

Lead Article

Women and the Politics of Place

WENDY HARCOURT
AND ARTURO
ESCOBAR

ABSTRACT *Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar introduce the key concepts discussed in the journal issue. They bring an analysis of women's political organizing in the context of globalization into dialogue with the conceptual work of activist intellectuals engaged in debates about the nature of globalization.*

KEYWORDS *body; culture; embedding; environment; globalization; glocalities; home; justice; meshworks; public space*

Women's place-based organizing

When we look at the growing number of women's political organizations throughout the world it is apparent that women are participating in a new and vital politics around their bodies, their home, their environment and social public space. They are networking at local and transnational levels, seeking to defend their places while at the same transforming unequal social relations within them.

This paper, culled from a longer one prepared for the project 'Power, Culture and Justice: Women and the Politics of Place',¹ builds on the knowledge of women's groups about their place-based organizing and brings their knowledge into dialogue with the conceptual work of intellectuals engaged in debates about the nature of globalization. We explore here how women are responding to and shaping global processes – how they are organizing around 'place', using local and global networks to create a more just and equitable world. We ask, how are women's struggles around the defence of place the source of new forms of creativity, culture, ideas, alternative development and alternative economies? How do the lives of women-in-places interact with the global flows of information, media and commodities? How do they shape and change the apparently increasingly homogenized global modern capitalist culture as they become interconnected?

The fate of place

In mainstream and critical debates alike, globalization is presented as an all-encompassing economic and cultural phenomenon with no possible alternative. As such, concrete places seem to disappear under the unavoidable advance of things global. Globalization is seen as driven by global capitalist processes and neo-liberal principles. At the same time, globalization is understood to mean an increased interconnectedness of people leading to cultural homogenization throughout the world. More and more it seems that a single culture of consumerism, driven and dominated by North American culture, is monopolizing this movement, fundamentally facilitated by new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

These two facets of what we might call neo-liberal capitalist globalization are what many people assume dominates all that we do. And therefore that the best strategy for nations, regions

or social groups is simply to try and win a better place in that global economy and the global society – by producing more, consuming more and contributing to free-market growth. However, even if the world is increasingly interconnected, it is far from becoming a placeless ‘consumer land’. The struggle over place continues, both for those who seek a more equitable place within, and those who would rather live without, capitalist globalization. Arif Dirlik and Julie Graham in their comments that follow give important insights on how to read globalization. Dirlik asks for a more historicized and sophisticated analysis of globalization that recognizes place-based cultural diversities. And Julie Graham suggests that we understand and enact in new ways globalization and development. Together with Kathie Gibson (in her introduction to the set of articles that discuss women and economic activism in place as migrant workers in the Philippines, rural China and Papua New Guinea), Graham argues that there are alternatives and ‘antidotes’ to capitalism that can be built upon the distinctiveness of the women engaged in diverse non-capitalist economies that inhabit specific places.

A global sense of place

As this journal issue shows, when looking at the increasing number of women’s political organizations it would be misleading to imagine that globalization is all-encompassing and that concrete places are disappearing or are inconsequential for women’s lives. In today’s world, places are no longer isolated, nor are they pure, static or just traditional; places are clearly made and affected by their encounters with global processes. Yet even in a globalized world, place is still the way people know and experience life. We might find a McDonald’s in New Delhi, but that experience is still in and uniquely of New Delhi. In almost all of the discussions of globalization it is assumed that ‘the global’ is necessarily where power resides and that the global will therefore inevitably determine history. And ‘the local’ – concrete places, alternative economic models, regional identities – is left with the pathetic choice of either adapting or perishing. This sort of thinking ultimately undermines and dismisses the important resistances and

realities unfolding at the local level. Lourdes Arizpe in her comments that follow underlines this in her discussion on how local concerns transform global initiatives into ‘glocal’ processes as we confront the ‘equality of vulnerability’.

Women’s groups in their daily lives are qualifying global processes. The politics of place poses an alternative way of understanding globalization that acknowledges the diverse manifestations of globalization itself. Our concept of women’s place-based politics refers to the various political activities carried out by women around the body, the environment, the community and the public arena where women’s groups are redefining political action. We emphasize women’s place-based political activities in order to try and listen to the silenced struggles of women who are too often viewed as the ‘other’ of public, male-dominated political engagement.

Women’s bodies are the first place where women are engaged in political struggle. These include struggles for autonomy, for reproductive and sexual integrity and rights, for safe motherhood, for freedom from violence and sexual oppression. The body is the site for many struggles over different identities, ways of thought and daily practices. Because women are often silenced or ignored, and without dismissing the many forms of oppression effected through the body, we also see that women’s bodies can become at times the only place to make their needs, sufferings and joys visible. Yvonne Underhill in her discussions on the body as the place ‘closest-in’ in Papua New Guinea ‘where the politics of place is worn clearly on people’s bodies’, describes the ways women in Wanigela manoeuvre the webs of knowledge and power around the lived body in their daily lives. Wendy Harcourt and Khawar Mumtaz look at the capturing of the body politic in the international debates on population and development in their rereading of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo) from a place-based perspective. Randa Farah breaks through the stereotypes of the veiled body of women in Palestine, showing how they appropriate place and discourses in ways that transform the meaning of dress and the veil – while their priorities lie in addressing political and economic issues of displacement.

A second place is that of *the home*, where many women still derive their most important social and political roles and identities. The home serves paradoxically as both a safe space where women have considerable power as well as a site where they experience a great degree of violence and oppression. The home is a crucial terrain of political struggle. Not only is it where many relations of power (within the family) are negotiated, it is also where much vital but undervalued labour is produced. Redefining their relationships within the home, as well as between the home and the wider community, is then another important site for elaborating new political practices. Laura M^a Agustín cuts into the rhetoric around the home in her discussion of migrant sex workers, describing the new milieu that many women inhabit in the global trajectory of leaving home. Charito Basa shares her own and other Filipinas' working experience in Europe, their sense of alienation and displacement of home and ways they seek to recreate home in a hostile state context. Saba Gul Khattak underlines the complex meaning of *watan* (home) for Afghan women refugees. She argues that for Afghan women enduring frightening levels of violence, years of war and displacement, they have lost home as a way of life, a way of being, a culture, and a way of thinking linked to their deepest sense of identity. They need time and space for personal and collective healing to rediscover home, creativity and sense of self.

The third place is *the environment*. In this perspective the environment is not limited to nature but rather is understood as a multi-layered web of economic, political and social relations that define women's surroundings. As such it is inextricably connected to all aspects of survival: to issues of livelihood, justice and quality of life. While environment is clearly linked to survival, the meanings of both environment and survival vary from place to place, but are continuously linked to and affected by broader, even global, contexts. The environment is intimately enmeshed in and shaped by gender relations. Environmental rights, responsibilities and organizations are all deeply gendered processes. Women are often more directly affected by environmental destruction; this also means that today women are at the *avant-garde* of ecological struggles

in many parts of the world. Arturo Escobar, Dianne Rocheleau and Smitu Kothari show how women are taking the lead in the environmental movements in India, the Dominican Republic and Colombia, becoming central to a politics of place. They argue that as we live in place, we have to integrate body, habitat, home and community in our analysis of environment. Libia Grueso and Leyla Andrea Arroyo illustrate this integration in their table at the end of the article that looks at the problems facing black women in their organizing within movements that are mobilized to defend the territory of the Colombian Pacific. In a completely different setting of Finland, Liisa Horelli also describes the holistic approach of women's place-based struggles around habitat, environment and home.

The final place is *the social public space*, the male-dominated domain where political decisions are made and to which most women still have limited access. And this is the domain where they find their gender-based concerns silenced or missing. For many years, women's movements have been creating diverse avenues for entry into that space, even if they are still marginal to the pulse of dominant forms of political power. In redefining what counts as political, and at the heart of the politics of place, is an implicit challenge and renegotiation for what is discussed and valued in public. Networking and alliance building are at the core of women's movement into the social public space – whether as part of the global women's movement on a multiplicity of issues as described in the article by Wendy Harcourt, Lila Rabinovich and Fatma Alloo, or as fighters and guerrillas as depicted by Ilja Luciak speaking of Central America and Neloufer de Mel describing the fractured lives of women in the war zones of Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Other articles speak of women's place-based organizing to change the legal, educational and institutional barriers to women's empowerment. Roxann Prazniak's study highlights the pioneering activism of black American women in Virginia in trying to preserve their history and place in struggles that can seem to regenerate the structures of injustice. Cassandra Balchin's study of the solidarity and information of the Network of Women Living Under Muslim Law argues that globalization has helped foster the

growth of identity politics and transnational feminism, an observation echoed in Kalayani Menon-Sen's report on Asian women's varied resistances to globalization.

Our place-based perspective suggests that transformative political change best happens when women are able to act in all four domains of place.

Body politics

In a world where dominant discourses and practices continuously abuse and marginalize women via their physical and socially constructed bodies, it makes sense that new knowledges, critiques and visions should be closely linked to women's varied experiences of those bodies. While men certainly have bodily experiences as well, history and culture have rendered their relation to their own bodies very differently. This, then, is not a claim for privileging women because they are essentially or fundamentally different than men, but a recognition that essential categories persist and as such must be addressed.

The intersection of feminist and development theory provides an important vantage point for the elaboration of a new critical language that deals more adequately with the politicization of female – and other – bodies. We need to understand the body not as bound to the private or to the self – the western idea of the autonomous individual – but as being linked integrally to material expressions of community and public space. In this sense there is no neat divide between the corporeal and the social; there is instead what has been called 'social flesh' (Beasley and Bacchi, 2000). The body itself is a political site or place that mediates the lived experiences of social and cultural relationships.

In calling attention to bodies as political subjects, it is recognized that 'we are our bodies', and that every rational, emotional or other experience or filtering of experience is ultimately had through the body. The political self is not distinct from the body; it is only through particular ideological and historical processes that bodily experiences and activities have been removed from political discourse.

Home

It has long been recognized that the home is an ambivalent site with respect to justice and equality for women. On the one hand it is where women appear to exercise the most power, where their roles as grandmother, mother, wife are recognized and where women can make decisions and find respect. On the other hand it is where women are the most exposed and vulnerable to sexual abuse, to violence and to exploitation. It is often the intolerable conditions in the home that force women to seek alternatives to their lives, to defend their bodies and their children by creating other homes and places secure from the violence they suffer within the home. The ideology of the safe hearth and home is breaking down. Women are not only fighting to end the practices that contribute to their continued inequality, they are struggling to reapportion and create new economic and social value for practices associated with the home and domesticity.

Environment

The debates on women, the environment and sustainable development in the last decade are a fascinating example of how women are carving political spaces that challenge the hegemonic institutions of the state and market. As members of the so-called 'third actor' in the modern *polis* – civil society – women have criticized the traditional economic development model on the grounds that it ignores the environment and people's needs. Women have entered these debates vocally, and in large numbers, because their and their families' livelihoods are at stake.

Women's voices on environment and sustainable development emerged most forcibly on the international scene in the period beginning in 1992, the time marked by the UNCED Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. They argued that women, particularly poor women living in the South, have the biggest stake in protecting the natural resource base (as well as basic health and sanitation of their surroundings) and that it is the external forces of the state and global market which are breaking down the relationship between people and their environments. People's environments include the meanings, values and general

ways of being that characterize and distinguish between different communities. Many women (and increasingly men) have argued that we need to look for an integrated economic, ecological and ethical approach that takes into account women's particular and local perspectives in addition to heeding both local and international levels of responsibility. They have proposed a holistic approach that values non-western ways of thinking and organizing and allows for the possibility of envisioning alternative ways of being. These might not be deemed good or worthy in the dominant economic system because they view profit and productivity as secondary to peace and ecological sustainability. Women in urban centres, rainforests, mining towns have formed alliances and partnerships based on the belief that women's everyday realities in sustaining their livelihoods have to be the basis of a reshaping of the international agenda on sustainable development.

Public space

The political dimensions of the body, home and environment as place converge in the negotiation of women's movements to enter the public sphere. The political struggles being elaborated by women are both vying for more access to the domain dominated by men as well as attempting to change the very terrain on which we consider politics and political change to happen. In a sense 'body politics' – politics around the body, home and environment – beyond pursuing concrete changes also works to validate issues and perspectives that were previously considered to be non-political, or private, distinct from the social public domain. The politics of place in the public sphere not only consists of efforts, through governmental and non-governmental means, to participate in, or influence, institutional politics, but also to illuminate the political nature of culture. Culture is political precisely because meaning, and the power to produce or determine meaning, is constitutive of our lived experiences as well as our analyses of them.

By validating women's lived experiences as political through these emergent politics of place, women are in effect vying to change the dominant culture that supposes a top-down, unilateral view

of politics and social change. Women's public political work, then, has much to do with shifting cultural codes and creating a critical language or vantage point that can open up the public domain to more participants in the decision-making process as well as point to the ubiquity of those public sites within accepted cultural practices (see Julie Graham below and her proposed Feminist Politics of Place).

Re-embedding culture and justice

One of the most notable features about the four domains of place we have just introduced – body, home, environment and the social public space – is that although they are often dismissed as private and unimportant sites of struggle, when they are politicized they challenge many of the most fundamental assumptions of dominant and global discourses. Politics based around these four areas question the presumption that knowledge is only 'important' if it is detached, objective and rational, and instead points to the importance of material, subjective and personal vantage points. Women's place-based politics is embedded in, rather than removed from, the material lives they are trying to change.

The notion of politics of place is closely linked to our recognition that politics is largely made up of contests over meaning: the interplay between culture and power. Just as women have redefined the political by illuminating the political nature of their bodies, place-based politics suggests that we need to take into account many more aspects of our social and cultural locations when constructing a movement in pursuit of social change. The notion of embedding experience suggests the importance of placing someone in their social and cultural location without artificially binding them to a fixed cultural or social identity. Being embedded in a particular location by no means suggests that the location is itself closed off to change, rather location allows for a more realistic and potentially progressive understanding of identity as dynamic and shifting.

Re-embedding politics in place, thus, also means locating discussions and activism squarely and deeply within all of their contextual complexity.

This presents us with a vantage point from which we might develop potentially transformative solutions. It provides us with a point of departure from which we can acknowledge (rather than hide or ignore) and thus address the crucial and difficult questions facing political movements in a global context. If a practice is brought into question within its own cultural parameters, where actors can note the various political and economic interests of those arguing on both sides, an issue can be resolved without jeopardizing the specificity and autonomy of cultures (see the articles by Cassandra Balchin and Randa Farah).

Similarly, we need to acknowledge not only our cultural backgrounds and locations, but also our particular positions and roles as mediators, activists and academics. If we take seriously the importance of working from concrete positions we must consciously and constantly look for and draw attention to the parameters, boundaries, identities and privileges we are shaped by. This is not to argue that moving between cultures, writing about societies, or making judgements on the efficacy of certain practices is not a complex process, but it is to offer the suggestion that deliberately acknowledging and then interrogating these shifting limits is one of the most important strategies offered by a politics of place.

The complexities at the intersections of place, power and culture

While arguing for the validity of place-based politics, we must also take into account the myriad paradoxes, challenges and ambivalences that arise within and on the fringes of place. We must always consider that places themselves are sites of unequal, even oppressive, power relations, and that for many, even identifying 'one's place' is a politically and personally complex task, full of painful ambivalences but potentially progressive possibilities.

For example, how do we promote the viability and autonomy of traditional cultures while still allowing space for change within those cultures? How can a woman's group effectively pursue a transformative politics, one that includes the cultural autonomy of her traditional community,

while reserving her right to make changes to it? How can she create or move in a new and currently unrecognized, undefined place?

Similarly, in our argument for the defence of places, we cannot ignore the fact that there is no such thing as a 'pure' or easily definable place. We must address the paradoxes, challenges and conceptual and practical needs that arise because of the unprecedented number of people that are forced (or choose) to leave home and place – the migrants, sex workers, displaced people, refugees, even the victims of natural disasters, etc. – and require us to take into account the tensions between movement and attachment, displacement and re-construction, identity and belonging that many people live with.

A place-based politics must continually face the complexities of possibilities of place in a time where nothing is purely local or global.

A conceptual tool-kit

In reflecting on the experience of place-based women's politics we have found useful a set of concepts that can serve as both a basic 'tool-kit', and the beginning of a critical language, that we – activists, mediators and academics alike – can use for examining, understanding and strategizing around particular cases.

Networks/meshworks

The concept of network is central to processes of globalization. Most resistance networks operate partially through, or at least by engaging with, dominant networks. Oppositional networks are those that connect social groups and movements with each other. These might be better termed meshworks, the difference being that, as opposed to dominant networks, meshworks tend to be non-hierarchical and self-organizing. They are created out of the interlocking of heterogeneous and diverse elements brought together because of complementarity or common experiences. They grow in unplanned directions. Anti-globalization social movements, in their heterogeneity and self-organizing character, might be seen as incipient meshworks of this kind.

Meshworks involve two parallel dynamics:

strategies of localization and of interweaving. Localization strategies contribute to the internal consistency of each particular point in the network, as well as making it more distinct from the rest. Interweaving, on the other hand, links sites together, making use of and emphasizing their similarities. The resulting meshworks of the anti-globalization movement, for example, could be in the position of holding the big financial and development institutions more accountable for the hierarchies they continue to support. Meshworks are not necessarily 'morally superior' to dominant networks or hierarchies, but they do tend to be oppositional.

Glocalities

Many of these networks and meshworks link together various sites that in the process become, or create, spaces that are neither local nor global but can be better understood as 'glocal'. Although initially some writers defined 'glocalization' as a process through which transnational capital takes over localities, we conceive of glocalities as neither inherently good nor bad, but potentially strategic. In a sense, glocalities ought to be understood as descriptive of all places because today no place is constituted wholly by local or global factors. At the same time glocal spaces, understood as strategic, have tremendous potential as a base for new and transformative politics and identities. Glocalities, the places and spaces produced by the linking together of various social movements in networks and meshworks of opposition, or by the connection of places to global processes, are therefore both strategic and descriptive, potentially oppressive and potentially transformative.

This also amounts to saying that globalization does not really happen 'from above' or 'from below' but always 'in between'. Glocalities are simultaneously global and place-based, and their specific configuration will depend on their cultural content as well as on the power dynamics at play. For instance, a plantation is a glocality produced by the most conventional forms of capital and ways of conceiving of food and nature. A diverse rainforest, on the contrary, is an altogether different type of glocality produced by the cultural, economic and ecological practices of local communities (such as

exemplified in the case of the Colombian Pacific) that differ significantly from those that produce a plantation, even if engaged with them.

Defining a politics of place

Women's empowerment, violence against women, the environment and health are now major political issues. Rather than being subsumed by 'global logics', women's political organizing and other social movements worldwide are engaging in politics that are actually very rooted in their specific social, economic and cultural locations and do not yield easily to the trends of capitalistic globalization. Instead of simply accepting the capitalist system or homogenized social and cultural systems as natural, inevitable truths beyond their control or choice, political women's groups and other social movements' groups are working to form what we have identified as a 'politics of place'.

Women throughout the world are using their own knowledge and experiences to create new and distinct places, places that are neither wholly modern, nor entirely traditional, not untouched and pure. Using global networks such as the Internet and transnational NGOs, these social movements are working to assert their own visions, fight for justice and shape global processes.

In rethinking political responses to modernity and global capitalism it is important to build on the creativity, knowledge and experience of women's groups engaged in place-based politics. The conflicts that women are experiencing within the different domains (body, home, environment and social public space) usher in new forms of cultural and political relations. As actors in their own lives, women are leading place-based activities, forming meshworks and defining glocalities. They are working together towards greater equity, respecting and working with cultural and other differences. Strategies for greater equity and feminist transformation that respect cultural difference can be crafted from these global connections. Such strategies could well repudiate dominant development in the name of the defence of place, creating new structures of power and new forms of culture.

Note

1 This article is a much shortened version of the background paper prepared for the project 'Power, Culture and Justice: Women and the Politics of Place', co-ordinated

by the Society for International Development with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation prepared by the authors and Michal Osterweil. See the editorial in this issue for more details on the project.

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Women and the Politics of Place: A comment

ARIF DIRLIK

ABSTRACT Arif Dirlik looks at how the political and ideological issues raised by September 11 endow the project, 'Women and the Politics of Place', with a new significance – and urgency. He looks at the importance of rethinking politics at this historical juncture from the perspective of women and place.

KEYWORDS *civilizational boundaries; globalization; September 11; Taliban; transformation*

The shadow of September 11

September 11 has cast a shadow on how we think, what we say, and what we do. The shadow weighs with particular heaviness on the people of the United States; but judging by responses from around the world to what happened in New York City and Washington, DC, few have been untouched by it. We stand at a crossroads. The grief caused by that foul deed easily turns into anger, and a longing for revenge, which, if unchecked, is likely to bring destruction and further grief to untold numbers of innocent people, themselves victims of the circumstances that brought it about, and its misguided perpetrators. The other alternative is to mourn, and find in the mourning an occasion for reflection on those circumstances, that we may work our way out of the spiral of violence that already has brutalized many, and now threatens to consume us all. The political and ideological issues raised by September 11 endow the current project, 'Women and the Politics of Place', with a new significance – and urgency.

destructive and constructive in intention. It seeks to deconstruct the abstractions of political economy and cultural discussion that erase concrete everyday experiences, and serve the legitimization of power in one form or another. It also hopes to offer possibilities of reconstructing the world in a way that recognizes the necessity of satisfying long-term social, political and cultural needs, which presupposes a guarantee of subsistence, and the priority in the formulation of policy of the experience of the world in the concrete. Women have a particular significance in any such project. The crucial point of departure for the project is enunciated by the authors midway in the statement, when they write that:

political activities carried out by women around the body, the environment, the community and the public arena are redefining political action. They are redefining the political to take into account their own gender concerns based on their encounter with various processes of globalization, and are challenging the dominance of political-economic logics by basing a politics in their own needs and their daily, lived experiences.