To conquer the bars: Spanish forms and places for cultural negotiations around gender.

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Most of us are interested in power. But power is nothing in itself, it must be defined. Expressions of dominance vary in time and space.

One of the most important questions for feminist theory is: How can power be recognized and described?

But it is difficult to pinpoint what should be described and how it can be summed up in order to compare circumstances of power in different historical times, in different types of societies. Which is what we must do in order to build feminist theory.

One must ask questions like: What is inequality and what is just difference? What resources are especially important in order for a person or a group to act in its own interests - or even formulate its own interests? How are circumstances connected to power
interpreted by the persons involved? How and how much do the interpretations vary between the various categories of people involved?

It all varies in time and space. The variations constitute an important study object for feminist history and anthropology. But there are probably also resources that are important always and everywhere. To describe them correctly, they must be made rather abstract. "Money" is not a universal phenomenon, but "material resources" are. "Many friends" would not do as a concept, but probably "social capital". And so on.

In my search for cross-culturally valid ways of talking about power resources, I have found one I would call "access to cultural negotiations." This paper is about that type of resource in a specific time and place, Spain in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Still a rather high level of generalization, but it is not the exact ethnography that is important here. What I want to do is to exemplify what this type of power resource is about.

If people say something, it is a fact that they say it, whatever we may think about the veracity of the contents. To speak is a social act. Discourse is connected to the gender order in two ways: different gender categories participate in different discourses, and participate to a different degree and perhaps in different ways; and some discourses are about the gender order or gender-related issues. In both these ways, the features of the field of discourses constitute a set of constraints and possibilities that work in different ways for men and women. Therefore, analyzing discourse is much more than analyzing texts or symbols. It is about real power relationships.

Spain is a country that has been through a dramatic process of change during the last few decades. And it is still changing although now in less obvious but perhaps deeper ways.

In the short period from approximately 1960 to 1980, "everything" happened. Basic economic and social structures were transformed, so that a rural society living mainly on agriculture became an industrial society where most people lived in big cities. And the transition from a long-lasting dictatorship to something quite similar to other Western European parliamentary democracies.

In such a conjuncture, ideas must change too. Even ideas on gender, which are usually among the deep and resistant ones. Few things are taken for granted in Spain, today, and this is perhaps especially true for gender. Issues like "the couple", women’s work outside the home, divorce, abortion, sexuality, and so on are constantly on the agenda, in parliament, on TV debates and in friendly conversations at the corner bar. Few things are taken for granted, and those that are taken for granted by some are not by others.

It is, in other words, a situation of general cultural insecurity.

Shared ideas, i.e. culture, are always continually negotiated in any society. That is, they are talked about and thus reproduced with whatever adjustments to changing
circumstances are called for. Culture would not be shared, and thus not culture, if it was not communicated. In communication, ideas are reproduced. But reproduction is never unproblematic, there are always differences of positions and opinions, so there is debate - and thus change.

That is: What people say is one of the things that change the world. This is always so. It is not just something that happens in intellectual debate or political work but in every little comment we make to a friend about what another friend did and what we think about it. Such talk shapes ideas about good and bad, important or trivial, reality or fantasy.

Cultural reality is always in movement, never perfectly reproduced, but always in the process of being recreated. Some values and images and definitions seem more or less stable, perhaps even eternal, because they are frequently communicated and seldom opposed or contrasted. But they, too, are made and remade in the process of communication.

In a situation of cultural insecurity like the one Spain is living through, there is more negotiation. And gender has become an especially prominent theme in those cultural negotiations. The fact that cultural negotiation is going on has in itself become unusually visible.

Feminists for example have a slogan that says, "We must conquer the street! We must conquer the night!"

To a foreigner this might sound frivolous. It can sound frivolous for Spaniards, too, if you interpret it in a traditional way. The street is a traditional metaphor, in Spanish-speaking countries generally, for all public life. And according to traditional thinking, "men are of the street, women are of the house," i e women should not participate in public life. A woman who wants to come out of her house, in order to participate in the labor market, in politics or perhaps just in social life, is - or was - taken to be precisely frivolous, indecent, a woman looking for things no "real" woman ought to desire.

But for that same reason, to conquer the street is not frivolous but subversive, in a positive sense, for the feminist movement. It is an important political goal. The division of the world in a private and a public sphere is not given, not static. What should be what, and who should be allowed to be where, or if the whole idea of dividing the world into private and public things should be rejected altogether - it can all be negotiated. And it is being negotiated - in formal debate, in media, in everyday conversations among friends, at parties, around the family dining table, in the bar, at the office...

To conquer the night is about the same thing, but expressed in terms of time instead of space. If the street is considered, traditionally, a male space, it is much more so at night. Yet it is at night that much of what women now want to participate in, takes place:
association meetings, evening courses, social life, shift work or overtime to earn more money...

To conquer the bars is another slogan which is also about access to all sorts of public arenas.

It is first of all about pleasure, sure enough, but it is not frivolous to want access to some fun. Spanish feminists think a woman should not have to limit herself to gender specific pleasures, like gossiping with other mothers when waiting to pick up their children outside the school. To go to a bar in the evening is among many other things one way of creating a space for sexual freedom, thus securing one of the bases for making your own decisions about your own life and your own body. To demand the right to have a bit of fun without having an excuse in the form of some task is a step on the road towards more freedom. Most Spanish women have already taken this step, but not all, and it is not a steady step, it has not been consolidated in a wide consensus. It does not always feel quite right even for the women themselves when they take it. To conquer the bars means, then, to conquer the right to leisure and pleasure, in the first place.

Second, the bars are an important institution in Spanish life. They are not just places to have a drink and meet friends. They are oases that can be counted on, you can always find a bar when you need one, and there are many needs that can be satisfied in bars. They have telephones and bathrooms. They give protection from heat or rain or cold. They give information if you are traveling, like where to find a hotel, a cheap meal, and so on, and they give constant information to their steady customers about the whereabouts of the other steady customers. For many men, it is their home away from home, where they read the newspaper, watch television, meet their friends, or just sit, rest. In other words, bars function as tourist information, social clubs, news exchanges, and so on. For men, mostly.

I have had lots of experiences of this, as a married woman, traveling with my husband all over Spain. Now that I am divorced, it does not work quite in the same way. If I am hot and tired, of course I can go into a bar and have a cool drink. But I usually peep in first, to see what kind of bar it is, and I know most Spanish women do the same. If there are only men in a bar, the presence of a woman will be noticed in a way that can be uncomfortable, even if noone says anything. When traveling and needing information, I usually try to find a bar with a woman behind the counter. She will usually give me the kind of service that men expect as a matter of course from both male and female bar personnel.

Spanish women use bars more and more. Courageous young women sometimes go alone to bars in order to meet men. Women of all ages accompany their husbands once in a while for a drink and a chat with friends. It is becoming more and more common to see
groups of women in bars, eating and drinking while taking a break from shopping, or during a break at the office, or before or after going to a movie...

But even if it is changing, bars are still mostly male territory. Women have access, sometimes, to some bars, on certain conditions for certain limited purposes. Men use bars as a taken for granted resource.

And men can use bars in even more serious ways. Bars are important for business and political life. In the bars you can prepare a decision or comment on a strategy, with laughs and jokes and while getting to know the other people involved in a more personal way.

Spanish women are just discovering that it is dangerous not to go to the bar after the meeting in the association or the political party. In the bar is where alliances are formed, information is passed around, arguments are tried out... Women want to go, they try to go, they know they should go - but usually the do not go, because they have to rush home and cook dinner and get the kids to bed and calm their husbands, proving that they are not out too late, in the company of other men...

Here we can see how the resource "access to fora" is dependent on other resources, such as time and freedom of movement, and dependent also on cultural constructions of daily rhythms and sexuality.

Another obstacle for women’s participation in the conversations in the bar is precisely the fact that bars are gender marked. A woman can be in a bar doing exactly the same things as the men are doing, and yet not be able to use the occasion in the same way. She cannot relax in the same way, because she is in a place where she knows a lot of people think she should not be and because her own experiences have not prepared her for feeling as relaxed as a man in a bar. So it is more difficult for her than for a man to play with the strategic potentials of this forum.

There are other places for everyday interaction, of course. The bars are crucial, because they are everywhere, but other places for cultural negotiation exist.

So - it is important to have access to fora for cultural negotiations because that is where life is changed. Gender ideas is one of many things being negotiated. Let us look at some examples of how this happens, from two different contexts.

In Benituria, a working class suburb of Valencia, where I did fieldwork in 1983, gender had become a key symbol for change. Change was usually felt to be something very good, even a prerequisite for a good life. The common interpretation was that "change" in the abstract was what had diminished poverty and increased freedom and personal autonomy. This was something most Beniturians had experienced concretely in their own lives. To be against "change" was therefore close to impossible. Those who had doubts or felt confused had to find excuses. For most, it was a good thing to "have an open mentality"
and "to be ready to learn." And Beniturians who wanted to prove that they were really "progressive", i.e. not afraid of change, were especially careful to express "modern" opinions on gender issues (for instance being pro-abortion and pro-divorce, using contraceptives, criticizing traditional marriage, insisting on the need for "justice" and "equality" for women in the labor market, etc.).

Others were unsure of what "all these new ideas" would comport and preferred to make conservative choices in their own lives. But for them, too, gender was a salient symbol of on-going social and cultural changes. For good and for bad, but mostly for good, they said, even when they did not act accordingly. And those who did express opposition to what was happening almost always chose metaphors from the gender order to argue that change was leading to disorder and unhappiness: young girls do not guard their innocence any longer, they don’t realize what they are losing, families are breaking up, children are left uncared for because selfish mothers prefer their careers, people are obsessed by sexuality...

What people say, how and when and to whom, depends among other things on social class. To find a contrast to Benituria, I did fieldwork among middle class people, in Madrid, in 1990-1991. This context turned out to be difficult to generalize about, because it was very varied and quite polarized - but one thing was clear and that was that debate was the most outstanding feature of the gender order in Madrid. Because society continued changing, and because most middle class people had been through important personal changes as individuals - often change of social class, upwards or downwards - everything was up for discussion and empirical variation in lifestyles and opinions very great.

Power was not usually a substantial theme in conversations in Madrid. It was too touchy a topic, best avoided in polite conversation. But that was so, above all, because power was the major thing being negotiated through other gender-related themes. It was there, and it was changing, and that is what made it so uncomfortable.

Looking at forms and arenas for negotiation in middle class Madrid, we can see that gender organizes the rules of participation in them, and the access to them, in such a way that men’s positions have a better chance of being heard and being taken seriously.

This is being contested in various ways. Women enter male arenas, new female arenas are created, the gender specification of some (male or female) arenas is under doubt. Most new arenas created are mixed. Few arenas are exclusively male any longer.

Gender negotiation goes on in almost all situations in Madrid today. Quite a lot is taken for granted in socially segregated contexts, like social clubs or friendship groups or private parties, since people choose such contexts on the basis of similarity in opinions and similarity in mode of management of meaning. But in the generally unstable situation, even protected contexts can bristle suddenly with unexpected contestations. And most contexts are not neatly segregated according to opinions on gender.
The major part of the cultural negotiation takes place in contexts of sociability. There are innumerable forms for it. And since talking has a high entertainment value, sociability consists to a very high degree of talk.

Naturally, different arenas lend themselves to different kinds of talk. But even relaxed occasions, like a dinner party in the garden, usually have a tint of debate.

But the spontaneously occurring debates are not enough for the most expansive-minded. Special arenas are created, like discussion groups, book clubs, and the many political and cultural associations. Lectures with discussion periods are popular.

There is much creativity, both in the search for new arenas and in the effort to create more permanent groupings.

A special case is the feminist effort to create new arenas for women only. The feminist movement in Madrid has opened bars, organizes women´s festivities, arranges lectures, art shows and film festivals, runs a film discussion club, and so on, and all of these arenas are for women only. However, the movement is at the moment quite marginal. What is said in its fora reaches few ears other than those physically present. There is much reference to "feminism" in gender debates, but it is usually far off the mark. People outside the movement know little about what is debated inside it.

The most important difference between the two class contexts is the degree of gender segregation. In Benituria, almost all spontaneous sociability was gender segregated. Women met and talked to each other above all while waiting in line in the food stores and while waiting to pick up their children outside the schools. Women living in the same building sometimes had intense friendships, helping each other with housework and inviting each other in for afternoon coffee. There were some, not many, small friendships groups getting together to chat on a more regular basis. More common was for mothers of small children to form temporary but very much appreciated relationships with other mothers when they sat in parks or playgrounds with the children.

A major determinant for women´s sociability was that it was not quite legitimate. All of the common contexts were working contexts. The women found excuses for and ways of talking to each other while they were doing something else.

Men had an unquestioned right to socialize without any excuse. The absence of excuse was even underlined in discourse; it was considered important for a man to be able to say "I don’t have to give explanations to anyone!" There was also a well-established institution for male sociability: the bars. Not all men used them regularly, but most did, and no women used them in the same way.

Then there were clubs and associations. They could be arranged along a continuum of "progressivity", where the two main criteria were place on the political left-right-scale and degree of gender segregation, and these two tended to coincide. The mixed-gender contexts were above all the neighbourhood association, the leftist political parties and the parent-teacher associations at the schools. Both women and men belonged to and were
active in voluntary church activities and the organization of the city festivity, Fallas, too, but inside these organizations the activities were divided according to gender. The most common context for mixed-gender sociability was kin, especially regular Sunday lunches with parents/in-laws. Socializing as couples was a phenomenon one knew about, talked about and tried to emulate, but it was not very common.

The middle class situation is different. First, gender segregation is not very legitimate. Second, there is much more emphasis on the Couple. It takes precedence over mother-child relationships inside the family much more than in the working class, there is more talk about it, more negotiation about what it implies, etc. This finds expression in social life, so that much of it is based on the couple. Couples go out together, but they tend to separate during the interaction itself. Often women and men sit together, at the same tables, but talk mostly to persons of their own gender.

Organized activities are never formally gender segregated in the middle class. But time schedules make them quite gender segregated in practice. Such activities as visits to museums, garden courses, etc. are usually scheduled in the day time, when men work, so only women attend. Associations of different kinds usually meet in the evening, so mostly men and unmarried or childless women, or a few privileged professional women with maids, can attend, while most housewives and mothers are very busy preparing dinner and getting children to bed.

Middle class women have a recognized right to leisure that working class women do not. And some of them have the means (time, money and freedom of movement) to use it, too. But not all.

Middle class men usually feel too distinguished to go to the corner bar. The social clubs constitute the substitute for bar life for many men. Others have no substitute, except to the extent that their office functions as one. Very few middle class men practice sports and even fewer take part in such traditional upper class male activities as hunting. So most of their social life is gender mixed: leisure based on the couple and working hours in gender mixed offices.

The women do go shopping, like the working class women, and they do sit with their children in parks. But they do more and more of their shopping in supermarkets. And they are more wary than working class women of talking to strange women in the park. Some women do not even have the excuse of going out with the children, either because the maid does it, or because there is a garden around their building, where even small children can be left alone while playing.

So all in all, middle class persons have fewer opportunities to get to know people or even talk casually to strangers. This is true for both women and men. Both women and men have few daily opportunities to socialize in uni-gender contexts. Couple sociability and kin get-togethers are the most important informal contexts for middle class people of both genders.
All of this has consequences for how messages circulate, and thus how culture changes and who influences what sort of change.

**What is being constructed? Themes.**

There is little room here to describe the content of cultural negotiation around gender. This paper is about the fora for it. But to avoid mystification, let me give just a hint of what is going on in middle class Madrid, to show how central the gender ideas are that are currently being redefined - and thus how important it is to participate in this cultural work.

The thematic areas of work and sexuality are those that the Madrilenians obviously talk about and know that they talk about. Most discussion on gender are about the relationship between women and the labor market, or about changing ideas around sexual mores. But through these something larger or deeper is being worked out. If we look for the themes used as general referents to organize discussions and back up arguments, we find that the two most salient ones are "changing femininity" and "achievement". Both are related to the general social change away from ascription. So is a third general theme, "genderization". By this I mean the foregrounding of gender among personal characteristics, achieved or ascribed.

Femininity is a basic ingredient of any gender order. The features that make something male or female must have some specification. For the Madrilenian middle class, femininity used to be seen as a natural and eternal category. All female human beings, even very young ones, had it in some degree, and it was thought to be inevitable, part of the order of things that had to be for life itself to be.

Now much of what was considered intrinsic to femininity is contested by many women. Those who consider themselves progressive oppose especially seductive and submissive behaviour and the images of weakness and capriciousness. They feel that such behaviour or imagery is undignified, and places women at disadvantage in all contexts. They also oppose the present division of tasks and resources in general. If femininity was something which could be summed up in the idea of submission (seductiveness and manipulation instead of decision-making, dependency instead of personal autonomy, repression of sexuality, self-sacrifice for the sake of others, etc.), and the idea of submission is today unacceptable, then the idea of femininity must change. But it is difficult to see how it can be changed, since it is naturalized, and since the alternatives proposed - autonomy, equality, etc. - are rather unattainable in practice, given present social arrangements. So we have an impasse: femininity cannot stay the same but it is almost impossible to change.

One solution is to "become a person," *ser persona* - this is a very common phrase in all sorts of contexts.
What is meant by "person" is hardly ever made explicit. It seems to refer first and foremost to individual autonomy: to be able to make your own decisions in everyday matters, not to have to give in to the will of others or to have to manipulate others in order to get what you want. For some it also means autonomy in a wider sense, to be able to influence not only your own immediate life but factors that influence your life and perhaps those of others. And for very many it also means psychological strength, will-power, not letting yourself be easily outvoted or even persuaded.

To be a person is often, but not always, associated with having a personal income. And some women use the classical phrase of masculine pride, "I don’t have to give explanations to anyone," i.e. no one has any right to know more about me than what I choose to tell them.

People who do not earn money in their own name would indeed have a harder time to get such a stance accepted by others, by their own family especially. For some, a housewife is a non-person almost by definition. For others, a housewife can be a person if only she tries to be a new kind of housewife. If she is assertive, if she has a strong personality, if she does not sacrifice her own wishes constantly, if she strives to free herself from the "ignorance" associated with housewives, then she is "becoming a person" in spite of not earning money of her own. In either case, the opposite of "to be a person" is to try to live up to the old feminine ideal of living for others.

Since femininity can no longer be easily described, since there is little agreement on what it is or used to be or should become, since women vary among themselves very evidently and very few seem to fit the "traditional" ideal, the idea of femininity no longer serves very well as an argument for ascribing women to certain positions or ascribing certain positions to women only. This increases women’s possibilities to choose for themselves, and as they do, they further undermine ascription.

Since femininity has been very strongly associated with woman-in-the-house, the present situation of change is conceived of as woman-getting-out-of-the-house. The changed femininity and the resulting new roles and goals for women are discussed above all in terms of economic activity, and only to some small degree in terms of other public activities such as politics or associations.

Femininity refers to certain characteristics of women. Genderization refers to the importance given to a person’s gender characteristics, whether male or female, and whichever they are thought to be. In Spain, there is great genderization of people, both in scope and force. I.e. a person’s gender is relevant in most situations, and the fact of genderization is culturally visible and strongly sanctioned. However, women are more genderized than men. Their gender is relevant in more situations than men’s. Their gender is seen as the one in need of reconstruction, or as the one necessitating special sanctions in order to safeguard order or naturalness. Conflicts in the gender order are called "women’s issues".
The discussions on genderization almost always end up being discussions about nature versus nurture, or, in the Madrilenian terms, nature versus education. One side argues that genderization (of whatever the discussion is about: labor market, domestic tasks, personality traits...) is a result of education only. Gender is gender, not sex. The other side argues that some things may be cultural and modifiable, but some important part of that which is genderized is so because it must be so, it is not gender but sex, so it is foolish and dangerous to try to change it.

The status of "nature" in the discourse, then, is a very strong and legitimate reference. But if "nature" determines what people can do and want to do, society ought to be organized around ascription. That is far from the case in Spain today, and it is especially not so for the middle class.

Achievement or merit is the basis for the social position of the new middle class. Since it is construed as something that arises out of individual competence, it cannot be denied to women who prove competent, and since many women have proven competent, the prestige of merit accrue to them in the same way as to men. The logical consequence is to include them in the move away from ascription, so that just as a certain family background or the right personal connections are no longer thought sufficient grounds for employing or promoting a person, neither can male sex be. Since this logic is not easy to convert into practice, however, the issue becomes socially infected, and the arguments invented increase the internal contradictions of the gender order.

Achievement as a principle for social organization also implies an emphasis on the differentiated individual. For Madrilenians of whatever opinion, there is no doubt that individuals should be idiosyncratic and autonomous. Variation and "strong personality" are positively stressed, and they are equally appreciated for women and men.

In everyday spontaneous conversations, achievement is discussed mainly from the following points of view: professional merits, formal education, and strong personality. Freedom is seen, among other things, as the opposite of ascription. Formal gender segregation is therefore not acceptable to anyone. The division of tasks must be legitimized with something else, such as naturalness and voluntary inclinations. Legitimations are certainly found, but the lack of cultural legitimacy for formal gender segregation means that women’s mobility is not easily limited.

The more conservative experience a contradiction between their belief in merit and their belief in natural gender. They tend to emphasize achievement in other contexts, but when it comes to gender, they tend to prefer some construction that ascribes certain tasks according to gender independently of individual variations. The more progressive are quite decided that achievement should be the order of the day. The conflict for them is mainly one between women and men, where women are ready to go all the way and delegitimize all ascription, calling all observable gender characteristics "due to education", whereas men hedge around "motherhood" (including in that all kinds of domestic tasks), which at
least some of them, even among the most radical, would like to retain as innately specific to women.

The Madrilenian middle class must redefine gender for itself. I have given a short description of what aspects are under cultural examination and how they are conceptualized in order to show how cultural negotiations around gender can be described. Now, to conclude, back to the theoretical issue of how to compare power matters - hierarchy, injustice, stratification... - in ways that do not become ethnocentric.

Participation in discourse is one possibly universal criterion for measuring power. Access to places where ideas are being shaped, is as important a resource as money. Cultural negotiation changes reality, so it is dangerous for any category of people in any society to remain outside the spaces where shared ideas are negotiated.

If messages circulate mostly in two separate gender worlds, or if they often cross the gender barrier also makes a difference for how the whole gender order will change.

To place certain categories of people in delimited places (for instance the home), to give them certain privileges (for instance the right to be supported or the monopoly over certain, also important, types of knowledge, for example about emotion) in exchange for their renouncing participation in other spaces can never be fair. It is always dangerous for the so placed. This is an objective fact, independent of what interpretations the so placed develop of the situation and the cultural plausibility and psychological defenses that such interpretations may contain.

Talking is doing. What is said influences social organization. The main way people take part in the process of change in the gender order is by discussing it. Middle class Madrid is a sociable and verbal context. So is working class Benituria. Gender changes stand out in daily experience and are considered and experienced as decisive for quality of life and personal happiness. So people discuss gender issues, shape new opinions on them and then - indirectly, in the long run - modify their way of acting on them, too.

Important fora for cultural negotiations have been highly gender specific in Spain. They are gender marked even now, albeit to a lower degree, and gender segregation is certainly being questioned. This de-legitimation of many gender markers is perhaps the clearest ingredient in gender change in Spain. But the de-legitimation is not complete, not even on the level of ideas, and both habits, experiences and actual practice drag behind ideas.

To conquer the bars and other fora for debate concerns personal freedom and social power. It concerns redefinitions of the limits of what is permissible for whom when it come to pleasure and fun and sexuality, it concerns the redistribution among women and men of practical resources in everyday life and in politics and business, in family life and working life. Anything but frivolous!
So my methodological suggestion is: To describe a gender order in a feminist way, one should pay attention, among other things, to what fora for cultural negotiations exist, how they are connected to each other and to other important resources, to what extent they are gender marked, how people act in them, what issues are negotiated where, which types of discourse women and men have access to and have been trained in - and in what way all of this taken together influences the gender order as a whole.

If we want to say something about power in different societies (groups, regions, subcultures...) and compare in a fruitful way in spite of all the differences, we must look for resources that can be defined in a universally valid way. And this should preferably be done without using a level of abstraction so high that the connection to human reality is risked. Access to and influence over cultural negotiation is one such resource.