

The Color of Gender: Reimagining Democracy

Zillah R Eisenstein

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As a feminist, Zillah Eisenstein begins by locating this book within her own personal and political context. The acknowledgements include her daughter's teachers and other carers who enabled Zillah Eisenstein to have the time and energy to write, and the introductory chapter starts with the political influences on a child of communist parents in the USA of the 1950s. Eisenstein wants to re-imagine democracy 'between the legacy of the Reagan-Bush decade and the possibility of change' that appears to be offered by Hillary and Bill Clinton. Writing as a white woman in a society based on 'a racialized system of difference threaded through with economic class and gender privilege' which she terms racialized patriarchy, Zillah Eisenstein argues that 'difference' implies power and oppressive structures more than diversity. *The Color of Gender* does not focus on the texts of white men, which is a refreshing change for a feminist text in the wake of Foucault, Derrida *et al.* Instead, Eisenstein draws on the language of universal democratic rights to 'demand' (not just argue) that they be transformed to include women of colour.

The Color of Gender appears over ten years after Zillah Eisenstein's influential text *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, and she returns to the project of radicalizing the discourse of liberal rights, but from a different historical and political position. Reagan and Bush have been and gone, and the Clintons struggle on against the powerful legacy of the 1980s. The Soviet Union and its satellites have become 'post-communist', while feminism and radical Black politics are castigated as 'old-fashioned' at a time when civil rights and abortion law reforms have been all but destroyed in the USA. In this context, Eisenstein sets out to deconstruct the notion of universalism through a recognition that 'human rights' are always racialized, gendered and class-specific (and, I would add, sexualized). The 'universal rights' guaranteed by the 'founding fathers' of the nation were in effect those of the white male. Beginning instead from the imagined position of women of colour, Eisenstein rejects the pretence of universality embedded in the traditional discourses of human rights and individuality in order to rethink democracy, liberalism, socialism and feminism in the 1990s.

The bulk of the book examines five different political moments, four of which are located in the USA, in order to develop Eisenstein's reconstruction of democracy. The first such chapter considers the 'Eastern European

male democracies' of the 'post-communist' years since 1989, examining these new patriarchal democracies and the implications for Eastern European feminism at a time of renewed racism and nationalism. Eisenstein argues that the recent struggles in Eastern Europe make it hard to imagine a democracy 'that is not patriarchal or torn apart by racial hatred'. Turning to the North American context, she envisions feminists as fighting for affirmative action policies that do not strive for sameness of treatment in aiming for racial and sexual equality. The next section starts by examining the dismantling of US civil rights legislation, the rise of an African American middle class and a Black male neo-conservatism in a detailed analysis of 'race', racism and civil rights law. Chapter 3 brings together the Civil Rights Act of 1990–91 with the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings, the Gulf War, the Los Angeles riots and 'Political Correctness' in an analysis of 'new racism' in the final part of the Bush administration up to the time of the Clinton victory. Chapter 4 focuses on legislation around abortion and reproductive rights during the Reagan–Bush era, especially with respect to 'the Webster decision' which upheld the right of a Missouri statute to limit the abortion rights of women. Eisenstein uses this example to strengthen her argument about the gradual privatization of the American state during this period. This section ends with an analysis of the contradictory politics around AIDS, where Eisenstein's focus on women of colour raises different questions in contrast to the usual concentration on white, middle-class, gay men. Examining the response of the Bush administration to this crisis, she also looks at the radical politics of ACTUP and the need for a 'revised radicalized democratic politics' that can address the racial, gendered, sexual and class-specific nature of the disease as well as its universal dimension. AIDS is not the sole province of gay or radical Black politics, any more than Black and gay (or Black and female) can be disentangled, but it *does* define and 'attack' specific communities. The detailed points of Eisenstein's text are sometimes available elsewhere, but the overall structure of her arguments about democracy, feminism, socialism and liberalism is important, and very much a product of and comment on its time. Eisenstein's perspective is located within the politics of Western democracies, especially the USA, although her words have relevance in other societies within similar cultural, political and economic traditions. Her concern is to write female bodies into democratic theory, and in the final chapter Eisenstein begins to make tentative connexions with the positions of women of colour outside the so-called 'First World'. She reviews the work of some white feminists and feminists of colour in their various understandings of feminism, difference, similarity, race, gender and class before ending on a note of guarded if determined optimism about the prospects for US politics after the first hundred days of the Clinton administration.

The Color of Gender addresses important debates for feminists working in Western contexts. The relevance of the book is unlikely to be limited to the 1990s, not least because the questions addressed by Eisenstein will not easily be resolved. She sees these issues as challenges rather than unfortunate problems in an optimistic approach to politics which views conflict and contradiction as spurs to thought and action rather than as matters for embarrassment or retreat. One can only hope that her optimism is not too misplaced: according to Eisenstein we simply cannot afford it to be misplaced. I closed the book with a new (or renewed) appreciation of the need for an international feminist politics that dissolves the usual focus on First World contexts and recognizes the similarities and differences between women around the world. This is not the book that Eisenstein has written, but it is to her credit that *The Color of Gender*, despite its US focus, does not close off discussion but manages to leave the way open for further debate.

Christine Griffin

We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up. Essays in African Canadian Women's History

Coordinated by Peggy Bristow

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Rebellious slave woman and valiant fugitive. Devout Baptist church sister; abused, underpaid domestic; exploited wartime factory worker. Pioneering nurse and resolute teacher. 'Womanist' artist, academic and poet. African Canadian women emerge in this anthology in portraits which find parallels in other geographical areas of the African diaspora; they are punctuating their 400-year presence in Canada with testimony of their exclusion from and marginalization within Canadian life. These essays cover the history of African Canadian women from their arrival in the seventeenth century to the immediate post-war period. The relationship between the various organs of the state and Black women is a central theme and is discussed in the context of economic and social changes. The relations of African Canadian women to the Canadian economy are correctly both considered in the context of Black people in general and analysed in terms of gender, by the introduction of oral testimony, biographical sketches, analysis of census, government records and other official data.

Here is a panoramic documentation of women's experiences from the period of slavery which, as Sylvia Hamilton shows in the opening essay,