CONTENTS AND SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTS

Abstract

This book is a study of the relationship between political circumstances and the gender order. Moreover, it studies this complex relationship in a country that had just been going through profound changes in both. As anthropologists tend to do, I have chosen an empirical example in order to analyze the processes up close. And as feminists tend to do, I use the data to formulate questions about power. The example is a social movement, the so-called neighborhood movement. The focus is on women’s participation in it, in whatever forms it took.

The neighborhood movement has been surprisingly little studied. It played a crucial role in the transition from dictatorship towards democracy in the 1970s, when so much was being renegotiated, in political institutions as well as daily life. Since then its impact has weakened, but it is still alive and it still makes things happen.


The study suggests that the Spanish neighborhood movement can be seen as a great experiment in the direction of establishing contexts for practical, political and moral work of a participatory and expansive kind, where meanings can always be questioned.

My data show (a) that this movement is a plural political space where a number of interpretations of effective strategies to challenge the powers-that-be manage to work together, not without conflict and not always with great efficacy, but with creativity; (b) that women participate in likewise plural ways; (c) that the plurality extends also to the field of feminist issues; (d) that the neighborhood movement is a space where difference feminism and equality feminism communicate with each other, in less abstract, more practical ways than inside the feminist movement; (e) that it is a space where women from all walks of life find inspiration and knowledge to change their everyday conditions; (f) that this means that some of the thorny theoretical issues are resolved in practice; (g) most concretely, it means that women who could never be persuaded that feminism or gender equality are attractive or realist as personal goals nevertheless find that their lives change and their horizons widen, and since they enjoy this greatly, they continue working in that direction.

This is clearly not a feminist movement. Just as clearly, it is not a gender conservative movement, either. My effort has been to show that there are more subtle consequences that escape easy classification along the lines of the usual debates around conservatism versus change in a short or medium time perspective, but that in the longer run these consequences for the gender order lie in the direction feminism desires, and that the characteristics of the neighborhood movement make it an appropriate space for changes that will reach everyone, not just an elite.
Profound social processes work slowly. The results are not always visible, and when they are, they may look suspiciously complex, hard to grasp, therefore hard to believe. But what happens slowly and at grass roots level may turn out to be deep and long lasting.

The characteristics of the neighborhood movement – premises close to home, a relaxed style of interaction, social purposes mixed with instrumental ones – have been shown to facilitate women's participation in political life in other countries, too. The cultural emphasis on local life is more specific to Spain. The idea of barrio (quarter, ward, area, part of town) is of a good, safe, home-like place which it is natural to love and want to do things for; that is what gives cultural sense to this kind of political organization, and it seems to facilitate women's participation in that the barrio becomes a metaphorical being to be cared for.

Thus it constitutes a bridge between the concepts of “home” and “street”, which are the approximate equivalents in Spain of private and public spheres. In Spain, as well as around the Mediterranean generally and most of Europe, these spheres have been strongly gendered.

The Spanish neighborhood movement creates new arenas, new styles and new issues for cultural and political negotiations. This has evident practical effects, especially on women's possibilities. It constitutes a process that foments women's freedom of movement and women's recognition as citizens. This is most apparent when it comes to the women who become active in the movement, but indirectly it affects all women, and through them also all men, because it alters and redefines crucial aspects of the gender order as a whole.

Theoretical debates cannot be clarified through theory only. Local contexts must be taken into consideration. And as practice will create new practice, the processes set in motion must be continuously analyzed. Practice theory tells us that there is no perfect reproduction of social life ever, but seldom total upheaval either. So strategic reasoning must be about finding the contradictions, the leaks, the nooks and crannies, the places where new things can or must happen. A major purpose of feminist anthropology should be to make careful, thick descriptions of practice and analyze them to find those contradictions – so that practical people can then use them for their purposes.

To most of the women in the neighborhood movement, the word feminism sounds as bad as the word politics. But in cautious and practical ways, they do question the gender order they live with. They negotiate for entrance into new spaces and for more space in them once there. They learn new things and enjoy that. They work close to home, with things they master, and they are discovering that what they do makes a difference on a larger scale. They become aware of themselves as agents of change. Since this clashes with traditional ideas on gender, they are forced to confront traditions, and their associational experience gives them good tools for doing that.

So what they are doing is really what the white middle class feminists of the rich countries did around 1970: starting with their own situation, refusing to accept other people's interpretations, but not accepting things as they are either, they expand their spaces and reflect on the process along the way. Women are leaving "home", moving in such a way that the whole traditional division of private-public is undermined.

The breadth and depth of the changes these women create come from the fact that they are not a vanguard minority in the usual sense. They are a minority in their barrios, certainly, but they represent a majority when it comes to experiences and life styles. What they do is visible and understandable (even when not always acceptable) for many more. They push at the naturalized definitions of women and men, private and public, possible and impossible, individual and collective, and pushing they demonstrate that what seemed solid actually yields. To people not accustomed to see themselves as agents of social change, this is important news.
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