BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY: AMERICAN WOMEN, NEW AND OLD

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Abstract

The tradition/modernity paradigm is most important in understanding gender identities. The aim of this socio-anthropological study is to show how this paradigm functions in American culture through antinomical roles defined through a *journey* between tradition and modernity. In Western societies, mostly the American society, although gender polarities still exist (sex/gender, domestic/public sphere, etc.) they do not reflect anymore traditional antinomical, segregational and discriminatory roles but rather they add Eastern collectivist values and principles (tradition, society, old, Orient) to Western individualist ones (modernity, self, new, Occident).

Keywords: tradition/modernity, East/West, polarities, sex/gender, collectivism/individualism, domestic/ public sphere, natural/cultural.

A compelling dichotomy, this tradition/modernity paradigm is extremely significant in understanding gender identities and their relations to this dichotomy/paradigm. We witness a continuous negotiation between the two which links or breaks them.

In the discussion of gender roles, **tradition** implies an asymmetrical gender system in which women are suppressed and **modernity** entails egalitarian gender relations. Whatever its pace and level, development is a *journey* between tradition and modernity. While historically speaking, Europe stands for tradition, East, collectivism, society, old, conservatism, Orient, etc., America stands for modernity, West, individualism, self, new, innovation, Occident, etc.

The aim of this socio-anthropological study of gender and individualism in American culture is to show how the paradigm tradition/modernity functions in their representation.

While **gender** is a universal concept, for Americans **individualism** is part of what it means to be an American. While the paradigm of dichotomy functions between East and West, it is also an inherent feature of American culture. For Americans everything is regarded, debated and valued through its **antinomical** definition: whatever is not good is bad, if somebody is superior, his partner is inferior. That holds true for gender as well. While **sex** is a biological factor, **gender** is a cultural construction. While historically speaking, man is seen as superior, woman is seen as inferior. Other gender roles (discriminatory and segregational) place men in the **public sphere** (dominating, active, strong, powerful, intellectual, breadwinners) while women belong to the **domestic sphere** (submissive, passive, weak, emotional, homemakers).

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Several questions arise regarding women in general and American women in particular since the 1920s (when American women gained political vote stipulated in the 19th Amendment):

- Are private and public spheres still segregated?
- Is sexual inequality rooted within social structure itself?
- Are societies still patriarchal (i.e. male-dominated) in certain spheres?
- Is feminism associated with gender equality or with man hating?
- Is woman still seen as "the second sex" (i.e. sexual asymmetry is still valid) and thus faces the same glass ceiling effect (i.e. imbalance of power and access to executive positions because of segregated gender roles)?

Some answers are given by researchers themselves:

a) Ortner in "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1974) speaks about woman's biology, her social role in child care and reproduction and personality that encourages cultures to see her more 'natural' and less 'cultural' than man, hence her cultural confinement to the subordinated role of "the second sex".

b) In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that "a woman is not born a woman, but made a woman".

c) In 1963 appears Betty Friedan's revolutionary book on *The Feminine Mystique*.

d) In 1989 Arlie Russell Hochschild publishes a book entitled *The Second Shift*.

All and many more reach the conclusion that social factors are more important than biological ones and that both sex and gender are closely related to ethnicity and class. America has a common political and economic organization shared by a multicultural (multiethnic) society in which some cultural categories are contested such as gender is.

American women were not included in history, were excluded from the American Constitution because of the masculine identity of American individualism (Warren 1984) and its relation to another Western value, equality. We can see thus the seeds of the glass ceiling installed by males. American individualism in fact has excluded women and racial minorities from economic and political life.

American women fought in three feminist movements for the eradication first of political bondage (in 1920) and then of social bondage. Although the federal *Equal Pay Act* was passed in 1963 to authorize equal pay for men and women for similar jobs, although an *Equal Rights Amendment*, intended to prohibit all discrimination based on sex, was first proposed in 1923, it is still not part of the USA Constitution. The Amendment was introduced into every session of Congress till 1972 when it was dropped. It was then reintroduced last on July 21, 2009. If it gets three more votes (it has been ratified by 35 of the necessary 38 states) it might become the 28th Amendment in the American Constitution.

Discrimination needs complete transformation in thinking. Women could never be free as along as society did not acknowledge men and women's identity in capacities and responsibilities. Women's movement for rights took place in three waves: 1) 1848-1960 (Seneca Falls, political vote, E.C. Stanton as a key figure); 2) 1960- 1990 (focus on

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personal life, narcissism, self-empowerment, B. Friedan as a key figure); 3) from 1990s on (focus on national self, self seen as part of a larger community). As female landmarks we should mention E.C.Stanton who in 1890 in her book entitled *The Woman's Bible* stated clearly the importance of social bondage which is worse than the political bondage. Then in 1898 Ch. Perkins Gilman in her book *Women and Economics* emphasized the idea that economic bondage is a cause of sexual division of labor. And, interestingly enough, she offered solutions to overlap the two spheres, i.e. to use woman's experience in the public domain (central kitchens, public welfare childcare centers, etc.) as "expert housekeepers to maintain the cleanliness of the home" (Chafe 9)

The cultural changes of the 1990s (including multiculturalism, the advances of feminism, a growing rejection of moral relativism, new forms of spiritual self-expressiveness and greater attentiveness to children and childcare) can only be understood in the context of how **the revolution in social values** (1960s and 1970s) has subsequently evolved. These changes all relate to the notion of 'expressive individualism' as Daniel Yankelovich (1998) calls it. In a nutshell, everyone (not only artists and writers) should have the opportunity to develop their own inner potential for self-expression. A belief in individualism is, of course, as old as the American nation itself. But prior to the 1960s, American individualism focused mainly on the political domain, i.e. "freedom to speak their minds, to pursue their own religious beliefs, to live where they choose to live" ("A Critical Review on American Individualism") In the 1950s as Yankelovics states, Americans were "a nation of political individualists but social conformists" ("How American Individualism is Evolving") The 1960s initiated a radical extension of individualism, broadening it from the political domain to personal life styles. By the 1980s in the American ethos the expressive individualism had grown into a national preoccupation.

Individualism can be both a **gift** (resulting in independence, autonomy or personal initiatives) and a **curse** (leading to withdrawal from social life, turning in towards oneself). For instance, Alexis de Tocqueville speaks in *Democracy in America* about the cool and considered attitude which drives people to withdraw into a small, enclosed world consisting of their family and a few select friends, leaving the rest of society to its own devices".

American literature abounds in examples of individualism as a curse. Besides the well-known Alexis de Tocqueville, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Kate Chopin, who took up the theme of the individual vs. society, there were many others. Lewis Mumford analyzes the relationship between the individual and the American institutions while the individual vs. American traditions (minority and ethnic traditions as agents of individuality) have been much debated by Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison.

Women, we said, were excluded from politics and were not mentioned in the American Constitution. Betty Friedan in 1963 (*The Feminine Mystique*) insisted upon "the problem that has no name" – i.e. the necessity for women to be treated as individual human beings. Women participate in social life so they do need to be fully integrated and

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not discriminated in any sense. **Collectivism,** an Eastern value, raises the problem of solidarity. Women had to 'bond' together in national and international "Sisterhood" organizations dedicated to the support and promotion of women's rights.

Several questions can be raised at this point regarding the paradigm individualism/collectivism:

- If the link between the community and the individual becomes less strong, to what extent will an individual experience social problems, in which he/she is not immediately implicated, as his/her problems?
- To what extent are people in an individualistic society prepared to consider the problems of others as their own?
- To what extent can National Community cope with American Individualism?

We would incline to answer that unity and individualism are incompatible; too much interest in the self (irrespective of being a male or female), instead of focus on all the problems of the world, can be harmful.

True individualism and unity/community are compatible if one has the moral right to pursue his/her happiness (independence, initiative, self-responsibility) but cooperates with others, unites with other citizens, in order to preserve and defend the institutions that protect that right. We can be united as individuals without losing our individuality or our love for individual liberty.

American individualism facilitates **structural injustice** (gender and race). Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* showed how the individual relies on **gendered structures of inequality** in order to meet basic social and material needs as well as on culture of white supremacy to enhance his self-esteem.

To understand how individualism has been changing since 1920, (when women had their first political victory – the vote) it is useful, according to Yankelovics, to hold **two contexts** in mind:

a) In the early sixties young people began to question some of their parents' core values. From the mid-sixties till the late-seventies, the percentage increased from 30% to 80% who acknowledged the importance of transforming **outdated social values**. Here is a quick reminder of this period's most important value shifts related to gender given by Yankelovics:

- people placed less moral value on "morally correct" sexual behavior, a loosening of some but not all norms of sexual morality.
- less Puritanism about pleasure, especially about bodily pleasures; pleasures are regarded as good.
- a high value placed on family life, but with a vastly expanded concept of family beyond the traditional nuclear form.
- a far-reaching shift from role-based obligations to shared responsibilities regarding husband-wife relationships.

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- a high value placed on women achieving self-fulfillment by paths of their own choice rather than through roles dictated by society.

Women were previously refused individualism and forced into a sphere from which, in order to get out, they had to organize themselves within that very restrictive sphere on the principle according to which "sisterhood is powerful". In fact, as Cott suggested, women's experience within their **separate sphere,** which rested on 'bonds' or 'sisterhood' within that sphere, was a necessary condition of feminism: "It assigned women a 'vocation' comparable to men' s vocations, but also implying, in women's case, a unique sexual solidarity. When they took up their common vocation, women asserted their common identity in 'womanhood,' which became their defining social role: gender ruled, in effect, their sentiments, capacities, purpose, and potential achievements. Without such consciousness of their definition according to sex, no minority of women would have created the issue of 'women's rights'". (201)

The ideology of separate spheres reflected American woman's role in that historical period of economic, social, and political changes of the 19th c. Domestic literature, as Barbara Welter argues in "The Cult of True Womanhood – 1820-1860" (1966) insisted on piety, purity, submissiveness and domestic isolation, which constrained women to the social status of inferiority.

b) The second context we need to keep in mind is an understanding of how and why sharp discontinuities in values took place in the historical period after the 1960s. The main assumption is that **societies** learn and react differently than **individuals**. For a variety of reasons, societies react far less cautiously while mature adults who encounter new circumstances will usually adjust to them in a slow and moderate fashion. The case is even more valid when we refer to women. As an individual you can control your own life, but you have little or no control over the society and its institutions.

With these two contexts in mind, we can look now at what American society and culture have learned about gender and individualism.

Self-expressiveness continues to be valued as a major goal of American life. American culture has made a **shift** in defining the self and what it means to be an individual. The American society is moving toward perceiving the self as a moral actor, which is a shift from the doctrine of **need-based rights** ("If I need it I have a right to it") to a conception of the self as a part of a larger society. A greater emphasis on self-reliance is coming into play: "I am not a victim; I am responsible for my own actions", Yankelovics gives as example to support the statement. From the kind of egalitarianism, Americans are moving back toward the traditional American value according to which people are responsible for their own lives. Unequal results are thus no longer deemed to be society's fault. The individual, from **autonomous,** becomes **a part of a larger whole**. Self-expression is not necessarily achieved through a career. Instead, self-fulfillment is expressed in phrases like "he is his own person", "she is a real person", "she knows who she is". **Gender identity** becomes an American cultural value. While the 1950s focused

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on the political domain and the 1960s (called the narcissistic period) on the personal life domain, from the 1980s onwards, the individual started being regarded as a part of a web of relationships: relationships to self, to others, to the community, to the society, to humanity, to the world.

Centuries ago John Donne said: "No man is an island, but each a part of the mainland". Paraphrasing and extrapolating I would say "No **person** is an island, but each a part of community and society". There is less preoccupation with 'me', 'sisterhood', rights, and more concentration on community and society. In other words, American individualism becomes entangled with European collectivism, self ('I') with society ('Us'), modernity with tradition. Women are 'allowed' to fulfill "the second shift" (Cf. Hochschild –mother/career; private/public sphere); husband and wife share traditional and modern responsibilities.

American women face the **glass ceiling** (i.e. reach a professional level above which it is difficult to move) but at the same time more and more women become involved in the political process. Although only 26% of the American women are not in favor of a female president, most voters (66%) saw Hillary Clinton as a strong contender at the 2008 presidential elections.

In conclusion, in Western societies, mostly the American society, gender expectations are still taking on **polarities** but these polarities do not reflect anymore the traditional dichotomy based on **gender, segregational and discriminatory roles**; rather, they have added new attitudes triggering new behavior patterns which describe an American society where **Eastern collectivist values and principles** meet with **Western individualist ones**.

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