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The Engaged Feminist Intellectual

How feminist am I in my salaried work, how engaged, how intellectual? It seems to me that our first instance of engagement is in how we have chosen to support ourselves, even if unwillingly, because with that support we think we can be engaged feminist intellectuals outside. I often think that feminism is in my bones, but what feminism is it that is in my bones? If I ponder about it in your pages, I will not be speaking about social engagement as a feminist. When it comes to social engagement, I repeat, you must think of how you have chosen to support yourself -- because, in spite of yourself, that is how you have -- depending on what you have chosen -- inserted yourself in the abstract circuit of capital and the repercussions of your action determine your "engaged" work.

When I think of the feminism in my bones, my mother comes first to mind, and behind her my construction of my foremothers, a "memory" constructed out of stories told in the family. If capital is the strongest agency of validation into modernity, and has been since the 17th century, when previous imperial formations and mercantile formations change into the capitalist mode of production -- in this place I am held by a much older agency of validation, reproductive heteronormativity. Let us say that it is between these two -- capitalism as modernity and reproductive heteronormativity as the chief recoding instrument of capital, thoroughly internalized -- that the engagement of the feminist shuttles.

The job is everybody's choice of a mode of living. Like many "engaged" persons, I also have another job which is outside of this choice. This is my engagement with maximal teacher training in backward areas of West Bengal, now for over 20 years. In the opening I said that the instrumentalization of the salaried job for the propagation of the "real" job is not perhaps very intelligent -- and we are speaking of the feminist intellectual. We must think through engagement in terms of the relationship or non-relationship between the two "jobs." If the relationship is to instrumentalize, then I think there is a "reaction formation" which wants to deny the often larger social role of the one unwillingly chosen. This applies to a salaried job as much as it does to a feudal job such as marriage. Let us carefully think through the meaning of "freedom of choice."

"Freedom of choice" is something that is denied to race-class-gender compromised people. Therefore, in our activism, we cannot ignore "freedom of choice" as a desirable opportunity for which we must strive to build the best possible social and political infrastructures. But the freedom from oppression that spells out "freedom of choice," cannot be an end in itself. We must keep in mind that the end is the freedom to be able to understand that an achieved juridico-legal, socio-political "freedom of choice" should allow the individual to realize that this concept-metaphor has been, in the narrative of modernity, deeply

imbricated with capitalism disguised as a pursuit of happiness. Alas, it is in the area of the unwillingly chosen and kept "job," that we in fact in our lives act out the limits of freedom of choice -- and this is where the truth of our engagement lies -- the irreducible compromise should tell us more about our engagement than the sustainable activism -- the maximum of compromise in order to achieve the minimum of activism.

I think that the initial non-relationship between Columbia and the village work (which of course meant an economic instrumentalization of the former) has been transformed to the extent that the latter feeds the former intellectually now.. My only evidence comes from the fact that, although I am, within limits, personally within my salaried work, and abundantly honored, institutionally my projects are not noticeably supported.. This must say that my engagement with my salaried work, now determined by the other kind of work, is out of joint with the institution. I cannot go any further than this in establishing its validity.

However, as I am writing this quickly before I can pack so that I can catch the train to my village work, what comes to me very strongly is that in many ways in order for what we recognize as feminism to operate as an engagement -- we must presume socialist norms, which are written within capitalism, because it means turning the use of capital from capitalist to socialist uses. Where there is no agency of turning and the development of capitalism not noticeable except as remote victim, today the task has been picked up by the international civil society, which I have described as "self-selected moral entrepreneurs" on many occasions. These people are confident that gender redress can be computed in terms of making the phenomena of gendering accessible by general terms provided by world governance style documents, every unit in fought over in prep com meetings, everything most simply understood, as in a PowerPoint presentation,; as in knowledge management plans, decisions made by logic rather than subject-engagement. A certain kind of anti-capitalism, not invariably present in this sector which is often dependent upon, and happily so, upon corporate funding, substitutes for a proactive socialism here. The slow and deep language learning that must accompany accessing cultural infrastructures so real long term change might be envisaged is largely absent. The distinction between problem solving and the un coercive rearrangement of desires -- between doctors without Borders and primary health care, let us say, is often ignored here. This kind of "feminist engagement" is not noticeably "intellectual," if the intellectual is a person who analyzes the existing situation before choosing the most convenient instrument for solving a problem that has been constructed as a "case" by looking at the grid established by people in a completely different level of capitalist society.

In this sort of below the radar rural situation, in eastern India, at least (that is another problem, we tend to generalize too soon, because of the alliances of the international civil society with the benevolent feudal feminism of the global South), the problem-solving approach can apply to clearly visible cases of domestic violence. Without maximal follow up, with all the infrastructure in place hierarchically in country and local city and government, and, more

important, without an engagement, supported by deep language learning, and a renunciation of the conviction of having the answers, with the millennially established structures of feeling and desires, nothing achieved here will last when the engaged persons leave, as they necessarily must. As for health, and education, in these areas, we must engage children rather than adults if we are to destabilize internalized accepted gender patterns of behavior; and they must be destabilized at the same time as desires must be rearranged to develop intuitions of a democratic state. Even here, what other efforts the engaged intellectual might be able to bring to bear -- remembering that the real change must be epistemic rather than merely epistemological, -- is offset by the development of ethical and epistemic semiosis at home cradled in an often traumatic childrearing which is so deeply involved in the lessons of millennial class apartheid and gender division that it is precisely of him him him him him him him him the problem that one is trying to solve. It must be said, however, that the class apartheid here is more crippling than the gender divisions. As you enter the rural middle class, engendering shows its uglier face.

Therefore, autobio graphically and confessionally, rather than in an instructive mode, let me say that, in the metropolis, encountering a sort of feminism that must itself fight with on the ground phallogocentrism, recently internalized post-feminism, mainstream gay movements reproducing the morphology of reproductive heteronormativity, continuing juridico-legal fights, and confronting the underlying unexamined gender -benevolence of the international civil society allied with the feudality of the global South; I encounter upon the rural floor a situation where involvement with women is pleasant -- but their delighted reaction cannot be taken as evidence of the success of engagement -- and therefore, giving time, skill, undermined by repeated mistakes because human equality as human sameness is too easily assumed, my feminist engagement goes into a pre-active moment, so that male and female children can learn simply to be the same and different, starting from nothing but having been born by phallus and the vagina, with phallus and vagina, nourished by breast, by guile, protected and destroyed by physical violence and subservience.

I must end now. If I don't get packed, I miss my train. These regular 10-day trips of intense labor remain book ended by the salaried work and the lecture circuits that provide the travel. I take pleasure in being validated by the absence of financial recognition from the other end -- nothing but harassment from the US Internal Revenue Service periodically. Let me end with what I had to produce so that I could at least deduct travel and expense from my income and the detailed account of my everyday that was demanded in order for this not to be questioned year after year.***