims did not desire humanitarian intervention. This kind of situation raises particular difficulties for liberals, as they regard individuals' desires deserving of respect.¹

A somewhat different, but related, kind of intervention in culture is the spread of global capitalism. The goods offered by global capitalism are not only material, but also financial, intellectual, and even spiritual. These goods inevitably bring cultural change, often in unpredictable and chaotic ways. The global spread of capital is currently managed and encouraged by four multinational organizations, which include nearly all sovereign nations of the world: the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations. These institutions view the spread of global capitalism as valuable for persons, and thus seek to further that spread. But many challenge this view as neoliberal imperialism or neocolonialism. Thus these institutions, and the theorists who argue for them, face the charge that they seek to impose their values on the less powerful for the sake of the more powerful. In this case, however, the ones who are supposed to be harmed by the imposition of imperialism are at the same time choosing to participate in global capitalism. For example, it is the workers in Third World factories that are supposed to be harmed by their working conditions and pay, yet they have themselves chosen to work in those factories rather than maintain their traditional lifestyles. Although I will not be able to discuss the connections in this paper, I believe that objections to neoliberal imperialism are related to objections to feminism and international human rights interventions that I will discuss in this essay.

DISTINGUISHING AMONG POSITIONS

In this section, I argue that we can distinguish four different kinds of interventionist projects, one of which is justifiable. In discussing the interventions, we must settle on a terminology for the nations and groups who are the targets of interventions and those who are the interveners, and the available options inevitably tend to be normatively loaded. I have opted to use the normatively loaded terms, but argue for the flavors of normativity that I have chosen for the labels. I shall call the intervening nation or group "invaders" or "colonizers" when their aims, intentions, or methods are nefarious. When their aims, intentions, and methods are benevolent, I call them "persuaders." Their targets I call the "invaded" or "colonized." The main differences among these positions rest in the intentions of the invaders or persuaders. One might object that what

matters morally speaking is not the intentions but the effects of the intervention on its victims. While I agree that effects matter for some judgments about interventions, intentions matter for other judgments. In particular, intentions matter when deciding whether an intervention is morally praiseworthy at the outset, and so whether it is to be pursued. Three aspects of an intervention project are to be judged when assessing it morally: the intention with which it is undertaken, the effectiveness of the strategy used, and the outcome of the strategy. When deciding *ex ante* what is to be done, though, we have access only to the intention and the proposed strategy. Intention is prior even to strategy, since it provides the motivation by which an effective strategy is devised. Furthermore, intention determines the aim of the strategy, and the measure by which the outcome is judged good or bad. Thus it is imperative to judge the intention behind proposed feminist or humanitarian interventions.

IMPERIALISM

The most serious charge against an interventionist project is imperialism, which is the attempt to impose a universal standard that merely serves the interests of the imperial power. Imperialism is undertaken for the good of the invading or colonizing nation or group. The term traditionally has been used to refer to one nation's annexation of the territory of another nation. But I also include here colonial projects, which traditionally have aimed at extracting labor and resources from another nation for the good of the home nation, because in both cases we can say that it is for the benefit of the invading nation. Imperialism is characterized by a reckless use of power by militarily and economically more powerful nations, without regard to the consequences for their targets.

While nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imperialist projects look, at least in hindsight, like obvious cases of such recklessness, those of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries are just as morally problematic. The Cold War was waged by two militarily preeminent nations and resulted in chaos and destruction throughout the Third World. The current so-called war on terror respects no borders and few of the Geneva Conventions that constrain nations from committing atrocities in declared wars. Like the Cold War before it, the war on terror is justified on the grounds of making America and her allies more secure. Those who accept this justification assume as background premises that the United States is a great and progressive democracy, and hence that her security is an objective and universal moral imperative, or that in international affairs nations are morally permitted to seek their own interests without regard to other nations' well being. Surely, on reflection, the latter cannot be grounds for *moral* justification at all, though it seems to be good political rhetoric. The former is also questionable as a moral justification when it is invoked to justify human rights violations or to attack a noncombatant sovereign nation. Another

contemporary imperialist project is waged by the preeminent economies who seek to make terms of world trade favor their citizens, without regard to how such manipulations might impoverish other nations. For example, agricultural price supports that the European Union and United States defend through the WTO are selfish assertions of economic power against poorer nations, which cannot offer or threaten enough to force more powerful nations to come to terms with them. Not only do these economic heavyweights harm poorer nations, but they are also hypocritical because they protect certain sectors of an economy from the workings of the free market, a tactic condemned as “anti-free market” by the economic powers when impoverished nations try to implement similar policies. Such hypocrisy characterizes imperialism. The most militarily powerful cry foul when terrorism is applied as a kind of warfare by the less powerful.

Imperialism thrives in the world today, but I want to argue that the term is misused when it is applied to feminists or other progressives who employ rhetoric or symbols that have previously been used by colonial or other imperial powers to describe or critique cultural practices. Language itself cannot carry out imperialism; imperialism is not simply an attitude, but involves real, material injuries from which psychological injuries may well follow. More important, imperialism connotes an intention to serve the interest of the invader or colonizer without regard to the harm of the invaded. Liberal feminist projects that are criticized on grounds of imperialism are those that criticize a practice because those feminists perceive the practice as violating women’s human rights. But upholding others’ human rights is not selfishly useful to those who argue for it. Seeking to uphold women’s rights can be particularly costly and risky, since the forces against women include many of the ruling elites of both the countries from which the victims and the feminist sympathizers come. That is, feminists who argue that certain violations of women outside their own communities are human rights violations are not plausibly benefiting themselves by doing so, other than in the indirect sense that harms to any women or humans are harms to all women or humans and therefore advocating freedom from oppression for one group of women should eventually lead to freedom for all women. Although all women are oppressed by harms to women that come to them because they are women, the harms of that oppression may be quite diffuse and may be counteracted by other benefits. For example, upper-class white women in North America can surely be well off even when poor women in the Philippines are oppressed as women. In fact, sometimes it is precisely the oppression of such poorer women as Filipinas from which wealthy white women benefit, in the form of cheaper goods and services. This benefit puts greater responsibility on the feminists of North America to aid their sisters in throwing off oppression.

One might object that for feminists to use the rhetoric and symbols imperial powers have used aids imperialism (even when that is not feminists’ aim or intention) by setting up or reinforcing a stereotype or image that makes the

invaded easier to conquer. This could happen in at least two ways. One is the use of a denigrating stereotype or image. Such rhetoric and symbols are to be avoided in all cases as wrong. Yet this is not the kind of objection raised against liberal feminists. Another way that a negative stereotype or image may be reinforced is by setting an ideal that the colonized allegedly cannot or does not reach. For example, the liberal feminist may, by appearing in a country in which women are held to extremely strict norms of modesty in dress and action, set an example for feminine freedom that the colonized women cannot hope or do not wish to match. In comparison to liberal, white feminists, then, the colonized women in such a situation appear suppressed, perhaps even cowardly. This sort of reinforcement of a negative stereotype does not constitute an objection to liberal feminist interventions on behalf of human rights. Sexual double standards concerning modesty in dress and action are wrong in any context. They deny women the equal right to appear in public and to affect the religious, political, and educational systems of the societies in which they live. Where there are such customs, the chances are good that women are oppressed in other ways as well, since they cannot speak out equally against violations of their rights to equal treatment. Fighting against these violations thus is a moral duty for those who are capable of doing so. Clearly, there are better and worse ways to oppose such customs, however, and it is incumbent on feminist interveners to do so in ways that do as little harm as possible to the women forced to live under those customs, and that place blame for the negative stereotypes and images squarely on the social structures and the men who dominate them.

MISSIONISM

Missionism attempts to change the deepest spiritual or metaphysical commitments of the invaded. Missionaries undertake their work for the good of the soul of the colonized or invaded, without regard to the belief system of the colonized or invaded, and without respect for their different beliefs. Since the aim is to change spiritual or metaphysical beliefs, there is ultimately no objective proof that the invaders' beliefs are correct. Missionaries must use a variety of methods of conversion to change minds, some of which may themselves be benevolent. But the enterprise of missionism remains misguided, since any benevolence serves the aim of conversion. Examples of contemporary missions are familiar: various types of Christian missions have been undertaken and continue both abroad and at home, from the self-proclaimed "crusades" of Billy Graham's "evangelistic association" to Mormon elders riding from house to house on bicycles in China or Italy to Jehovah's Witnesses' distribution of *The Watchtower* in towns across the United States. It is important to note that such missions have often colluded with imperialism by supplying the justification that "natives" must be made Christian, by force if necessary, for their own good.

Colonial powers often provided missionaries to spread the form of Christianity from the colonial home country. Missionism can also be waged violently. Witness the anti-Muslim crusades of the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries and antiabortion activities today in the United States that are violent, coercive, or just threatening.

The harm of missionism is twofold. First, it is deeply disrespectful, attempting to invade through violent, material, or psychological coercion rather than through rational argument. Missionism thus treats the invaded as nonautonomous and less worthy of dignity and respect. Second, it disrupts and may even rupture community. Now such disruptions, when they are of communities that are oppressive, may have beneficial effects. But, in such cases, missionism succeeds only in spite of its aim, through a mechanism that was no part of its overall goal of conversion.

Missionism should be distinguished from those public offerings of belief systems that do not invade or coerce but truly offer choice and education. These are ways of persuading rather than invading. We must separate rational and respectful persuasion from the kind of invasive and disrespectful imposition of beliefs that missionism involves, or else there is no possibility for rational argument even between two persons who share a culture. This point, I think, shows us how the distinction can be made. Where there is no internal dissension or desire for an outside viewpoint, there can be no room for persuasion, and any attempt is either futile or coercive. But where there is a request for information or debate from within the culture, there is an opportunity for respectful and rational dialogue. Thus a feminist who is invited to an Omani women's university and uses that occasion to argue for the moral or spiritual equality of men and women is offering a different metaphysical viewpoint, but not from a dominating missionary position.

One might argue that liberal feminists do practice a kind of missionism by intentionally exposing oppressed women to images of strong, independent women or progressive slogans on signs or billboards as a means to combat oppressive images and slogans. For example, in the abortion rights struggle, abortion rights activists carry signs with slogans that do not persuade through argument but rather make a more psychologically coercive appeal to persons to view things as the feminists view them.² I do not classify this as missionism, however, because it does not attempt to make a metaphysical or religious point. Abortion rights supporters need not (and I believe should not) argue that the fetus has or lacks some special metaphysical status. Their argument hinges on freedom of religion and the claim to equal rights for women rather than any particular religion or metaphysical view. Thus it is not missionism to push the abortion rights point of view using any means. It is still possible to criticize the means by which protestors, no matter how humanitarian their view, attempt to gain supporters. However, I would argue that when we can argue rationally

and persuasively for a view, then the use of slogans and counterimages to set the stage for open-minded consideration of those arguments is acceptable.

EUROCENTRISM

Euro- (or Ameri-) centism attempts to impose the aesthetic and cultural norms on other cultures, ignoring the desires, political beliefs, or social structures of the colonized and assuming that the customs and structures of the invader or colonizer are best. Eurocentrism is often invisible to the one who assumes it. It can be a thoughtless imposition of bias. It can also be purposeful and reckless.

Eurocentrism harms in much the same ways as missionism. It is disrespectful in that it imposes a different set of beliefs without rational argument. Eurocentric ideas can come to dominate through their association with the wealth and power of the West. Eurocentrism is disruptive when it imposes norms or ideals that dislodge other norms or beliefs. For example, Western aesthetics about the proper height for humans have started a fad of painful leg-lengthening surgeries in Vietnam, and have caused companies there to set minimum height requirements for jobs for which height could have no possible relevance other than to cater to irrational prejudice. Eurocentrism also harms by imposing Western notions of proper economic or political development without regard for cultural specificities and nuances. Many World Bank projects have failed because they did not understand the local methods of agriculture that worked well with the level of technology, information, and skills of the people, and instead tried to impose a European or North American style of agricultural production. Other failures have been caused by a more sinister imposition of European gender relations, a failure that commits the wrong of male imperialism as much as Eurocentrism.

HUMANISM

Humanism is generally defined as a moral view that takes human beings to be the source of value and focus of moral concern. Humanists reject as immoral the kinds of oppressive treatments of persons that I have just categorized as imperialism, missionism, or Eurocentrism, as they reject oppression generally. Humanism supports nonviolent and respectful attempts to help the oppressed find a path out of their oppression. Humanism aims for the good of the persuaded, sometimes requiring deep moral, social, and political change of (some of) the invaded for their own good or for moral necessity. Humanist or humanitarian projects are justified by a normative political theory that discerns injustice and attempts to eliminate it. Unlike the three other missionary positions I have discussed, humanism does not harm and is likely to be helpful. While these projects may fail, they are not in themselves harmful. What may be harmful, however, is

the backlash that results from failed (or even partially successful) humanitarian projects. As I have argued elsewhere, however, backlash reactions ought not to be blamed on humanitarians, but on wrongdoers who fail to be persuaded by progressive humanist arguments (Cudd 2002).

Humanitarian military intervention is licensed by the international community to stop genocide, aggressive wars by states on weaker neighbors, or massive human rights violations. In December 2001, the U.N.–appointed International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) issued a report entitled “The Responsibility to Protect,” in which it examined the “right of humanitarian intervention.” The report sets out conditions under which intervention is not only justified but also required. First, there must be a *just cause*, which is the state’s inability or unwillingness to protect its people from mass terror, genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass rape, or forced expulsion. Second, the intervening military force must have the *right intention*, in particular, to prevent those forms of violent oppression. Third, military intervention has to be the *last resort*, undertaken only after other means have been attempted to prevent catastrophe. Fourth, the force used is to be the *minimal force necessary* to secure human protection. Fifth, there has to be a *reasonable chance of halting* the oppression, and the expected ill consequences of the military action have to be less than that of not intervening militarily.

Nonviolent humanist interventions can take some general guidelines from this document, I believe. First, the just cause requirement holds in part because intervention without some just cause risks being imperialistic, missionistic, or Eurocentric. Since nonviolence is much less harmful than violence, the harm that is being counteracted is correspondingly lessened. I propose that the cause must be the inability or unwillingness of the state to uphold human rights or prevent oppression. Since nearly every country of the world violates human rights to some extent, humanitarian intervention would be justifiable almost everywhere. Military intervention is *required* when the stakes are high enough and the other requirements are met, and so we may ask whether intervention is ever required for human rights violations that fall short of genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass expulsion, or rape. Although this is an interesting question to pursue, it goes beyond the scope of this essay.

The just cause requirement distinguishes humanism from the other missionary positions, but it is not the only guideline that does so. Second, I have argued that humanitarian missions need the right intentions, which is the intention to persuade the nation or group to support and defend human rights. Without such an intention, the mission threatens to support some other imperialist mission, and is unlikely to garner the trust necessary for successful persuasion. While missionism may sometimes be undertaken with the right intentions, it is to be distinguished from humanism by both the just cause requirement and the third guideline for nonviolent intervention, which I discuss below. Since missionism

attempts to impose an unprovable metaphysical view, there cannot be a just cause to do so, regardless of the passion with which missionaries believe in the righteousness of their cause.

The third requirement for just, nonviolent intervention is that there has to be a reasonable chance for the humanitarian intervention to succeed. Success is to be broadly interpreted to include registering complaint or resistance, but in the best case it entails persuasion and subsequent rectificatory action. The reason for this requirement in the case of violent intervention is clear—there is no justification for pointless violence. There is also justification for this requirement here. First, unless there is a reasonable chance for success, then the effort should be expended elsewhere, where a chance for success in relieving oppression does exist. That is, the opportunity cost of foregoing other opportunities to relieve oppression must be considered. Second, while nonviolent intervention does not harm or disrupt anywhere near as much as violence, it is still disruptive. If that disruption means that oppression is challenged and minds are changed, then the intervention can be said to have succeeded to some degree. But if there is no uptake to the challenge to oppression, if it occasions no questioning of custom or law, then any other disruption is a cost that ought not to be imposed. For humanitarian projects to be successful, it is crucial that there be some who agree with the progressive change, that is, those who are persuaded by the normative political theory that grounds the project. Otherwise, the intervention threatens to become an example of missionism rather than humanitarianism. If there are no persons in the culture who are open to persuasion, or who are already persuaded and can join the attempt, then the proposed humanitarian effort cannot address persons as rational beings but at best can coerce through psychological manipulation. This cannot have good effects and is, as I have already argued, disrespectful. Furthermore, where there are no members of a culture who agree that injustice is occurring, the persuaders must stop to consider whether they have a just cause after all. Perhaps there is some crucial fact they don't know or some nuance they have not perceived that would license an entirely different interpretation than they have assumed. Where there is injustice it is likely there will be persons who are willing to be persuaded and to help persuade others to end it. Where there is no chance for persuasion, the obligation to intervene is nullified. However, feminists should be watchful for changing circumstances that may provide an opening for persuasion.

CAN LIBERAL FEMINISM BE A HUMANIST MISSION?

Feminist missions attempt to help women change the oppressive conditions of their lives. Feminist theorists identify oppression and the causal factors that account for it; activists take such knowledge and attempt to cut the causal chains of oppression. Feminists work within and across their cultural and

national borders, attempting to forge links that further both theory and activism to improve women's lives. Although we can identify similar problems for feminist missions within a national context, my main concern in this paper is to examine cross-cultural missions that attempt to persuade people in other cultures of feminist theories and to undertake or join feminist activism. Many feminists are both theorists and activists. For example, Susan Moller Okin, who has theorized about gender inequality in Western political thought and family life as well as violations of women's human rights in Third World countries, was, until her recent untimely death, a board member of the Global Fund for Women. The fund defines its mission as follows: "to advance women's human rights by making grants to women's groups that work to gain freedom from poverty, violence and discrimination."³ Martha Nussbaum, another prominent feminist political philosopher, has worked with the United Nations on issues of women's human rights. For these two liberal feminists and many others activist commitments flow from theoretical ones.

What I am calling liberal feminism for the purposes of this paper shares with liberalism the general aim of protecting the liberty of the individual. That general conception can be seen to comprise two more specific aims, which stand in some tension with each other: (1) to protect or maximize *liberty*, and (2) to protect or enhance the standing of the *individual* as a free agent. Protecting or maximizing liberty seems to involve increasing the chances that individuals will be able to choose what they prefer, but enhancing the freedom of the individual sometimes requires thwarting individuals' immediate preferences. I have argued elsewhere that there are two types of liberal theory, and two corresponding types of liberal feminism (Cudd 2004). Constraint-minimizing liberalism combines a view about what kinds of actions or interactions are to be prohibited or inhibited in order to maximize liberty for everyone simultaneously. Substantive liberalism takes the job of a theory of justice to be to characterize (perhaps only very generally) the institutions of society within which the individuals make choices and act. The idea of the substantive liberal theory is to preserve and foster autonomous individuals in and through liberal institutions that promote free and informed choice. Liberal feminists combine these types of liberalism with special attention to and concern for the ways that women have been oppressed.

Liberalism derives from a belief in the moral primacy of the individual. While liberal feminists recognize that community and culture make possible values and meaning for individuals, they insist on the priority of the individual's well-being over that of the community when the two conflict. Liberalism is especially sensitive to the objection that by taking the individual to be the final authority on her own good, the individual may subject herself to non-autonomously formed beliefs and desires. These are the twin problems of adaptive preferences and false consciousness. There are two broad liberal feminist approaches for

addressing these problems, connected to the two approaches to liberalism I mentioned above. Nussbaum's solution is to retreat from maximizing individuals' preferences to supporting individuals' capabilities. She outlines a theory of human capabilities, the capabilities that humans can develop under the right social circumstances which make human life particularly valuable.⁴ She then argues that the state, and the international community if necessary, is obligated to provide a minimum level of support for these capabilities in all its citizens. The other approach, which I favor, recommends reforming preferences and beliefs through noncoercive, transformative projects that aim at relieving oppression.⁵ Both approaches grant at least the usefulness of a list of human rights and a measure of human development as targets for reducing oppression and increasing individual freedom.

However, liberal feminist missions have generated objections from post-colonial theorists. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty have argued that liberal feminists tend to overlook the lack of democracy or justice in their own nation when criticizing the human rights record with respect to women in another. In particular, they overlook injustice in relations between the United States and former colonial countries, pretending that the United States lives up to its rhetoric of spreading democracy around the world. This can foreclose the possibility of productive alliances with feminists from the third world. Alexander and Mohanty write:

This theorization of the American state as Democratic by U.S. liberal feminists addressing sexism often obscures relationships of colonial domination and, thus, potentially precludes the formation of alliances between Third-World women within colonizing nations or between women in colonizing and colonized/post-colonial nations. (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xxxi)

This is in part, I believe, the objection that I dealt with above, that the rhetoric can serve the interests of imperialism even when employed by well-intentioned humanitarians. As before, I submit that this use of rhetoric and symbol does not itself introduce imperialism. More to the point, this objection overstates the case to use the term "theorization" here, since U.S. liberal feminists are highly critical of the United States, in particular its treatment of women as second-class citizens—a charge implying the United States is *undemocratic*. Thus they could not be *theorizing* the American state as democratic, even if they might be assuming as background that the United States more closely approximates democracy than most of the countries of the world. Clearly, women's rights are not as curtailed in the United States as in many other places, and the privileges that U.S. economic power bestows on U.S. women obligates them, as I have suggested, to work on behalf of women both at home and abroad.

A second objection from Mohanty is that Western feminists are too quick to compare the experiences of women across time, distance, or culture. She writes that “ahistorical notions of the common experience, exploitation, or strength of Third-World women or between Third- and First-World women serve to naturalize normative Western feminist categories of self and other” (Mohanty 1997, 28). The objection seems to be that to see women as having a common experience of oppression is to assume a notion of the self that pretends to be but is not universal. This might be seen as a charge of missionism, in my terms, since it suggests that Western feminists try to impose a metaphysical view, namely, their view of the self as universally valid. I agree that liberal feminism does assume a notion of the self and other as separate ontological and moral units when it theorizes that oppression is fundamentally the denial of universal human rights, and that women are oppressed in being denied their human rights. Whether this notion of self is Western, however, is less clear. That is, I question whether the metaphysical underpinnings of this view of the self are in fact in question and being imposed by the Western feminists. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights seems to make the same kind of universalizing move, for instance, and yet it is a document that has broad support throughout the world. The notion of human rights requires that there is a human individual who is morally significant and who can make significant claims on other humans and social bodies. But this is common to many different traditions and cultures—at least for some of the individuals within the culture. That women have often been excluded from counting as equally significant in their own cultures is a point not lost on the Western liberal feminists that I have mentioned.⁶

A third type of objection to liberal or Western feminism comes from Gayatri Spivak, who criticizes it as colluding with global capitalism. She writes:

Feminists with a transnational consciousness would also be aware that the very civil structure *here* that they seek to shore up for gender justice can continue to participate in providing alibis for the operation of the major and definitive transnational activity, the financialization of the globe, and thus the suppression of the possibility of decolonization—the establishment and consolidation of a civil society *there*, the only means for an efficient and continuing calculus of gender justice *everywhere*. (Spivak 1999, 39)

I take Spivak to be charging that Western feminists ought to be careful in recommending or working toward a Western-style civil and political society to women everywhere, since that will serve the interests of global capitalism. The colonialism she mentions is, I believe, what many critics of globalization call “neocolonialism,” the carrying out of the colonial project of surplus labor and resource extraction

by means of capitalist trade. Thus she is arguing that if feminists intend to bring capitalist and Western-style democracy to liberate women, they may simply end up serving the purposes of enriching Western capitalists. Since she suggests that this is an unintended consequence of seeing their own nations and cultures as superior, this would be a kind of Euro- or Americentrism.

Spivak seems to reject all attempts to form transnational bridges as a form of silencing:

In this phase of capitalism/feminism, it is capitalist women saving the female subaltern. WID—Women in Development—is a subsidiary of USAid, and WEDO—Women in Environment and Development Organization, is a generally North-controlled international nongovernmental organization with illustrious Southern spokeswomen. This matronizing and sororizing of women in development is also a way of silencing the subaltern. (Spivak 1999, 38)

Angela Miles distinguishes between Western feminists who are mere assimilationists, who want to show the Third World how to become like them, and those who seek transformation of themselves as well as Third World women. Miles argues that there are North American feminists who “(1) accept uncritically the simple, ethnocentric and industrial notion of ‘progress’; (2) see women’s struggle more as a struggle to be admitted to existing structures than to transform them; and (3) on this erroneous basis, make invalid presumptions about the greater powerlessness and oppression of women elsewhere in the world” (Miles 1998, 166). These are what she calls assimilationist feminists. Transformative feminists by contrast argue that market relations are at their core exploitative and destructive. They argue that the current conception of development cannot be reformed but must be transcended. While Miles admits some positive role for Western feminists in transforming oppressive cultures not their own, Spivak and Miles both criticize feminists who align themselves with market capitalism in their pursuit of feminist ends. They uphold a version of feminism that they call transnationalism, which has been conceived as a Marxist rejection of globalization. Spivak defines the concept of “transnational literacy” as requiring, in part, an understanding of the Marxist economic critique of transnational capitalism. Both criticize the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as imposing “development,” which they claim is really just another kind of colonialism. Spivak writes, “The general ideology of global development is racist paternalism (and alas, increasingly, sororalism); its general economics capital-intensive investment; its broad politics the silencing of resistance and of the subaltern as the rhetoric of their protest is constantly appropriated” (Spivak 1999, 373). First, it is important to note that this combination of criticisms puts development agencies in a no-win position, since if they do take up the suggestions of the

local people, it is seen as an “appropriation” and a “silencing,” whereas if they do not, development projects are condemned as colonial impositions. Can it really be the case that there is no role for international development agencies to play in reducing poverty and oppression?

Spivak's and Miles's objections bring me to the second and third responses to the postcolonial objections. The second is to point out that postcolonial theorists assume a mistaken Hegelian, essentialist notion of culture. By this, I mean the idea that we can find distinct cultures that have unique, predetermined futures, into which they inevitably develop unless deterred by an interfering outside force. But human culture has never been and cannot be so self-sealed, nor is there any reason to believe that its course is predetermined. Rather, culture is an organic process whose development is determined (though not predictably) by the many individual and collective actions of the individuals that make it up. Feminists and other activists believe that we can affect the future of cultures, and so we ought to make them better. For liberal feminists, that means we should try to reduce oppression, particularly women's oppression, by supporting individual autonomy.

Finally, it is important to see that the Marxist economic analysis is seriously flawed. Marxism does not offer a credible theory of microeconomics and simple economic facts bring Marxism's macroeconomic projections into serious question. Crises have not materialized, and emiseration has not occurred with the spread of market capitalism. In fact, by most measures of development, including arguably the most crucial—life expectancy, infant mortality, and maternal mortality—most of the world has vastly improved with the spread of international capitalism. Were it not for the global AIDS crisis, the picture would be even better. It is clear that countries such as North Korea or Mauritania, which are least active in international trade, are the worst off by these measures. I am not arguing that capitalist free trade is equally good for everyone; there are massive inequalities across and within countries that participate. What I do maintain, however, is that what is needed is a more global, truly inclusive, free trade, in which force, fraud, and coercion are prohibited.

Within a reformed and truly free trade world, transformative liberal feminist projects would be possible. One example of a deeply feminist, transformative project is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which supports small entrepreneurial projects among women of India. The success and value of this sort of project is agreed on all sides. Mohanty argues that it meets the needs defined in terms of these women's objective interests as poor women workers and their more subjective needs to reconceptualize their own lives as worthy and members of collectives. That is, SEWA has helped women see that they count and in this way has helped them to form autonomous preferences. What is successful about SEWA can thus be seen in liberal feminist terms as both liberal entrepreneurship and the development of autonomous preferences.

THE LIMITS OF THE LIBERAL FEMINIST POSITION

Liberal feminism offers visions of freedom and arguments for women's human rights and capabilities that can help define and achieve liberation for women everywhere. Yet, we must acknowledge that leaders of other movements for freedom and equality have often failed, despite good intentions and reasonable theoretical positions. Theory does not always lead to success in implementation. Communists, despite a will to fight oppression, a liberating vision, and an arguable political theory, brought about more harm than good in their twentieth-century attempts to implement classless societies. Will pursuing freedom through liberal feminist arguments and methods lead to such disastrous outcomes? One seemingly important difference between communism and liberal feminism in this regard is that communism supposed there was a single cause for oppression, namely, the existence of economic classes. Liberal feminists agree, however, that gender oppression is only one kind of oppression. Thus, liberal feminists acknowledge that other axes of oppression are equally important to discover and oppose in different social circumstances. To discover these axes of oppression, particularly in foreign cultures, theorists must learn from others, and tailor their arguments and methods in appropriate ways.

I conclude this essay with some cautionary notes from Uma Narayan's work, which attempts to find what is valuable in both postcolonial and Western feminist theory (Narayan 1997). First, she argues that in criticizing cultural practices, we must not represent the Third World as if it has a single monolithic tradition that is timeless. Within all cultures, there are forces that oppose or seek to alter or reinterpret tradition. My argument about the organic and ever-changing nature of culture echoes this point. Second, Narayan argues that we must not unconsciously use the representations and stereotypes of the colonizers of the past, because this is disrespectful and causes mistrust. Third, we must work with and for indigenous persuaders, and not pretend that the idea of liberation comes solely from the West. As I argued earlier, humanism cannot begin without the presence of some who are already persuaded that there is some oppression and that it can be changed. These are the persons with whom we must work and whose work we must follow in order to end the oppression of women in a culture foreign to our own.

NOTES

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1. This is true even for non-welfarist liberals, such as Rawls or Nussbaum, who still find satisfaction of preference to be desirable, all else equal, because it promotes or indicates individual freedom. As Anita Superson points out, though, Nussbaum does acknowledge that there are deformed desires or preferences and that she would not find their satisfaction to be desirable in every case. Still, excepting also these desires, satisfaction of preference is a good thing.

2. I thank Anita Superson for offering this objection and example.

3. Available on their website at www.globalfundforwomen.org.

4. This conception of human capabilities is developed in Nussbaum 2000.

5. I argue for my solution against Nussbaum's in Cudd 2004.

6. Spivak also seems to be objecting to claims of solidarity when she writes: "UN conferences provide alibis for derailing these efforts in the interest of capital rather than the social in the name of an ethics about the achievement of which they know little. The worst offenders, precisely because they dare to witness, are the so-called U.S. feminists whose 'activism' is merely organizing these conferences with a ferocious leadership complex and an insatiable hunger for publicity. I use these violent adjectives advisedly, to warn against every achievement-of-solidarity claim coming from these quarters, to 'work at the screen' of the production of the attendant images" (Spivak 1999, 383–84, n97).

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