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Be Afraid: Sarah Palin and the Emergence of a Neoconservative Feminist Standpoint

In August 2008, U.S. Republican presidential candidate John McCain chose Alaska Governor Sarah Palin to be the vice presidential candidate. Palin's selection evoked a range of passionate responses. Many people were shocked: some were shocked and elated, some were shocked and appalled, and some were shocked and emotionally torn. In addition to evoking passionate responses, Palin's selection foregrounded a wide range of issues relating to gender: the historical gender disparity in candidates, the nature of sexism in the campaign, childcare roles, and the implications of a McCain-Palin administration for women. Among these currents of gender issues, I explore one specific stream: in a rhetorical move filled with contradictions and ironies, conservatives, including Palin, have made new claims to represent feminism. I suggest these claims signify the emergence of what I call a "neoconservative feminist standpoint." In this exploration, I revisit the idea of a feminist standpoint, with particular attention to Chela Sandoval's theory of a differential oppositional consciousness. I suggest a theory of what I call an "oppressive consciousness" as a complement to Sandoval's theory. Applying this framework, I suggest that the neoconservative feminist standpoint can be interpreted as an adaptive strategy of an oppressive consciousness. Furthermore, in its practice, this standpoint is primarily an antifeminism in its invitation to fear, anger, and divisiveness, and its refusal to support women's issues. Finally, I suggest that an examination of this emerging standpoint may result in additional possibilities for effective responses.

Feminist standpoint theory may be particularly well suited as a theoretical approach to examining these new claims to represent feminism. Sandra Harding notes in her introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* that standpoint theory remains “a seductively volatile site for reflection and debate about difficult to resolve contemporary dilemmas,” which seems to be an appropriate fit for these circumstances (Harding, 2004). Harding further notes that, in the technical sense, a standpoint is not simply a viewpoint or a perspective, but a “different, somewhat hidden phenomenon that we must work to grasp” (Harding, 2004). In this discussion, I refer to this phenomenon using the term “oppositional consciousness” as developed by Patricia Hill Collins (1989) and Chela Sandoval (1992).

I am particularly interested in the way that Chela Sandoval develops the theory of a differential oppositional consciousness. In her article “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Differential Oppositional Consciousness,” Sandoval describes four historical modes of oppositional consciousness: equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist. Sandoval then describes a fifth mode of oppositional consciousness – differential, which is a method of moving through each of the previous four modes and adopting and adapting them as necessary. In this process, the ideological boundaries between each of the individual modes become less rigid, and the modes shift from functioning as oppositional strategies with fixed goals to functioning as oppositional tactics responding fluidly to a variety of circumstances. Sandoval describes a differential oppositional consciousness as a representation of the praxis of U.S. third world feminism and proposes a location where this praxis “links with the aims of white feminism, studies of race, ethnicity, and marginality, and with postmodern theories of culture as they crosscut and join in new relationships” (Sandoval, 1992).

I suggest a complement to an oppositional consciousness, which I call an “oppressive consciousness.” This oppressive consciousness exists within members of the dominating group and has a primary goal of sustaining systems of oppression. I further suggest four main points about an oppressive consciousness. First, like an oppositional consciousness, the historical practices of an oppressive consciousness can be categorized. Second, an oppressive consciousness can also be differential, improvisational, and highly adaptive. One example of an adaptation would be the development of coded racism and sexism. Third, an oppressive consciousness is often embedded as an element within a larger social structure or practice, and part of the challenge is to tease out its oppressive elements and respond to them without discarding the social structure. For example, gender oppression and marginalization has been found in many academic disciplines, and one task has been to identify these elements and reform them without abandoning the discipline. Fourth, an oppressive consciousness has the potential to transform. I suggest that what I call a “transformational consciousness” can emerge from an oppressive consciousness when the oppressor becomes aware of the oppression and seeks to transform it. I make a distinction between an adaptation and a transformation: I define an adaptation as a change in tactics or strategy that maintains the goal of sustaining the oppression, and I define a transformation as a fundamental internal shift in ideology that results in efforts to end the oppression.

One can envision a constant interplay between a differential oppositional consciousness and a complementary differential oppressive consciousness as each responds and adapts to movements of the other. In the case of conservative claims to feminism, I interpret feminism to represent the oppositional consciousness, and I interpret the oppressive consciousness to be embedded within conservative political theory and practice. I suggest that these claims do not

represent a fundamental transformation. On the contrary, they represents an adaptive strategy of an oppressive consciousness.

The details of some of the specific claims to feminism are revealing. CNBC host Donny Deutsch states that the selection of Palin is a “seminal moment,” and she represents a “feminist ideal.” He analogizes her to a product that can be sold, which contains leading ingredients of “supermom” and “sexy.” His additional comments continue these themes of motherhood and sexuality: “I want her watching my kids. I want her laying next to me in bed” (Tracie, 2008). In this emphasis on motherhood, traditional family roles are prescribed. In the focus on sexuality, a fetish for heightened femininity is substituted for professional competency and concern for women’s issues. In another controversial claim, the president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, Shelly Mandell, introduced Palin at a rally and stated “America, this is what a feminist looks like” (Tapper, 2008). Mandell’s emphasis on Palin’s looks is curious; it appears to be an attempt to counter a historic attack on feminists as looking unfeminine, and shift the emphasis away from Palin’s record.

Palin’s claims to feminism are also revealing. In a September 30th interview, Katie Couric asks Palin if she considers herself to be a feminist. Palin responds affirmatively: “I’m a feminist who believes in equal rights and I believe that women certainly today have every opportunity that a man has to succeed and to try to do it all anyway.” (Couric, 2008). The emphasis on equal rights echoes a liberal feminism. However, the rest of her response appears coded. The statement that “women certainly today have every opportunity that a man has” sends the message that she is not a “radical” feminist, and she will not challenge the status quo.

Despite its feminist claims, I suggest that the neoconservative feminist standpoint is primarily an antifeminism. In its practice it is characterized by an invitation to fear, anger and

divisiveness in what often resembles a “consciousness lowering.” This antifeminism also often intersects with expressions of oppression against other groups, and these expressions can become particularly ugly. An October 8th NY Times editorial “Politics of Attack” describes the McCain-Palin efforts as “an appalling campaign . . . of race-baiting and xenophobia.” Palin’s rallies are described as “spectacles of anger and insult,” which have “elicited some frightening, intolerable responses.” In an October 11th press release, Rep. John Lewis makes similar comments on the campaign: “Sen. McCain and Gov. Palin are sowing the seeds of hatred and division, and there is no need for this hostility in our political discourse.”

Although a neoconservative feminist standpoint is primarily an antifeminism, in the process of appropriating feminist rhetoric as an oppressive strategy, a small gap has formed, and some rudimentary aspects of feminism have become integrated and more established. The notion of feminism as equal rights has gained ground. The role of women in the workplace has become more established (Riley, 2008). Additionally, since conservatives have complained about sexist attacks on Palin, they may be less likely to use them as a strategy in the future. Because of this gap, it may be appropriate to call neoconservative feminism a standpoint.

Although the campaign has concluded and we have elected President Obama, some indications suggest that Palin, and the gender issues surrounding her may reemerge in the future. A November Gallup poll indicates that Republican voters favor Palin over all other candidates for the 2012 presidential election (Jones, 2008). Additionally, in late January 2009, Palin formed a Political Action Committee (Kapochunas, 2009). Odds are she’ll be back.

In conclusion, I briefly highlight two feminist responses to Palin, and I suggest an additional possible response. Ann Friedman and Miriam Perez at the website *Feministing* have a forceful and nuanced response. One of the features of *Feministing* is a weekly criticism or

celebration of a person or idea called the “Friday Feminist Fuck You” or “Friday Feminist Fuck Yeah” as the occasion warrants. In this instance, the title of their September 12th post reads “Is Sarah Palin a Feminist? Friday Feminist Fuck NO.” The post concludes in a way that one would anticipate: “We really want to drive home the point that just because a candidate is a woman, like Sarah Palin, does not mean she's a *woman's candidate*. So... is Sarah Palin a feminist candidate? . . . Fuck no” (Friedman and Perez, 2008).

Gloria Steinem has a similar response in her September 4th LA times opinion piece “Palin: wrong woman, wrong message,” in which Steinem states that Palin “opposes everything most other women want and need . . . [Palin] believes that creationism should be taught in public schools but disbelieves global warming; she opposes gun control but supports government control of women's wombs; she opposes stem cell research but approves ‘abstinence-only’ programs, which increase unwanted births, sexually transmitted diseases and abortions” (Steinem, 2008). Both of these responses highlight the distinction between being a woman and supporting women’s issues. This distinction may be the central point in contention and may be the most effective strategy of response. An additional effective response may be to develop a better awareness of the adaptive nature of an oppressive consciousness and to utilize a fluid, adaptive, differential oppositional consciousness in response.

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