



Reaching for Feminist Praxis:

Reflections About My Own Positionality as a Feminist Activist and Law Student in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the tense yet critical intersections between feminist theory and feminist activist practice, taking as a case study my own experiences within the feminist community and the academy, as a Law student and activist in Brazil. I adopt the Freirean concept of “praxis” to articulate how feminist thought/research and feminist practice/activism can relate to and inform each other. Praxis presumes that theory and practice are not irreconcilable or isolate spheres, but rather a dialectical unity, which provides a useful explanation of how action and theory mutually inform each other to transform reality. In order to further articulate these ideas, I recount my experience as an activist in the grassroots popular feminist project Promotoras Legais Populares (PLPs), commenting on the liberatory possibilities and obstacles of shattering the dichotomy between theory and practice. My engagement in feminist political activities thus serves as an example to address how the challenges of intersectional feminist activism could be faced and expressed through liberatory and politically situated theory. By reflecting on my own questions navigating both the academy and feminist collectives, I reach for a feminist praxis that can serve as a basis to tackle the tensions of being a feminist in the legal field and a researcher engaged with feminist politics.

Keywords

praxis; activism;
feminist theory;
feminismo
popular

It is a common practice in academia to provide a small “biography” when submitting a paper or doing a presentation at a conference. In my case, I have frequently felt the need to not only mention I was a Law student, but also that I was part of the grassroots popular

feminist¹ project *Promotoras Legais Populares* (referred to as PLPs)². Similar to Laura Pulido (2008, p. 342), a central part of who I am and how I interact with the world relates to both *studying* political activism and *being* politically active. As I began to understand that combining scholarship and activism is not straightforward (Pulido, 2008, p. 346), I have questioned how my political involvement with feminist activism has informed my research. I realised, reflecting on my academic work, that the theoretical perspectives I adopt, the subjects I decide to explore, and the conclusions I reach are often inferred from my political engagement. At the same time, feminist theory has affected how I interact with the collective knowledge-building process of feminist communities.

As I searched for a suitable theoretical frame that can encompass both my academic and activist work, I found the concept of *praxis* valuable to reflect upon my positionalities. Here, in order to further articulate these ideas, I recount my experience as an activist in the PLPs, remarking that my contribution to the group was not directly related to my interest in research, but to my own political notions of social justice and my willingness to participate in a liberatory popular project. My political involvement, then, serves as a case study to indicate how the challenges of intersectional feminist activism can be faced and expressed through politically situated theory.

I understand *praxis* as a liberatory possibility to shatter the false dichotomy between theory and practice (Fernandes, 2016, 2019; Freire, 2011, 2019; hooks, 1994). Praxis, in that sense, does not correspond to practice: it can be comprehended by how action and theory mutually inform each other to transform reality (Fernandes, 2016; Freire, 2019, p. 35). It presumes that theory and practice are not irreconcilable or isolated spheres, but rather a dialectical unity, as suggested by Paulo Freire (2019). To further elaborate: according to Freire, who relies on a Marxist perspective, praxis “is reflection and action of men³ about the world to transform it; without it, it is impossible to overcome the contradiction oppressor-oppressed” (Freire, 2019, p.52, my translation).

Because this is a dialectical relation, contradictions and limitations between reflection and action are expected and even desired to generate political transformation. Practice that dominates theory may stagnate because it does not fully recognise how oppression operates: when action is emphasised exclusively, then, it is converted into mere “activism” (action for action’s sake), that denies the possibility of dialogue (Fernandes, 2016, p. 492; Freire, 2019, p. 108). Theory that intends to be prevalent over practice is unable to transform reality, as it risks becoming an alienated and alienating “verbalism” for not being truly committed to transformation (Freire, 2019, p. 108). Therefore, understanding reflection and action as a unity means there is no need to choose one or the other; rather, they should both be mutually articulated to work through the contradictions and limitations (Fernandes, 2019, p. 56).

¹ I use the concept “popular” throughout this essay referring to its meaning in Portuguese/Spanish, which is related to the “popular classes”, that is, the marginalised groups in Latin American societies, such as workers, peasants, indigenous and black communities (Lebon, 2013).

² Briefly, the PLPs provide a feminist training-course, based on the popular education method of Paulo Freire, in order to collectively engage women on liberatory feminist practices - I later provide a better explanation of the project and how it is a major part of my understanding of feminism.

³ I decided to keep the translation as close to the original as possible, even if it implies reproducing the hegemonic masculine form of Portuguese. I am aware of Freire’s sexist and exclusionary use of the language, as noted by Fernandes (2016, p.495) and hooks (1994, p.49).

It is not then sufficient that individuals adopt a critical perception of the world and recognise the oppressions to which they are subjected; they should also engage in the struggle for their liberation (Freire, 2011, 2019). It means that, although Freire's liberatory pedagogy aims to overcome oppression through a process of critical consciousness, he also understands that is not an end in itself (Freire, 2019, p. 49). After all, "the power of liberatory education for critical consciousness" (hooks, 1994, p. 69) can provide actual transformations in the conditions that reinforce oppression and exclusion only when embedded in meaningful praxis (Fernandes, 2016; hooks, 2014).

In view of this framework, I can reflect on how I experienced many of the possibilities (and obstacles) of feminist praxis during the years I was a coordinator of the PLPs.⁴ Since the group's purpose is to organise a six-month feminist course that provides a liberatory education for *mulheres populares*, our practices are based on Freire's popular education (Freire, 2019), which we transformed into a version of feminist pedagogy. Our jobs as coordinators is to conceptualise the course, which includes deciding on the themes that are discussed⁵ and the facilitators of the debates.⁶ Additionally, we organise the weekly sessions and activities, select and contact the participants and, in general, interact with the community by participating in events and running workshops (Melo et al., 2017).

During the years I was involved with the project, alongside other *companheiras*, we sought to organise a feminist educational course that could enable women to critically assess and potentially transform their realities. Because we align ourselves with *feminismo popular*⁷, which draws on the discussions of Marxist feminists and relies on Latin American feminist experiences, our perspective is fundamentally anticapitalist and antiracist. Also, it is of utmost importance for us to address counterhegemonic thought and the experiences of marginalised subjects in Brazil - for example, black and indigenous groups, peasants, workers, the LGBTQI+ community, the disabled and elderly (Melo et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, engaging in critical feminist thinking through popular education, in a classroom filled with fifty women from different backgrounds, and trying to approach sensitive subjects, was at times not at all the liberatory practice we envisioned. As coordinators of the course, we constantly faced limitations and conflicts that we discussed for hours in our weekly meetings. Many times, it was a devastating and exhausting process, as we dealt with political disagreements and the contradictions raised by our own positionality, since most of us were young white students who did not share the reality of the women who participated in the course.

⁴ I was a coordinator of the PLPs section in Curitiba from 2015 to 2018. The project started in 1992 in São Paulo and Porto Alegre, inspired by similar experiences that were happening in other Latin American countries, and is currently organised in more than twenty Brazilian cities.

⁵ The themes are decided by the coordinators before the course starts, and range in a variety of topics, such as: sexual division of labour and capitalism, race and black women's struggles, sexual diversity, State and religion, women's rights, gender violence, women's health and sexualities.

⁶ There is a facilitator in every session, usually a feminist activist who has some knowledge and/or experience related to the session's theme.

⁷ I use the term in Portuguese because I refer to the practices of *feminismo popular* as it is specifically constituted in Latin America.

Those limitations and contradictions were particularly evident in an episode that happened in 2017, in our session about “the history of feminist movements in Latin America”. While the facilitator was a fellow activist and scholar, she proceeded to recount the history of feminism through the concept of “waves”, traditionally used in the United States and Western Europe. She was immediately questioned by the group for reinforcing a hegemonic and colonial discourse that marginalises the history of women’s struggle in Latin America. That led to many discussions (and tears) throughout the session, since black women felt particularly (and rightfully) affected by the approach that disregarded their positionality within feminist history. It was a hurtful episode because it ended extremely badly, as one of the coordinators tried to appease the situation but made an awful racist comment. Needless to say, the repercussions were endless, as we struggled for months to regain the trust of the black participants, who were violated in an environment that was supposed to be safe.

I am critical of how we, as coordinators, handled the situation back then. Although we eventually came to properly address the episode and had many meetings to face the issues within the coordination, we did not consider the repercussions of our chosen approach when we prepared the outline for the session. At the occasion, we asked the facilitator to question the limitations of the Eurocentric and U.S.-centred feminist canon, but we still kept the discussion about Western European “feminist waves” in the course program.⁸ At the time, we did not realise we were reproducing a hegemonic vision of feminism that divides, separates and excludes other narratives. Furthermore, the most damaging aspect of the episode was that our approach silenced, censored, and devalued the feminist voices of black women (hooks, 1994, p. 65).

In 2018, the same session was completely different. On that occasion, we built our knowledge of feminism centred on the claims and mobilisations of black, indigenous and peasant women in Latin America, and grounded on the political and historical context of the region, which is rooted in colonization and State authoritarianism. For that, we had to immerse ourselves in hours of study sessions and group debates to completely shift our framing of feminist history and to theoretically prepare ourselves to facilitate the debates raised by the participants. I thus recount this event as an example of how we managed to access the “healing, liberatory function” of feminist theory that can inform practice, as suggested by bell hooks (1994, p. 69).

Here praxis provides a frame to address the limitations and conflicts of feminist communities, as too often academics reproduce a “romanticized” notion of these spaces as inherently liberatory or capable of overcoming oppression by themselves, neglecting their complexities and contradictions, as Pulido observes (2008, p. 342). By adopting the notion of praxis, I come to the understanding that the “lived experience of theorizing” should be “fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation” so that the gaps between theory and practice can be tackled (hooks, 1994, p. 61).

Still, since my involvement with feminist groups allowed me to participate in collective knowledge-building, as a Law student,⁹ I struggle with the issue of translating the

⁸ This information I consulted in the records of documents and meeting minutes I kept.

⁹ I here refer mostly to my experience as a Law student in Brazil, not addressing my current positionality in Gender Studies in Europe.

collectiveness of these ideas into academia. Not only does academic production demand individual work, but I am also conscious that my researcher position is largely tied to race and class privileges. I thus find it hard to address my positionality of being a white college-educated feminist in Brazil, who is building on ideas drawn from collective discussions I had in different contexts (hooks, 1994). That way, even when engaging with feminist theories, I am not completely comfortable with how I insert the contributions of those collective experiences into my work, as I often feel I cannot properly convey how they were informing my arguments while still keeping my research grounded within the set of formal academic rules.¹⁰

In that sense, I am aware that my academic production will not, by itself, “contribute to a shift in power relations” or provide “an important service simply by telling the story of a subordinated or otherwise marginalized group” (Pulido, 2008, p. 351-352). Because of that, I understand the need of tackling the conflicts and contradictions of feminist positionality in academia. As emphasised by Pulido (2008, p. 362), living as an activist and a researcher means “having to make difficult professional, ethical, and political choices and having to live with the consequences”. The way I see it, the most challenging part of this process is having to constantly deal with my own doubts regarding how I position myself and address the aspects of my research that are fundamentally based on collective experiences.

I therefore posit that a truly liberatory feminist theory must be both informed by (and inform) the lived experiences of women and joined by a practice that is committed to transformative politics. Due to my involvement with the PLPs, I acquired “feminist lenses” that imply a consciousness of capitalism, racism, colonialism and multiple understandings of gender and sexuality – all of which are aspects I bring into my academic production through the topics I decide to write about and my criticism of hegemonic academic discourses in the legal field. The standpoint of *feminismo popular* has also led me to often adopt Marxist epistemologies, highlight the intersectional aspects of oppression and exclusion, and seek decolonial approaches in my studies. At the same time, I know that my constant reflexivity with regard to my positionalities and my engagement with distinct aspects of feminist theory are not enough: I must equally seek political action in order to reach for a truly feminist, liberatory, transformative praxis.

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¹⁰ That is particularly true for my undergraduate thesis, where I adopted feminist legal methods in my analysis of “parental alienation” in the Brazilian context. Besides basing my research on feminist legal scholars, I also brought the arguments of feminist groups, conveyed in their statements against the regulation of parental alienation (by the law n. 12.318/2010) (Hümmelgen, 2018).

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