

The Critical Feminist
By
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I use the term "Feminist" here in the sense of considering as goals of primary importance, and as basic human rights and as preconditions of democratic government, the achievement by women of equal access to resources, individual autonomy and economic and political power in society, as well as considering the achievement of this goal to be feasible.

Feminist researchers in the social sciences have at least four special concerns specific to them:

1. To explain the facts of past (and present) disregard for, and misrepresentation and falsification of women, by scientists in the social sciences (in the widest sense, i. e. sociology, social anthropology, political science, and economics, including history and human biology and individual psychology and psychopathology, and the so-called "Geisteswissenschaften" that deal with human cultural products).
2. To overcome this disregard and falsification, to fill in the large lacunae in all fields of history, anthropology, sociology and other social sciences concerning women's conditions of life, social roles and contributions in various societies and times, and to examine and correct as many of the widely accepted misrepresentations of women as possible.
3. To use their new scientific insights to guide, facilitate and support the struggle against the diverse extant forms of gender discrimination and of violence against and intimidation of women.
4. To use their scientific insights for the development and the testing of social policies whose purpose is to help women to gain equal access to resources, individual autonomy and economic and political power in society.

These concerns involve epistemological and methodological problems. In my view Popper's contributions are relevant to these concerns and could help in the solution of the special problems of feminist social scientists.

Before going into this, I shall first describe the epistemological and methodological choices of feminist social researchers and try to explain why so many of their choices were opposed to critical rationalism and why so little use was made of Popperian alternatives. Why was there so little awareness of Critical Rationalism in the feminist camp?

Feminists tended to adopt an anti-positivist or anti-scientist stance, due to the fact that male social science researchers had a) claimed objectivity by non-involvement in social problems, by distancing themselves from the human subjects of their research and by not informing them - or even misinforming them - about the goals of their research projects;

b) that they had claimed scientific truth for their theories by imitating the quantitative methods of the natural sciences though their results had frequently been blatantly untrue and biased against women and used as "scientific" license to harm women.

Many Feminists adopted fashionable anti-positivist, anti-scientific views such as the many variants of relativism, neo-Marxist, post-modernism or Kuhnian paradigms, all of which share the claim that (at least in the social sciences) the pursuit of objectivity and the pursuit of truth are impossible and that those claiming to do so are deceiving the public.

Relativism has been claimed to hold between the value of social theories and historical descriptions of different periods, between kinds of societies, between modern thinking and "magic thinking", different nationalities, races and classes, especially socialist and bourgeois. The theory of Kuhnian paradigms was taken to assume that science is relative to political, economic and institutional pressures, all of which were presumably parts of what constitutes a ruling paradigm.

The conclusion advocated by relativist feminists is that at least social research - perhaps also natural research - necessarily always is, and should be openly admitted to be, relative and separate according to gender. This is open to at least two interpretations: perhaps it means that only women can be feminists or that only women are qualified to conduct women's studies.

Post-modernism reads as follows: both objectivity and truth cannot be achieved at all in the human sciences, because their subject matter is made up of "texts" or of significant "events" that can only be individually interpreted and all interpretations are equally legitimate.

Thus it happened that the much needed criticism of positivism and scientism led some feminist scholars into subjectivism and irrationalism. This only reinforces positivism and scientism.

A certain historical situation in the social sciences happens to have played an important role in the evolution of feminist critique. Functionalism was the ruling school in sociology and in social anthropology at the time of the advent of the new feminist movement at the close of the sixties. It is a grand theory of social equilibrium, that stood for men's and women's desirably different roles in the nuclear family, and thus also in the economy and in politics, as the basis for the stability of modern society. This, of course,

stands in diametrical contrast to the feminist critical view of modern society and especially of the American nuclear family.

In their critique of functionalism some feminists joined Marxist and Neo-Marxist schools, such as the Frankfurt school, whose leaders declared extremely critical views of "American imperialism" and of the "bourgeois family". In spite of the fact that gender could not possibly play a significant role in Marxist and Neo-Marxist social analysis, they tried now to introduce gender as an additional factor without attempting to examine critically the main Marxist tenets of social class as the basic social whole, of the inevitability of the class struggle, of the state being nothing but an instrument of the "ruling class", and of the future classless society that will automatically solve all social problems, including the problem of women's social inequality. Later some neo-Marxist feminist scholars attempted to introduce not only gender, but also race and ethnicity, next to the basic Marxist factor of social class, thus further confusing the relativist and holistic tendencies of Marxist social analysis.

Thus it happened that these Feminist scholars in their criticism of functionalism as a conservative, establishmentarian and holist theory, did not contribute to the much needed critique of holism and of the accepted division into holism and individualism.

The Feminist criticism of the scientist fetish made of the quantitative method and statistics in the social sciences certainly was very important. "Factors" and "parameters" that are fixed arbitrarily, are all too often taken seriously without regard to the specific meaning that the question originally had to the person to whom it was presented, nor to his or her specific circumstances, nor to the possible distortions of the measurements of these "factors" and "parameters". All too often the numbers resulting from these pointless procedures are subject to some mindless inductivist correlations. And all too often the outcome of this entire pointless process is passed to the overwhelmed reader with no explanation. All this does deserve severe criticism.

As alternatives Feminist scholars greatly developed the research tools of the so-called qualitative method such as semi-structured questionnaires and semi-structured and minimally structured and in-depth interviewing (video and/or audio taped); they developed the entirely new method of "Oral history".

Unfortunately many of them erroneously claimed to have thus abandoned any kind of quantification. This suited well those who had adopted a subjectivist, irrationalist, anti-empirical stance.

In addition to the rule of functionalism, another specific historical situation at the time of the rise of the new women's movement also influenced the direction of feminist critique. This was the popularization of psychoanalysis, loosely characterizable as Freudian. In the USA this had started as late as the fifties and gained dominance in the sixties. In the mid-sixties semi-Freudian theories were used by psychanalysts, psychotherapists, physicians,

sociworkers, teachers and social policy makers. They were used as means of scientific legitimation for the devaluation of women and for their domestication, and as justification for gender discrimination of all sorts.

Betty Friedan gave the sign to "Women's Liberation" by publishing her book the "Feminine Mystique" that was a critique of the application of quasi-Freudian quasi-psychoanalytic theories to subjugate women. She discussed Freud's famous claims that women's anatomy was their destiny, that they were destined to narcissism, to "hysteria", to penis envy and to dependence and lack of autonomy; that women who aimed at occupational and intellectual achievement were unnatural "castrating bitches", that those who desired sexual satisfaction by clitoral orgasm were "infantile", (mature women were satisfied by vaginal orgasm and gained full satisfaction by giving birth to sons); that women who claimed to have been sexually abused in childhood by their fathers or other male father-figures, suffered from wish-phantasies, and that women who reported male violence, had attracted sadistic men because of their own masochistic tendencies.

Some Feminist psychologists and sociologists developed Friedan's criticism further and rejected Freudian Psychoanalysis, and some of them used Popper's argument that Freud teaching is pseudo-scientific, as he had refused to open his hypotheses to criticism, that he had formulated them in a way that characterized any criticism as resulting from the critic being psychologically inferior and even sick. (Popper called this technique "reinforced dogmatism".) Feminist sociologists pointed out the dogmatic character of the Freudian teaching that the period of infancy determines all future psychic development, as Freudians refused to examine the impact of later social influences on character. (When made, such examinations showed amazing changes in the attitudes of groups of women faced with similar choices = after a relative short period of time had passed.)

Nevertheless, the well-known Feminist Carol Gilligan simply accepted Freud's dictum that women - due to a basically and unchangeably different experience of female infants from male infants - were different from men by having a stronger tendency or capacity for human attachment (Freud had called it dependence) and a weaker urge for "autonomy" and declared that this made women different but superior to men, by causing them to develop a superior morality to that of men. She had pointed out the tendency of Piaget and Inhelder of making the moral judgments of boys the touchstone for the development of human moral sense in general, and thus condemning the usually less abstract, less legalistic suggestions of the girls, as being proof of women's slower and inferior moral development.