

Viva-fying the Other

Maria Thereza Alves

VIVA: Women and Popular Protest in Latin America, Sarah A. Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood [eds], Routledge, New York and London, 1993.

1992 was a hard year. We had to put up with, on the one hand, our friendly 'others' cashing in on their exoticism, and on the 'left' hand, on mainstream intellectuals declaring their respect for and solidarity with the importance of diverse multiculturalisms.

It is now truly 1994; and although great changes in society are no longer expected by the majority of us, it had been hoped that 1992, especially due to the sermon we tolerated throughout the year (and stragglers are not yet finished), would produce an impact among some of our friends; such as, perhaps, a slight tinge of embarrassment in continued writings of the other with no long or short term necessity beyond proving their scholarship.

I do not know where to place my anger concerning *VIVA: Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*. There are, to begin with, two problems to address simultaneously. Of the nine contributors to *VIVA*, although all are women, only two are Latin American. The two Latin American writers that were chosen somehow to represent the Latin American voice are representative of a small and privileged minority in those countries.

The first chapter, 'Gender, Racism and the Politics of Identities in Latin America', written by Westwood and Radcliffe, was initially encouraging since it promised to discuss the "diversity of gendered identities" and the "multidimensionality of situations of power, subordination and exploitation". Instead, the reader was mostly given reports on the struggle of low income women by university professors. I do appreciate, however, Westwood and Radcliffe's criticism of "racial democracy" in Brazil, which is usually

studiously avoided by Euro-Brazilian intellectuals.

The writings on El Salvador and Guatemala, Chile, and Peru are of tangible value to activists because specific struggles and their local effectiveness are placed according to the importance of their appropriation and transformation of cultural phenomena. The chapter on Ecuador is the usual clinical report on statistics that, although apparently of importance to such organisations as the World Bank, is not useful to non-economists. And the message is well known: if there is inflation, poor people work more and eat less.

'Ecologia: Women, Environment and Politics in Venezuela' by María-Pilar García Guadilla is not even scholarly (with 31 auto-references). The author's relatively baseless conclusions on gender and organisations is founded almost solely on the research of two environmental groups: one composed of five middle-to-upper middle class women (all also members of the executive committee which has not changed since '85) interested in environmental conservation; the second group is composed of 3 or 4 middle class intellectuals working in slums. Some of the conclusions made by García Guadilla are: (1) "Ecological organisations led by women tend to be more successful in opening new spaces of political significance". However, an alternative conclusion might be that if one is a member of the élite, whether female or male, one has easy access to the media and the government and therefore one's issues will be heard. (2) Women are more adept at "adopting negotiating strategies, proposing alternatives and using institutional channels". I feel uncomfortable at the suggestion that due to some aspect of being a woman I cannot be as radical as a man. (3) Women-led organisations are more "flexible, horizontal and less personalist", and are more likely to be based

on "stability, consensus and inter-personal relationships". García Guadilla would have us believe that these women, members of the colonizing élite of their country who, for the last five-hundred years, have never shared power willingly, would do so and lead us to "new spaces of political significance". The author's final announcement is that eco-politics is a "politics in which women will be foregrounded". García Guadilla appears to believe the state's construct of woman as being closer to nature than man (and we know the dangerous 'therefore's' of that construct). This conclusion places women and the environmental movement in a ghetto.

Although the diversity of feminism is mentioned several times throughout *VIVA*, several authors base their discourses primarily on the reproductive capabilities some of us have. Craske, writing on 'Women's Political Participation in *Colonias Populares* in Guadalajara, Mexico', quotes Kaplan on the importance of the female consciousness which is "the need to preserve life". Although Craske is not in the end in full agreement with this statement, her analysis of the positive involvement of women in the 65-year old PRI (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party) regime in Mexico strengthens the state narrative of 'the nurturing mother'.

The recent rise of women's participation in neighborhood organizations is due, Craske explains, to (the dubiously-elected) President Salinas' identification of the need to revive popular support for PRI. As a result of this political necessity, more access was given to women to enter PRI's well-organized network. The consequence was "structural changes within the organization to enable more women to have a say in the decision-making process... But, whilst this may be positive, women's concerns are still addressed only if they will win votes". The author believes that PRI women's struggle to gain access to the power structure within the party is deserving of solidarity and is an important event in the feminist struggle.

Craske's First World feminist assumptions are dangerous. For the past six years I have lived in a working-class neighborhood in Mexico. The community in this *colonia* had been strong supporters of the left opposition PRD (Revolutionary Democratic Party) until one night, about three years ago, when the PRD neighborhood leader (a young man) was badly beaten by the family members of the newly-appointed PRI leader (a housewife). Before about '91, PRI neighborhood power was held by another local woman, paternalistic but decent and non-

aggressive. After President Salinas' concerns were processed into political action, the local streetsweeper/housewife/mother, who is a member of a very large, extended family, was recruited as the new PRI leader. She went from being extremely shy and painfully humble to PRI leader and head of the Human Rights Commission (a local chapter of the same committee that is allegedly investigating human rights violations in the uprising in Chiapas, a state which does not have a law against torture). Friends who have walked to my house in the evening (and must therefore pass her house and the office of the Human Rights Commission, which is on her property) complain of being verbally and/or physically threatened for money by the family's teenage sons. I take taxis to town to escape the verbal sexual abuse I would otherwise hear from her sons as they hang out on the Commission's steps.

How has this woman's reproductive capabilities been in anyway beneficial to the preservation of human life? In Mexico, what can be possibly gained by women's participation in a brutally oppressive regime? One can see already this scenario: women's, church and political groups will be influenced by this book and at their next international conference will meet a Mexican woman, probably from PRI, maybe someone like my neighbor. After reading Craske what funding source will be able to resist her?

Although Craske appears to have genuinely researched the subject, the problem lies in the author's failure to translate political events into daily realities. There is the added problem of reducing the political complexities of class/gender/Third World issues to a rather simplistic Eurocentric model, which in this case has resulted in the author's support of oppression.

Machado's analysis of the health movement in a working-class area in São Paulo City, Brazil, failed to transcend the specificities of the issues, as had also the writings by Schirmer, Boyle and Radcliffe. Machado cites a health movement leader saying, in self-mockery, "We, the good housewives, the good ladies, saintly ladies, started to work for charity". This example of the process of women's political growth could have been mutually beneficial if Machado had allowed herself to become part of the process instead of *maintaining* her position as an observer, forever on the outside. This was an attitude that Scheper-Hughes, author of *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* was not allowed to take (and in the process agreed not to take) by the women being

researched. This is an insightful, critical account, which is in solidarity with low-income, usually Black women in the poverty-stricken northeast of Brazil who are coping with and managing within the definition that Brazilian society has imposed on them.

In the late '70s, partly out of a need for solidarity and partly curiosity, I attempted to investigate some of the feminist groups in São Paulo cited by Machado. The feminists (of two groups) first thought, due to my low-income background, that I was in need of charity, 'expert' information or help, but, as I insisted on mutual discourse, I was usually rudely snubbed. A feminist in one group accused me of being a CIA agent; a vote was called, and it was decided that, although I would not be allowed to participate in the meeting, I could ask a few questions and then leave. (Perhaps this confusion arose because these women were not accustomed to the possibility that a low-income woman could speak good English.)

Corcoran-Nantes' writing on the development of women's participation in politics through activism in urban issues focuses on gender/class/ethnicity problems that are usually glossed over by Euro-Brazilian feminists. Corcoran-Nantes says,

In Latin American society the marked inequality in the distribution of wealth and resources has further reinforced the idea, among women of the urban poor, that feminism is a middle-class ideology for women who have all the social and economic advantages. Moreover, the institutionalization of domestic service on the continent have sustained the antagonisms between classes whereby 'fortunate' women exploit 'less fortunate' women. The patron/client relationship which has evolved is a major barrier to any longstanding political association...

In a large feminist meeting I attended in Rio de Janeiro, a soft-spoken young Black woman, nervously addressing the mostly middle-to-upper middle class women in the audience, asked how many of them had been able to come to the meeting because their maids were caring for their husbands and children. The white, privileged feminists closed ranks and did not respond. The patron/client relationship is not just an economic relationship but also a question of ethnicity; a question of white/other. Members of feminist movements in Brazil/Latin America interpret working class women activists' refusal to participate in the feminist movement as a refusal to be feminist; it is not, it is a refusal as activists to be second-class citizens.

In general, VIVA is not able to accomplish its attempts to deconstruct Eurocentric discourses; in several cases writers reinforce that construct. What would have been truly helpful to me, as a Brazilian political activist from the low-income strata of society, and therefore from a sector of society that is denied access to information, would have been an analysis of current feminist and feminine leaders: their family, societal, political, and military connections; their public ideological positions and accomplishments (for an ideology/reality comparison check); on what board of directors they or family members sit; what charities or other organizations are funded by them. What are their income sources, how much are they due to inherit. This is important information that would enable low-income feminists to move strategically. For example, it would have been helpful for me to know that a well-known Brazilian feminist, a former state representative and militant theater director (whom I had admired), while publicly (although paternalistically) supportive of working-class women's organizations, is belligerently aggressive towards younger women. In this case, it is important to know that one should send a 'matron' to seek her political support.

In reference to Machado, it would be helpful to know what is her role within the PT (Worker's Party) political structure. What is Machado's 'take' on the participation of intellectuals in the PT? What is Machado's analysis of PT's syndrome of take-overs of popular organizations? How was Machado able to fund her studies in London? Was it through family money or grants; and if grants, who was the godmother/father that facilitated the process? What other sources of income support Machado's research, since teaching positions in Brazil do not cover living expenses? Does she have servants? What is her analysis of non-Eurocentric architecture in Brazil?

Writings by intellectuals on the transformation of low-income women into political activists is uplifting but not useful for politicians. However, writing such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping* transcends class/ethnicity lines, and, in solidarity, analyses the continual colonial brutality against low-income women and their daily struggle to undermine or cynically to participate in the structure. Further studies of the power structure and its entanglements in the lives of low-income people would be helpful in our attempts to dismantle the paternalism that keeps us from empowerment. At least we can begin our analysis with the feminists who are in 'solidarity' with our continuing situation of powerlessness.