Reading Bartky: Identity, Identification, and Critical Self Reflection

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Remarks on Sandra Lee Bartky's Femininity and Domination.

What has drawn me to Sandra Bartky's theorizing is its honesty, clarity, and complexity crystallized in the form of essays such as those collected in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Her theorizing provides sustained and intriguing opportunities for self reflection and places to begin to deepen one's understanding of the logics and intricacies of both oppression and critical consciousness as formative forces, one subjecting, the other resisting and liberating.

The statement I just made is general. I claimed that reading Bartky's essays is an opportunity for developing a special appreciation of self as both oppressed and capable of, if not already, struggling against the conditions of oppression. And yet the self that Bartky's essays are about seems to be a rather particular self. It is a feminine self, a heterosexual self, and a self whose issues concerning embodiment, sexuality, and emotions have a feel of specificity that even Bartky suspects as suggesting class and race privilege. Thus, Bartky notes:

A certain privilege is already reflected in my very choice of themes: A woman who has known material deprivation in a way I never have might well have chosen to deal with issues that were linked more centrally to poverty. (Bartky 1990, 9)

Though she is aware that the self of her narrative is particular, Bartky nonetheless believes that her essays can speak across the social identities of women. Immediately after commenting on the particularity of the Bartkyan self she writes:

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It seems to me that many of the themes that weave in and out of these papers speak to women of many conditions—women who are lesbians and women who are not, women of color and white women, poor women and privileged women. All sorts of women have known in their daily lives the low self-esteem that is attendant upon cultural depreciation, the humiliation of sexual objectification, the troubled relationship to a socially inferiorized body, the confusion and even the anguish that come in the wake of incompatible definitions of womanhood; women of all kinds and colors have endured not only the overt but also the disguised and covert attacks of a misogynist society. (Bartky 1990, 9)

How can a particular self speak to women across our social identities? Bartky's answer to this question as I cited it above is that the Bartkyan self is a gendered self and it is as such that it speaks across social identities. It can speak across social identities because it speaks to other selves that may have social identities that are different from hers but like her they, too, are gendered.

This answer presupposes the constitution of experience by unique and separable enough social identities so that one could be said, for example, to experience as a woman or a man, as a heterosexual or a homosexual, as a member of the working class or the middle class, or as a person of color or a white person. It also presupposes that identification is a needed psychological process in the formation of a critical self-reflection in which one comes to understand oneself as both oppressed and capable of, if not already, struggling against the conditions of oppression. The two presuppositions are linked in the answer in a way that makes identity a necessary condition for identification.

The stakes here are political and high. Bartky writes about her essays:

But, from the start, I meant these essays to be more than mere theoretical exercises or “interesting” contributions to current debates: I intended them to be political interventions as well. . . . I am trying to get women angry. More precisely put, I am trying to give women permission to feel the anger that I believe is already there. (Bartky 1990, 4)

With the late-sixties feminist group model of consciousness-raising as the model of the kind of situation that best facilitates the process of feminist critical self-reflection Bartky's conceptualization of identity and identification as needed for a process of critical self-reflection leading to an understanding of oneself as both oppressed and capable of, if not already, struggling against the conditions of oppression seems quite solid. Yet, I think that this conceptualization is problematic. Moreover, I think and will show that in her work Bartky
actually offers an alternative conceptualization of the ways critical self reflection comes about.

What I think identification is needed for is a feeling of a more or less cathartic connection with others that affirms things about what one takes to be oneself while giving one the deep sense and satisfaction that because of these things one belongs. And being somewhat Brechtian in my approach I would like to suggest that if Brecht is right in his criticism of a theater modeled after the Aristotelian ideal of the tragedy, cathartic connectedness through identification may undermine rather than enhance critical self reflection which according to Brecht requires alienation or estrangement.

Like Brecht, feminists have been suspicious of identification recognizing that, as cases of the identification of hostages with their abductors imply, identification happens not only between peers but can also be the response of a victim to a perpetrator. Bartky's own work, especially her later essays such as "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," "Shame and Gender," and "Feeding Egos and Tending Wounds: Defeference and Disaffection in Women's Emotional Labor," describes and explains the possibility of the identification of a victim with a perpetrator insofar as it portrays women as, for example, embodying femininity through a daily disciplining of their bodies, feeling a generalized kind of shame, and being enmeshed in their relations with others to whom they defer. Indeed, the feminist awareness of the possibility of the identification of victims with perpetrators has motivated resistance to it, though, ironically perhaps, identity politics, a politics that privileges identity and identification has been a primary vehicle of feminist mobilization including the kind of mobilization that Bartky wants her essays to effect.

The irony of a feminist identity politics is somewhat striking not only because of the suspicion cast on identification but because feminists, again just like Brecht, have also claimed a special value for alienation or estrangement, giving it, in the form of marginality and difference, a central theoretical place in the explanation of the possibility of a critical consciousness. Here too, Bartky's own work, for example, her early essay, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," is suggestive since in it she describes the alienation of feminists and articulates some of the ways in which this alienation is connected with the process of becoming a feminist through critical self reflection. Also intriguing in this context is Bartky's essay "Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Personal Transformation," because it too articulates a critically self reflective process as one that arises not in identification but in estrangement and its connections to the process of becoming a feminist.

Bartky's practices as a feminist theoretician also illuminate a process of critical self reflection that is based not in identification but in alienation, consisting as it does of a critical encounter with words that speak to her yet
not without a struggle for an understanding of how they do so and how they
do not. She writes:

Philosophical reflection—indeed any reflection—is always
already rooted in some inherited schema or, as is more com-
monly said today, in some text: these texts are bound to be class-
race-, and gender-biased. Hence, we must approach our tra-
dition with deep suspicion; we must test its claims against our own
hard-won insights; we must sort and sift among its materials to
see what we can use and what we must discard. (Bartky, 1990,
5-6)

Bartky, like most feminist theoreticians, is eclectic, recruiting Heiddegerian,
Sartrean, Marxist, Fanonian, Freudian, and Foucauldian ideas for her feminist
purposes. She is willing to sever connections between ideas and their initial
conceptual frameworks and be similarly disloyal to most interpretive schemas.
And she is also willing to endanger her theorizing with the possibility of
masculinist and other contaminations, if indeed the ideas she uses are con-
ected even if only through traces, to their initial frameworks. Her eclectically
produced essays can be the point of departure for a process of self reflection
not only for those who can identify with her or the self implied by her work
but for anyone willing to use them as such a point of departure, both hearing
and struggling with her words.

NOTES

A version of this paper was read at the APA Eastern Division Meeting in December

1. An obvious example of this is Kathleen Barry’s analysis of what happens to a
woman who is being prepared by a pimp for prostitution (Barry 1979) and its elaboration
by Marilyn Frye (Frye 1983).

2. In early, epistemological, standpoint, and postmodern versions of feminism alike
there is an emphasis on marginality and difference, which I think are the feminist
equivalent of Brecht’s alienation as a necessary condition for a critical consciousness. I
address some aspects of the feminist reliance on marginality and difference in a forthcoming
eSSay (Bar On N.d.). Here I’d like to point out that I sense an ambivalence about
marginality and difference. They are valorized and yet they seem to be lamented as social
conditions because of the pain associated with them. This may be a key to understanding
the important place given to identity and identification in feminist theory, a point that
would follow from analyses pursued in the late forties and in the fifties about the rise of
totalitarianism and authoritarianism such as those of Hannah Arendt and of some
members of the Frankfurt School.
REFERENCES
