Review Essay

REVOLUTION, RACISM AND SEXISM:
CHALLENGES FOR WORLD-SYSTEM ANALYSIS

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In the context of the proliferation of competing perspectives and the absence of theoretical cohesion across and within the social sciences (possibly most pronounced in sociology), the world-system (WS) perspective has made a bid to unify these disciplines into one. If to characterize WS analysis as a full-fledged paradigm would be to stretch matters, it most certainly constitutes a coherent research program on important issues of our time. Furthermore, WS theory has generated intellectual excitement, reformulated some classic problems of Marxist theory and politics, and drawn upon the energies and efforts of a significant number of scholars over almost a generation. The two volumes under review attempt to contribute to subjects hitherto relatively neglected in the corpus of WS analysis. It is difficult to do justice to the twenty-six pieces making up these volumes. At best, striking points can be highlighted.

World-system analysis has been criticized for neglecting women and sexism.

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The volume, *Racism, Sexism, and the World-System*, is organized into sections on theoretical orientation, the creation of race and gender as social categories, and how these play into labor in the WS. It gives a slight edge to sexism although most of the chapters deal with both phenomena but omit consideration of African-American women. Theoretically, some of the chapters focusing on women can be read as an implicit argument against—or a modification of—the dual-systems theory, that is, of patriarchy separable from capitalism, of some socialist feminists (whom Joan Smith has criticized powerfully elsewhere). From the WS perspective, there are not two systems but only one modern world-system which provides the structural constraints on the workings of households and production relations. Analogous arguments are also made for racism: it can best be understood within the context and processes of the capitalist world political-economy.

In the opening chapter which provides a general orientation, Wallerstein argues that enlightenment-derived universalism (“a career open to talents”) and the particularisms of racism and sexism paradoxically go together under capitalism. Given the tenuousness of the meritocratic interpretation of inequality and the zigs and zags of capital accumulation, racism is needed to “ethnicize” incorporated parts of the labor force at low wages and justify inequalities, and sexism serves to disguise unpaid labor in the working-class household. The contradiction of meritocracy and empirical reality are thereby resolved, Wallerstein argues. Our task, Wallerstein avers, is to go beyond this conceptually linked system—to something like that stated by Marx in *The Critique of the Gotha Program* where bourgeois rights are shown to be in fact rights of inequality?

From a different angle, June Nash gives a wide ranging consideration of “Cultural Parameters of Sexism and Racism in the International Division of Labor,” arguing that to understand racist and sexist ideologies that emerge as new populations are incorporated into the world economy requires cultural analysis that goes beyond an economic calculus. For it has often been the case that resistance to the “transculturation” imposed by the advance of capitalism has been the source of liberation movements drawing initially on threatened cultural categories of ethnicity and gender. Most important, Nash points out that it is necessary to distinguish between “patriarchy” and the imposition of “male hegemony” through incorporation in order not to overlook the differences in gender hierarchy between societies in their precolonial periods. Incorporation may coopt preexisting patriarchy as in Muslim and Asian countries; alternatively, industrial capitalism historically produced male hegemony at work and in the household as well as ideological distinctions between primary waged work and (nonwaged) housework. The export of production to the third world has played upon cultural socialization of women in its drive to lower wages, as it also does with racism in the core countries. With the increasing gap between rich and poor in the core and periphery, poverty is increasingly “a woman’s issue.” Nash summarizes: