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# The Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction of Difference

PAULA ROTHENBERG

*The construction of difference is central to racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. This paper examines the similar and dissimilar ways in which race and gender have been constructed in the United States and analyzes the consequences of these differences in construction for the development of social policy and the growth and nature of movements for social change.*

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The construction of difference is central to racism, sexism and other forms of oppressive ideologies. Few theorists have better understood the importance of constructing difference and the centrality of that construction to racism (and by extension, other forms of oppression) than Albert Memmi (1971, 186-195). At a time when liberal theoreticians still grounded their political philosophy on a metaphysic that accepted “natural” differences between women and men and then set out to win certain rights for women by arguing over which differences provided a legitimate basis for limiting women’s rights and which did not, Memmi had already recognized that difference was created not discovered. “Making use of the difference is an essential step in the racist process,” he wrote, “but it is not the difference which always entails racism; it is racism which makes use of the difference” (1971, 187). This insight prompted Memmi to define racism as

... the generalized and final assigning of value to real or imaginary difference, to the accusers benefit and at his victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s privileges or aggression. (1971, 185).

Note that it is the process of assigning value to difference, not whether the difference is real or imagined, that is the key to the process by which “the racist aims to intensify or cause the *exclusion*, the *separation* by which the victim is placed outside the community or even outside humanity” (Memmi 1971, 187). Placing the victim outside humanity is of course essential if one is to justify the in-

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humanity of slavery and colonialism. Placing the victim outside the community (of equals, or adults, or decent women) is essential if one is to rationalize the violence and the denial of personhood that lies at the heart of sexism.

What Memmi failed to notice, however, is the two-sided or dialectical nature of the process wherein difference is defined. For it is not only the racist or sexist who constructs difference but the victim of each or both who seeks to create difference as well. At times the "victim" has done so in response to the racism and/or sexism of the society in order to survive, but at other times movements made up of these "victims" have sought to redefine difference as part of a struggle for power and personhood.<sup>1</sup> At least in part this is because the particular paradigm for expressing race or gender difference that holds sway in society at any given moment carries with it both implicit and explicit prescriptions for social policy. At certain moments in history, oppressed people have been able to exert control over the process of defining difference with a view to reconstructing difference in what they perceive to be their own interest. Social, political and intellectual disagreements or struggles over both the appropriate social construction of race and gender and disagreements about the appropriateness of particular paradigms of race and gender can best be understood as disputes over the nature of difference that the society is prepared to establish and by implication the nature of the social policies it is prepared to entertain.

#### THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIFFERENCE

If we undertake a historical survey of the construction of difference in the United States, we find that difference claims have been expressed in the vocabulary of numerous different ideologies. In spite of the historical specificity which determines the form and content of each particular claim, we can distinguish three fundamental categories according to which race and gender difference has been alleged: difference in nature, difference in moral sensibilities, and difference in culture and/or values (Whitbeck 1975). Claims about difference in nature have been the most numerous and have assumed the most diverse forms. At times they have been attributed to biology, to physiognomy, to genetic makeup and so forth. Difference in moral sensibilities has alternately been treated as either innate or acquired, and the cultural/value differences have received similar treatment. It is not uncommon for one or more of these categories of difference to be used in combination.

Claims about difference are often difficult to deal with precisely because they are offered under the guise of value-free descriptions yet smuggle in normative considerations that carry with them the stigma of inferiority. Where white, male, middle-class, European, heterosexuality provides the standard of and the criteria for rationality and morality, difference is always perceived as deviant and deficient.<sup>2</sup> In addition, though difference claims are usually

couched in the language of the academy, most often bearing the trappings of the natural or social sciences, difference claims are essentially metaphysical. Even though they often point to or allege some readily observable difference, such as skull size, brain weight, or family structure, a reasoned refutation of the empirical claim rarely results in a change in attitude on the part of those who allege difference. They merely seek some other vocabulary or conceptual framework in which to reformulate their charge. This has led some thinkers to suggest that racism (and, by extension, sexism) have the belief status of delusions which by definition are impervious to contrary evidence (Pierce 1974, 513).

#### THE NATURE/BIOLOGY PARADIGM

Underlying all racism and sexism is the notion of a natural or biological difference alleged to separate the groups in question in a fundamental, inevitable and irreversible way. This natural difference is then called upon to explain any and all observable differences in opportunity or achievement between white people and people of color or men and all women. Science, medicine, religion, and the law have all made important contributions to the force and longevity of this theory providing “evidence” to ground this basic claim of natural inferiority. The strength of the paradigm lies in its ability to translate readily observable physical differences in appearance into qualitative and even “moral” differences.

While the idea of natural difference is central to both racism and sexism, it functions somewhat differently in each. In the case of race, the nature/biology paradigm is used to portray a difference in nature between whites and blacks so fundamental and so enormous as to exclude black people from the human community and thus make it possible for otherwise kind and decent people to carry out the unspeakable acts of inhumanity and violation that constitute the history of slavery and its aftermath.

Sexism works differently. Since men have mothers and often have wives, daughters, and sisters as well, the nature/biology paradigm expresses a weaker form of difference with respect to gender. Women are not portrayed as excluded from humanity but as separated from the relevant community, be it the community of men or adults. While racist ideology has entertained the question as to whether or not black people were part of the human species and has, at times, answered in the negative; sexist ideology has simply sought to exclude women by virtue of their nature from membership in the community that enjoyed or had a proper claim to certain privileges or rights.

The weak version of this same paradigm, which evolves after the Civil War and is bound up with the Industrial Revolution, offers white women a “separate sphere.” Here difference is seen as endowing white women with certain noble or positive attributes which fit them for certain important roles that men are

unable to fulfill. This complementary paradigm of gender difference replaces natural inferiority with “different and better if not equal.” In doing so, it manages to preserve the sense of difference which excludes all women from certain areas and functions (and rights and privileges) but sugarcoats this exclusion with the assurance that that sphere isn’t worthy of women anyway.

No comparable weak version of the paradigm exists for race nor does the weak version itself apply to black women. Beginning with slavery, black women are excluded from the community of women who need and deserve “special protection” and who inhabit a “separate sphere.” Historically, white people have denied the existence of gender difference within the black community at the very same time that “separate sphere” sex roles functioned as part of male identity and privilege in the white world. This denial of gender difference became part of the construction of difference that is racism. To put it another way, the difference in appropriate social roles for women and men that was the mark of “civilized” society was denied to black community whose members, not coincidentally, were consistently portrayed as having a bestial or animal nature. This difference in the social construction of gender within each race must be understood as part of the construction of difference that is central to racism.

In the case of both race and gender, the way difference is defined by the nature/biology paradigm performs certain critical functions. First, it implicitly and explicitly defines or establishes hierarchy as natural, that is present in the natural order of things. Second, it absolves those in power from any responsibility for the condition of the inferior group and thus blames the victim for its victimization. Third, it undercuts all efforts to alter relations between the races or the sexes since it portrays the difference as one of kind not degree. Social policy and practice must be predicated on difference and ought not seek to mitigate suffering caused by it.

While the nature/biology paradigm is often portrayed (and even dismissed) as crude and unsophisticated it has never been entirely replaced or supplanted. In fact, additional paradigms have been generated at different historical moments to meet the changing economic, social and political conditions and their attendant needs, but these new paradigms always function within the context of the nature/biology paradigm; they never replace it. The relation between old and new paradigms is very much like that among the contents of “Grandmother’s trunk” in the children’s memory game where though new items are added with each turn the old items persist and remain an integral part of each recitation.

#### CHALLENGES TO THE NATURE/BIOLOGY PARADIGM

Challenges to the nature/biology paradigm take many forms but all have in common the desire to portray difference as a matter of degree, not kind. While

they need not be committed to the idea that there are no differences between people, and even entertain the idea that there can be differences of race and/or gender, they emphasize the social nature of the categories “race” and “gender” and try to move from a normative to a descriptive use of the concept of difference.

The “separate but equal” approach to race relations and the “different but equal” or liberal model for gender roles are early examples of attempts to modify the nature/biology model by beginning to incorporate the idea of difference as degree while still retaining a strong hold on the difference in kind paradigm. For example, the Justices in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which effectively establishes “separate but equal” as the nation’s policy of race relations for almost sixty years, go to great pains to maintain that separating the races in public education, transportation and other areas is simply a way of recognizing difference but involves no normative judgment. In fact, they specifically assert that such segregation does not “necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other. . . .” Portraying the other as “equal” though different paves the way for future accommodation. After all, negotiations or accommodations are only possible between equals.

#### THE ETHNICITY PARADIGM

During the latter portion of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the biologicistic/Social Darwinist paradigm of race still predominates but the legal doctrine of separate but equal helps undermine its force, and gradually race difference comes to be redefined using the ethnicity paradigm. This paradigm functions both descriptively and prescriptively bringing with it its celebration of cultural pluralism (Wolff 1965). Now race difference is no longer irrevocably “other” and no longer places people of color, in Memmi’s words, “outside of humanity.” The ethnicity paradigm goes beyond “separate but equal” to offer a picture of society where race is simply one more difference on the all-American continuum of ethnic diversity.<sup>3</sup>

The implications and consequences of this portrayal of difference are enormous. Because the adoption of ethnicity as the dominant paradigm for race transforms race from a biological to a social category, it presents a progressive alternative to the crude and unyielding nature/biology paradigm it attempts to replace or supplement. At the same time, by denying both the centrality and uniqueness of race as a principle of socio-economic organization, it redefines difference in a way that denies the history of racism in the United States and thus denies white responsibility for the present and past oppression and exploitation of people of color. Further, while one version of the paradigm celebrates diversity in the form of cultural pluralism, another version regards difference as a problem and offers as its solution “assimilation.” The emergence of black nationalism during the sixties, as well as Garvey’s Pan Africanism of

the 1920s, can be understood as a direct response to the inadequacies of this paradigm and an attempt on the part of Black Americans to redefine difference in what they perceived to be their interests.

By focusing on the dynamics of colonialism, the nation-based paradigm for race reasserts the unique history of people of color in the United States and points to the inadequacy of the ethnicity paradigm. The popular movement to replace “Negro” and “colored” with “black” and “Afro-American” represented a dramatic attempt on the part of Black Americans to reassert race as the primary social-political-economic category and principle of social organization and to reject outright all solutions to “the negro problem” that proselytized assimilation.<sup>4</sup> The cultural nationalism of the period which was perhaps most visible to white Americans in the form of *dashikis* and *afros* was part of the group’s attempt to assert its own power to define and create difference. Looked at in this way, the nation-based paradigm and its attendant linguistic and life-style recommendations represented an attempt on the part of Black Americans to assert their right to define difference specifically by rearticulating the meaning of “separate but equal.”

#### EMBRACING GENDER DIFFERENCE

During the latter portion of the nineteenth century, the “separate sphere” gender paradigm is modified and ultimately replaced by a picture of gender which portrays women as “different but equal”.<sup>5</sup> Predicated on the notion of difference, the liberal paradigm for gender raises the possibility that at least some gender difference may be social rather than natural or biological. Part of the justification, offered by Mill and others, for introducing a principle of “perfect equality” between the sexes is that such a principle will not suppress whatever natural differences exist. The “different but equal” model for gender relations prevails for a considerable period of time. Its essential ambiguity about the nature and origins of difference between the sexes guarantees that the “nature/biology” paradigm it seeks to replace will continue to exert considerable control at both the psychological and social level. In a context where wealthy, white, males set the standard, race and gender paradigms that assert either “separate” or “different” but “equal” will always perform the dual function of implicitly evaluating as “inferior” what they purport to be describing as “different.”

During the sixties and seventies we find attempts by significant sectors of the white women’s movement to redefine difference in ways which parallel struggles carried out by the Black community. Just as the nation-based paradigm challenges ethnicity by heightening race difference instead of trying to deny or de-emphasize it, the radical feminism typified and precipitated by Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectics of Sex* (1971) and the more recent feminist essentialism which portrays feminine nature as different than and preferable

to “maleness” represent attempts by women to identify and embrace sex difference rather than apologize for it. At certain points, Firestone’s argument bears remarkable similarity to Mill’s insofar as both argue that traditional ways of formulating social policy about gender converts a physical fact to a legal right, subsuming the history of gender relations under the principle of “might makes right.” Early radical feminism quite dramatically embraces the nature/biology paradigm for gender only to stand it on its head. The thrust of the paradigm as it expresses and perpetuates male-domination is that nature/biology can’t be changed; it is immutable. Firestone and others (following Rousseau of *The Social Contract* and John Stuart Mill) suggest that the proper way to deal with natural inequality is to overcome it, not institutionalize it. What we have here is an attempt on the part of the women’s movement to assert its right to redefine difference.

Other segments of the women’s movement entered the political struggle over definition by offering androgyny as the proper paradigm for gender.<sup>6</sup> The androgyny paradigm, now very much out of favor, shares many similarities with the ethnicity paradigm for race. Now gender difference is clearly portrayed as a matter of degree not kind. In place of a model which assumes two sexes, the androgyny paradigm portrays gender difference as points on the continuum of gender. Difference now reflects, not two separate and different sexes, but a whole range of human possibilities.

The androgyny paradigm has been criticized in much the same way as the ethnicity/cultural pluralism model for race. Both have been charged with building in an essentially conservative picture of the (static) components (i.e. “qualities” and “groups”) that constitute the reality they seek to describe. Further, by prematurely seeking to replace male and female with “human,” the androgyny paradigm is guilty of rendering both race and gender difference invisible at a time when differences based on gender as they impact on people’s lives need to be uncovered and dismantled, not covered over. This parallels the charge that the ethnicity paradigm denies race its unique history of slavery and colonization, rendering the very factors that create its virulence invisible.

Finally, at those times when racial oppression has been regarded as the most serious kind of injustice in the society, white women have attempted to employ race as the paradigm for gender in order to appeal to those male social reformers who failed to acknowledge the extent and severity of women’s oppression as women. During the 1850s and 1860s feminists drew parallels between the situation of white women and the situation of Blacks, arguing that in the eyes of custom and the law, white women’s status was equivalent to that of negro slaves. In her famous speech before the New York State Legislature in 1854, Elizabeth Cady Stanton spends considerable time drawing this parallel. And again, more than a hundred years later, during the 1960s and 1970s, feminists once again attempted to draw this analogy as part of their effort to redefine gender difference in a way that would capture the attention of white, male



activists who considered racism a serious evil but tended to trivialize charges of sexism.<sup>7</sup> Such attempts have often rightfully angered Black Americans who have argued that they improperly equated the situation of middle class white women with the brutalization suffered by black people under slavery. It must also be noted that the very same white women who drew this analogy participated in fostering the invisibility of Black women both by drawing the analogy in the first place and by failing to speak out about the double burden of black women's exploitation in the second.

### CONTEMPORARY PARADIGMS AND THEIR CRITICS

In the contemporary period we find considerable confusion over what explicit paradigms are to be adopted for race and gender. Literature in philosophy as well as the social sciences reflects a concern on the part of some to identify "the new racism," alternately referred to as "symbolic racism," "modern racism" or even (with a touch of irony) "civilized racism."<sup>8</sup> While analysts disagree over some of the specific features and implications of these "new" racisms, all are concerned with distinguishing their more subtle contemporary manifestation from so-called "old-fashioned" racism which is seen as crude and explicit. The new racism expresses itself by using "code words" in place of explicitly racist language and arguments.

In *Racial Formations in the US*, Omi and Winant define code words as "phrases and symbols which refer indirectly to racial themes but do not directly challenge popular democratic or egalitarian ideals . . ." (1986, 120). As an example of this approach, they point to the way in which the earlier explicit attack on school integration has been replaced by an attack on busing which is rejected on the grounds that it interferes with "the family's" or "the parent's" right to decide where their children will attend school or with "the community's" right to decide upon appropriate housing patterns and school districts. Having made similar observations, Donald Kinder, who has written extensively on "symbolic racism," sets out to explain why so many White Americans express a commitment to "equality of opportunity" while opposing concrete efforts to bring about racial equality (Kinder & Sears 1981; Kinder 1986). Rejecting both the earlier prejudice model and the later self-interest account, Kinder formulates the concept of symbolic racism to account for the new phenomenon he observes. He points to

. . . a blend of anti-black affect and the kind of traditional American values embodied in the Protestant Ethic. Symbolic racism represents a form of resistance to change in the racial status quo based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American Values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic and discipline. (Kinder & Sears 1981, 416).

Kinder and others who offer this account of the new racism have been taken to task by others who argue that it underestimates the continued virulence of old fashioned racism with its explicit assumption of black inferiority and its straightforward commitment to segregationist sentiments (Weigel and Howes 1985; Sniderman & Tetlock 1986). And Kinder himself has recently responded to his critics by acknowledging that he and others “claimed too much when we declared that white America had become, even in principle, racially egalitarian and that traditional forms of racial prejudice had been replaced by symbolic racism. Old fashioned racism remains alive and all too well” (1986, 161).

What are we to make of the current debate about the nature and extent of racism in contemporary American society? Returning to the perspective of this paper, we can understand competing theories as reflecting a struggle over how difference is to be constructed in the present period and over who is to have the power to define difference.

Politicians and intellectuals have joined forces, intentionally or unintentionally, to make race invisible. It is this invisibility which is both highlighted and reinforced by accounts of the New Racism, accounts which on the one hand seem appealing to many of us because they capture something of what we sense to be the flavor of “a new racism” and disturbing on the other because we fear they contribute to the mythology that “*real* racism” is a thing of the past.

Understanding contemporary racist ideology requires that we recognize that the “old fashioned” notion of racial difference as natural and fundamental persists along side contemporary formulations of that doctrine which now point to difference as moral deficiency. By correlating physical and moral deficiencies with observable differences in physical appearance, the nature/biology paradigm obtains a virtual stranglehold on thought processes that continues to this day, making it very difficult to persuade the uninitiated that this paradigm is really already part of the social construction of race and gender and not a reflection of natural difference at all. The nature/biology paradigm has not been replaced, it has simply been supplemented by additional and more sophisticated expressions of racism and sexism that have the effect of continuing to reinforce the so-called “crude” paradigm while at the same time allowing people to avoid confronting that crude model or taking responsibility for it.

According to the new racism, the problem with people of color in general and blacks in particular is that they are not willing to work hard and defer gratification.<sup>9</sup> Their failure to attain economic self-sufficiency and social recognition lies in an essential difference in their nature. This difference legitimately excludes them from the community of citizens who deserve either or both support and sympathy from the government or “the American People.” Note here that people of color, according to this ideology, are already excluded from the community that is intended by the phrase “The American People,”

which is then understood to be circumscribed by a certain set of values “we” (as opposed to “they”) all share.<sup>10</sup>

What we are witnessing in the contemporary period is the resurrection of the nature/biology paradigm now in a more dangerous and more ideologically loaded form.<sup>11</sup> The political ideology of the day is Conservative with a capital “C” and Conservatism always relies upon some theory of natural and fundamental difference to explain and justify the inequality of opportunity and conditions which it fails to find problematic. In its older, crude version, the nature/biology paradigm is quite straightforward about the fundamental difference between the races that separates them irrevocably. In its new sophisticated version, the blatant racism is muted and its assertion of fundamental difference between the races appears to be its unavoidable (perhaps even regrettable) conclusion not its premise.

According to the new ideology, we are enjoined from ever seeing race difference. The differences we notice are differences in moral character. Since race has been obliterated as a category, the only way to explain differences in achievement is by pointing to individual difference. If blacks as a group fail to achieve, the implication is that there is something in their nature that prevents them from achieving. To say that they lack a commitment to the Protestant work ethic and a willingness to delay gratification is simply a polite way of restating the old litany that “Blacks are shiftless and lazy,” but in this more sophisticated form we are left with pointing out a moral deficiency or a deficiency of character which can claim to be colorblind.

The work of two contemporary black social scientists, Thomas Sowell (1981) and William J. Wilson (1978) have helped to gain credibility for the neo-conservative approach by de-emphasizing the significance of race as a factor in contemporary American society. In particular, Sowell’s discussion of the relative economic success or lack of success enjoyed by members of various ethnic and racial groups in the country, can easily be interpreted as supporting the implicit ascription of moral deficiency.

The current refusal to acknowledge the existence of race difference leads to a redefinition of race as once again a biological or natural category and actually brings us much closer to a return to the biologicistic/Social Darwinist paradigm. Now there are no races, just human beings. Some of those human beings are morally deficient (or, grow up in deviant families, which amounts to short hand for the same claim) and hence don’t/won’t/can’t achieve. Many of these morally deficient human beings are blacks, so there must be something in the nature of black people that explains this failure. Success proves that you have worked hard and delayed gratification and deserve to succeed. “Failure” simply indicates that you were deficient in those moral qualities or character attributes that guarantee success. At the heart of the “new racism” is a reconstruction of difference which returns to a paradigm which both explains and justifies why certain individuals are excluded from the community of those whose efforts

government is there to support. Government is to create and enforce conditions which guarantee equality of opportunity so that all those who work hard can succeed. Addicts and criminals (and, by implicit equation, “lazy blacks”), have excluded themselves from that community. Their failure to achieve is simply proof that they were never members of it and didn’t deserve to be. We return to the earliest formulation of classical liberal ideology with its emphasis on individualism, and its insistence that hierarchy is part of nature, now fused with a revitalized Social Darwinism.

The only alternative paradigm that has been proposed for race in the most recent period comes from Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition. Jackson’s rainbow is of course awash with the color that was left out of the ethnicity paradigm, color that is totally absent from the new right’s return to a modified Social Darwinism, but it is an analogy that thus far has had limited usefulness for formulating social policy. The thing about rainbows is that as soon as you begin to get close to them, they fade and ultimately disappear, an account that some would argue provides a disturbingly accurate account of the Rainbow Coalition’s role in both the 1988 Democratic campaign and its aftermath. While Omi and Winant and others like the Rainbow analogy because it moves beyond a purely racially based agenda (1986, 142-143), in the current climate its not clear whether this will prove to be a viable political strategy for coalition building or a (perhaps unavoidable) move in the direction of a paradigm that plays right into the contemporary preoccupation with denying the existence of race. Viewed in this light, Jackson’s announcement in December of 1988 that henceforth Black Americans were to be called “African Americans” suggests an attempt on his part to revitalize the ethnicity paradigm as a way to reassert the existence of Black Americans as a group. If we are, in fact, experiencing a resurrection of the biology/nature paradigm combined with emphasis on a rabid individualism, redefining difference by adopting the term “African American” may be the best chance black people have to reassert their common history at a time when the New Right seeks to focus on individual opportunity and merit.

If we turn our attention to the construction of gender during the contemporary period we find a similar return to a nostalgic past where gender difference and female biology or sexuality lies at the heart of social organization. Far from wishing to obliterate gender as it has done with race, the new right sees gender difference everywhere and is prepared to use it to justify differences in opportunity or achievement where appropriate. Where the ideal woman of the late 1970s was portrayed as a kind of a superwoman who could and *should* be able to combine successfully her multiple roles of corporate attorney, girl scout leader, femme fatale, super mom, loving wife, PTA volunteer, gourmet cook, little league coach, bonsai gardener, and fashion model, the ideal woman a decade or so later is encouraged to self-define as a wife and mother with an emphasis on the latter. Unable to actually turn back the clock

on some of the concrete gains that white, middle class women have made in the labor force, the new right is prepared to close its eyes to that participation as long as women with careers embrace the ideology that defines their primary role is as wife and mother. The media is filled with stories about high power professional women who put their careers on hold or find a way to convert full-time careers to part-time, home-based work, in order to stay home and raise their kids. Politicians and media portrayals made it clear that these women are allowed to build a work life into their homelife as long as they assure us that their primary source of satisfaction and fulfillment lies in motherhood not work (sic). Highly visible women in society from Supreme Court Justices to Law School Deans to Best Selling authors are presented to us as women who stayed home and took their motherhood role seriously thus earning the right to pursue their careers later.

While social pressure to return to the home during childrearing years has increased on middle and upper class, white women, cuts in food stamps and medicaid along with a new emphasis on “workfare” seems determined to insure that poor women and women of color are out of the home and in the labor force filling the jobs that no one else wants at wages no one else will accept. This continues the phenomenon we noticed earlier of using the construction of gender difference between women of different races as another way of constructing race (and, one might add, class) difference.

Where early stages in the contemporary women’s movement focused on analyzing “sex-role socialization,” the later stages have been concerned with understanding the construction of gender. This move reflects a new and more profound understanding of the way the constitution of difference lies at the heart of sexism, an understanding which parallels Memmi’s insights about racism. In the mid-seventies Gayle Rubin (1975) wondered about the claim that men and women are polar opposites, different as night and day. Stepping back to reflect on what many took to be obvious, Rubin pointed out a very different reality

. . . In fact, from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else - forests, mountains, kangaroos or coconut palms. The idea that men and women are more different from one another than either is from anything else must come from somewhere other than nature. . . . The idea that men and women are two mutually exclusive categories must arise out of something other than a non-existent ‘natural’ opposition. (1975, 179)

More recently, Catherine MacKinnon has argued that “gender is not difference, gender is hierarchy . . . the idea of gender difference helps keep male dominance in place” (1987, 3). Writing from a similar perspective, Zillah Eisenstein has suggested that “equality of opportunity is simply a form of male

privilege" (1984, 67) and Carol Gilligan has urged us to listen to "a different voice" (1982).

In both its theory and its practice, the contemporary women's movement has demonstrated a determination to deconstruct gender combined with a strong commitment to redefining difference. In an important essay Andre Lorde has asked us to recognize that "It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from ignoring and misnaming those differences" (1984, 115). She concludes, "Now we must recognize differences among women who are equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles" (1984, 122).

Responding to Lorde's challenge, the Women's Movement has begun to search for a metaphor that will facilitate the project Lorde envisions. A popular poster celebrating international women's solidarity adopts the slogan "One Ocean, Many Waves," while the 1987 National Women's Studies Association Conference used the theme of "Weaving Women's Colors," and the 1989 New Jersey Research Conference on Women, Celebration of Our Work at Douglass College bears the title "Mosaics of Inclusion." Each of these represents an attempt to find a metaphor for difference that reflects both diversity and unity. Each is an attempt to move beyond a portrayal of women which is narrowly white, professional and Western in nature to one which recognizes and celebrates difference.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF THE 1990s

The challenge that faces progressive movements as we move into the 1990s is enormous. In the face of a return to an implicit dependence on the nature/biology paradigm for expressing both race and gender difference, how can we reinstate the "deconstruction" projects of the seventies and create the basis for forging broad based political coalitions that can transform the political-social-economic agenda and priorities of the nation? While attempts to recognize and analyze the social construction of gender and race were important intellectual projects a decade or two ago, this relatively sophisticated conceptual project has been made even more difficult by the conservative ideological bias that permeates much of popular culture and communication during the current period. At a "common sense" level, the natural difference paradigm is reinforced constantly in the most casual interaction between people: dark skin is not light skin; women's bodies are not male bodies. In the presence of such obvious physical differences, most people find it difficult even to entertain the notion of race and gender as social and political categories. What can it mean to claim that difference is created by racism and sexism not simply and (appropriately) reflected by them?

Those of us committed to social change must look for the answer by focusing on the essential contradictions that lie at the heart of the new Conservatism—Conservatism that is committed simultaneously to asserting fundamental natural differences between races while seeking to make race invisible—a Conservatism that, in addition, is committed to asserting fundamental natural differences based upon gender, yet is unable to institutionalize this difference as the basis for social policy with the force and comprehensiveness it once could. Once again, our project is to turn the natural difference paradigm on its head. We must simultaneously deconstruct the social construction of difference that constitutes racism and sexism while we reconstruct difference as unlimited human and humane possibilities. This means that we must use every opportunity to show the way in which race and gender difference has been constructed in order to justify racism and sexism at the same time that we teach ourselves and others to name and value the differences that help to define each of us but which are the very strengths of the community we seek to create. We must do this at every opportunity by focusing on the contradictions between Conservative rhetoric and the reality of the lives of women and men who live and work in a multiracial, multicultural, class society. Local, regional, and national organizing around issues that expose the contradictions inherent in the prevailing paradigms provide the best long term hope for redirecting economic and social policy toward human interests.

## NOTES

1. The former occurs when oppressed people participate in the creation of difference in order to protect themselves from violating or seeming to violate the norms of behavior established by those in power.

2. Audre Lorde has described what she calls this “mythical norm” as “white, thin, young, heterosexual, christian and financially secure” (1984, 116).

3. My discussion of the ethnicity paradigm and challenges to it is based upon the analysis offered by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their important book *Racial Formations in the United States* (1986). Even at those points where I disagree with their analysis, I am indebted to it.

4. Commenting on the impetus for replacing “colored” and “Negro” with “black”, Robert Baker writes: “All of these movements and their partisans wished to stress that Afro-Americans were different from other Americans and could not be merged with them because the difference between the two was as great as that between black and white” (1981, 163).

5. In their fascinating account of a hundred and fifty years of the experts advice to women, *For Her Own Good*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English refer to these views respectively as “sexual romanticism” and “sexual rationalism” (1979, 21).

6. For some accounts of the androgyny paradigm and its critics, see, for example, Caroline Bird (1968), Ann Ferguson’s “Androgyny As an Ideal for Human Development” (1977) and Betty Roszak’s “The Human Continuum” (1971, 297ff) as well as Mary Daly’s

(1975) "The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion," and Janice Raymond's "The Illusion of Androgyny" (1975).

7. See Gail Rubin's "Woman as Nigger" (1971, 230ff).

8. Omi and Winant quote political scientist Merle Black as pointing out that "Reagan's kind of civilized the racial issue" (1986, 135).

9. This stereotypical portrayal is not applied to Asian Americans or to Cuban Americans at the present time.

10. This trick of exclusion has a long history. Portraying civil rights for blacks and women as a special interest, for example, sets things up so that extending civil rights to these groups appears to take something away from everybody else instead of enhancing democracy for all.

11. This in contrast to Omi and Winant who argue that "we are witnessing the resurrection of the ethnicity paradigm in a new form" (1986, 141).

12. See, for example, Jeffrey Prager's discussion of Ronald Reagan's portrayal of black Americans during his 1985 State of the Union Address. Prager points out that Reagan subtly attempted to divide black Americans into two groups, those who were "virtuous black workers" and those who were "menacing addicts, criminals, etc. (1987, 70).

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