Feminist Politics
Identity, Difference, and Agency

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CHAPTER FOUR

"L’intersectionnalité": Feminisms in a Divided World; Québec-Canada

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Emancipatory struggles, such as feminism and national or cultural identity politics, produce exhilaration and anxiety. If national or cultural identity politics (hereinafter "nat-cult") and feminism form complex struggles when viewed separately, their intersection in the cultural, political, and socioeconomic settings of Québec and the “rest of Canada” (hereinafter ROC) creates seemingly infinite complexities. In this chapter, I advance the notion of “strategic intersectionality” as a way of describing some of the consequences of the intricate interactions between feminism and nat-cult in Québec and the ROC. Playing the intricate, if dangerous, game of strategic intersectionality can empower us to imagine innovative tactics and create new coalitions both within and between the communities of Québec and ROC feminists.

This chapter constitutes an attempt to reconceptualize the relationship between the feminisms of Québec and the ROC. I focus on a rejection of differences that portrays one feminism as more or less developed than the other. I seek to replace common clichés about “distinct feminisms” with strategic intersectionality to explain differences as emerging out of separate political contexts and struggles. I thus hope to promote dialogue based on better understanding of the Québec and ROC situations.

My thesis works against the common understanding of the differences between feminism in Québec and in the ROC. Indeed, at times, we French Canadian women argue that feminism in Québec essentially differs from the feminism prevalent in the ROC. Proponents of Québec culture often position themselves at the intersection of two worlds: Québec people are
too North American to be European and too European to be North American. Québec feminists at times point to this cultural difference to explain the distinct manifestations of feminism in law in the two main Canadian legal systems.

I, too, take for granted differences between feminisms in Québec and in the ROC. I argue that differences among the two groups are unavoidable because of the divergent political positions that feminists occupy in their respective settings. Québec women thus engage in nat-cult struggles in ways distinct from the ways feminists are implicated in such struggles in the ROC. However, I advocate neither eternalizing such differences (essentialism) nor erasing them (universalism) but rather seeing these differences as inscribed in specific cultural practices, political settings, and institutional frameworks. From this perspective, I celebrate differences between feminists in Québec and in the ROC as expressing the strategic deployment of differences in differently situated feminist struggles; yet I also call for new kinds of coalitions based on these differences.

If both feminism and nat-cult are sensitive subjects, the combination of the two generates even more delicate issues requiring, at the outset, two cautionary comments that will be the subject of Part I. The first relates to the use of the term “nat-cult,” while the second concerns issues about Québec and ROC identities. In Part II, I describe what I mean by strategic intersectionality. In Part III, I describe some of the processes of dissociation and projection that lead to a “distinct feminism” thesis in Québec. I also briefly illustrate the potential of strategic thinking for Québec and ROC feminisms around the theme of “distinct feminisms.”

The Meanings of Expression:
“Nat-Cult” and “Québec” and “ROC”

“Nat-cult”: The Coining of an Expression
First, I will use the term “nat-cult” throughout this chapter to refer to the necessary critique of Québec’s position in Canada for feminist purposes. I will abstain from taking a position in the nationalist/federalist political debate because my critique should concern all feminists, Québec nationalists and federalists alike. At this moment, both structures of federalism and of Québec nationalism engender detrimental consequences for women. The harmful effects of Québec’s position in Canada for women will not necessarily be eradicated either by sovereignty or by remaining in Canada. Neither political outcome, for example, will eliminate the problematic private/public dichotomy reinforced by the civil law/common law split in Québec’s legal system. For
these reasons, when I describe an intersectional move made by a Québec feminist, I do not mean that she is or is not a Québec nationalist but rather that she displays a maneuver that emerges, in part, out of a critique of Québec's position in Canada. Finally, I use the term nat-cult because not all those concerned by Québec's cultural issues identify with nationalist politics. Similarly, I do not make any assessment about the political positions of ROC feminists about Québec or Canada.

Québec and the ROC as Complex Mosaics

Second, the way I seem to have generalized Québec and ROC identities may cast doubt on my simultaneous antiessentialist and antiuniversalistic appeal. Yet, I aspire to address issues relating to Québec and ROC identity without denying their historical and contemporary complexities. Québec people rarely admit, let alone confront, their difficult and contradictory position as both colonizers and colonized. Indeed, Québec people occupy a site of complex relations as both conquerors of the first nations and as a people conquered by the royalist English. Québec people also seldom face their problematic relations to the many French Canadian communities outside of Québec which form important and diverse, but always endangered, culturally specific Francophone populations. In addition, Québec participates in an intricate web of metropole/provincial relationships to France, related to the history of colonization, and to a continued set of shared origins, history, language, and legal system linking them across the Atlantic for centuries. The place of Québec people both as a minority within a majority—that of the ROC—yet a majority in its territory complicates its predicament even further. This singular Québec positionality carries important gender implications as well as repercussions relating to relations with its "own" minority groups.

Similarly, some readers may justly object to any generalizations about the "rest of Canada." The ROC forms a mosaic of wide regional and cultural differences that also give rise to their own sets of complex webs of identities and nat-cult encounters. Like Québec, the ROC combines intricate sets of relations between minorities and majorities over numerous identity struggles as well as issues related to its own colonial encounters. Feminist issues in one English Canadian province may resemble those in another region, yet have little in common with the experience of women from other parts of Canada, because of strong differences and similarities concerning linguistic, socioeconomic, religious, and nat-cult questions. Indeed, some of these regions and provinces share more striking commonalities with Québec than with other parts of English Canada. In addition,
some ROC feminists neglect acknowledging the way their own ethnic and
linguistic position inflects their feminism, making their practices more or
less adapted to their own needs or those of others.

As I will argue in the next part of my chapter, strategic intersectionality
attempts to substitute analysis of differences based on essences to those based
on political and cultural contexts—thereby creating the possibility for deeper
comprehension and political alliances between feminists. Strategic intersec-
tionality opens up an infinite number of partnerships between sites of cul-
tural practices, both dominant and marginal.

To summarize, I use the terms “Québec” and “ROC” throughout this chap-
ter as shorthand to designate the complex set of identities that each of these
sites encompass. I thus propose reconceptualizing Québec and ROC identi-
ties in order to imagine new stratagems and build new coalitions.

Strategic Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality implies an understanding of the simultane-
ous engagement in more than one distinct, but intertwined, emancipatory
battle. Moreover, one of these emancipatory fights must not be perceived as
subordinated to the other. Therefore, in this particular case, the feminist
struggle is not subject to nat-cult aspirations and vice versa.

In advocating the concept of intersectionality, I argue against both essen-
tialism and universalism. I reject claims that attempt to make Québec’s fem-
imism, Québec’s nat-cult, or Québec’s civil law as necessarily, objectively, and
abstractly distinct from ROC’s feminism, nat-cult, federalism, or common
law. Yet, I also reject assimilationist attempts that silence cultural distinc-
tions and aim at an undifferentiated sense of “universal” belonging. For ex-
ample, merely adding the experiences of Québec women to a ROC research
project may constitute an essentialist move when conducted abstractly and
without examining Québec’s political and cultural context. Similarly, gener-
alizing French Canadian experiences to all Canadian women without an ef-
fort to comprehend English Canadian identities in their complex settings
would be unduly universalistic. I do not mean to suggest that the Québec or
ROC contexts by themselves provide determinateness to otherwise indeter-
minate concepts; rather, they enrich our understanding of the various possi-
ble meanings of those concepts in particular struggles.

Strategic intersectionality demands a contextual examination of how nat-
cult and feminism interact with one another. Imagining new strategies re-
quires consideration of dimensions of experiences invisible to those who
view feminism and nat-cult in isolation from each other, thus failing to cap-
tured intersecting patterns of gender and national subordination in both Québec and the ROC. Imagining such new strategies presupposes stating hidden differences or similarities, deconstructing myths, revealing processes of projection and dissociation, and building new kinds of coalitions. These measures may apply inside one site of struggle or between sites to support innovative practices, to foster original strategies and to create shifting and productive alliances.

My particular interest consists in highlighting the specific context of Québec feminists who participate simultaneously in both nat-cult and feminist emancipatory struggles. By restarting a dialogue between Québec and the ROC feminists based on tactical thinking rather than on essentialist or universalistic desires of recognition and demands, conversations will ultimately be fostered.

Distinct Feminisms

In this part of my chapter I describe the “distinct feminisms” theme in an effort to uncover its hidden premises and assumptions. Each component of the theme brings to the fore the intersection between feminism and nat-cult. Often, feminists situated at the crossroad of these emancipatory struggles maneuver to avoid subsuming one to the other. Indeed, their nat-cult endeavors may remain hidden by the boundaries of gender struggles and vice versa. Thus, their emancipatory strategies can only be fully envisioned by looking at the crossing of these roads.

In this part of my chapter I will discuss first identity politics and second the processes of subordination and of dissociation in the creation of a Québec feminist identity in the legal world. However, I believe that some of the generalizations I am about to make could be extended to other domains and fields of knowledge.

Feminism and Identity Politics

At times, we Québec feminists attempt to explain and to justify the marginality of feminism in Québec law schools through a “cultural” argument based on a purported essential division between two Canadian cultures—a division often generalized to differences between “Latin” and “Anglo” historical origins and contemporary cultures. Such attempts to explain the indifference, antagonism, and even patent rejection of outspoken feminism in Québec law schools often involve the deployment of at least three claims, which should be put aside for the following reasons.
First, we reject the dubious assumption that all Québec feminist jurists suffer from a severe case of “false consciousness.” Indeed, the fact that feminism in Québec’s legal community may have a different expression than that of Anglo-feminism should not lead to the conclusion that Québec feminism does not exist. The supposition that all Québec women are the helpless victims of patriarchy and gender oppression verges on the absurd.

Second, we refuse to explain the split between Québec and ROC feminisms as merely an excuse invoked by Québec feminists and nonfeminists to avoid facing the “real” issues raised by Anglo-feminism out of fear or incapacity to do so.

Third, we would be projecting a “combative,” “aggressive,” and even “belligerent” Anglo-feminist tradition that serves as a “straw woman” in relation to the distinct Québec feminism. This last argument hinges on a highly problematic—even if strategic—projection of “Anglo-feminism.” Indeed, we Québec feminists often project an image of a well-recognized and accepted ROC feminism in English Canadian law schools. These projections have been beneficial to Québec feminists. They provide us with hope and encouragement. These projections are also deployed, in part, to convince colleagues of the fundamental importance and interest of feminism as an unavoidable movement of legal thought—to provoke a sense of urgency among Québec jurists, a sense that if they do not recognize feminism, they will lag behind in cutting-edge legal thought. However, the deployment of such projections also carries risks. Indeed, these Québec projections minimize the severe backlashes that have assailed women professors in English Canada. Threats of violence and acts of discrimination as well as the resulting “silencing” have deeply affected women students and professors in ROC law schools in recent years.

Invoking these controversial and ambivalent projections, some Québec feminists argue that the “aggressive” and “confrontational” approach of Anglo-feminism does not suit Québec society. Such authors contend that since the 1970s, Québec women have exercised a “power of influence” as opposed to a “power of confrontation.” The nat-cult struggle thus intersects with feminist demands, in part, by specifically asserting the existence of a “distinct feminism”: Québec feminism has, and should have, a different face. Québec women succeed in achieving the same advances in the battles against patriarchal oppression by more subtle but as effective moves as their English Canadian counterparts. Indeed, these contentions have a strong measure of truth in Québec. For example, there are as many women law professors and judges proportionately in Québec as in the ROC legal communities. Indeed,
for the past twenty years, twenty percent more women law students enrolled in Quebec law schools than in the ROC.

Understandably, the argument for a "distinct feminism" stems, in part, from the need for a common front to preserve nat-cult specificity. Fragmentation due to internal divisions and struggles would threaten the nat-cult project. It should be noted that the "anti-confrontational" argument is not specific to feminism's role in Quebec's political history. Rather, this contention often arises in nat-cult movements around the world, when feminists challenge the subordinate role of women in such struggles. Like other nationalist movements, Quebec's nat-cult suffers from a general subordination of most grassroots progressive political struggles to the state-building project.

Many feminists rightly argue that Quebec women have been heavily involved in the nat-cult project since its inception. However, the projection and dismissal of a perhaps mythic "confrontational" Anglo-Saxon feminist tradition risks missing important emancipatory strategies. In addition, an anticonfrontational approach risks underestimating the potentially nonoptimal tactics of women's subtle—even if persuasive—manner in Quebec. Strategic thinking implies staying clear of reductionist projections of feminist "false consciousness" and "aggressivity," as well as of "the united front" of nat-cult.

Subordination and Dissociation

Many feminists argue that the radical feminist analysis of women's subordination does not correspond to Quebec's culture and history. According to this argument, Quebec men, more than—or at least as much as—women, have suffered from the "historical disadvantages" related to the "male" English conquest. The effects of conquest, the argument continues, have produced a hierarchy between the conquerors and the conquered deeply internalized by Quebec men. The serious wounds inflicted on men by conquest would thus have significantly affected the patriarchal hierarchy between men and women in Quebec society. This argument is also often raised in nat-cult struggles around the world and often expresses some profound truths.

In Quebec, this argument opposes the Anglo-Saxon conception of women's exclusion and inferiority in patriarchal societies to the classic nat-cult ideal of partnership between men and women to overcome the effects of conquest. Implicitly, this appeal evokes the nat-cult gender identity myths of the Quebec matriarch and her somewhat meek consort, contemporarily designated as l'homme rose (the pink man). Simultaneously, it conjures the stereotypes of the "Latin" relations between men and women defined in
terms of seductiveness, sexiness, and desire, a set of attitudes that do not fit the combative cadre of Anglo-feminist battlefields.

Québec feminists make the strategic claim of a “distinct feminism” through their projection of a “confrontational” Anglo-feminist identity and a complex sense of belonging to the Latin cultural family. Québécoise women embrace “Latin” stereotypes of “femininity” partly out of a desire to assert their distinctiveness in North America. At the same time, they reject the blatant sexism associated with French and other Latin cultures. In addition, the hold of the “French past” decreases as the proportion of Québécoise women without any historical or “ethnic” ties to France increases; moreover, this “French past” never had any positive meaning for first nations women. Thus, the same projection and dissociation mechanisms that operate towards Anglo-feminism also operate in relation to French and other Latin cultures. The North American influence makes Québec women critical of the blatant sexism prevalent in these “sister” cultures. By dissociating themselves from both Anglo-feminism and Latin-femininity, Québec women and feminism attempt to construct a sense of their own intersectional identity.

I stress that I celebrate and embrace these strategic efforts of projection, dissociation, and distinction that succeed in creating a sense of feminist identity fitted to the Québec context. However, these projection, dissociation, and distinction moves should be viewed for what they are: strategies.

Conclusion

Writing this chapter in English constitutes one more example of strategic intersectionality, entailing many risks. On the one hand, my efforts may be appropriated by those seeking arguments against feminism—either of Québec or of the ROC—and/or nat-cult. On the other hand, my feminist and nat-cult colleagues from all parts of Canada may feel disturbed by my desire to focus on strategic approaches. I have attempted to position myself delicately in the intersection between my own feminist and nat-cult loyalties.

Focusing separately on traditional gender or national boundaries risks either subordinating feminist struggles to nat-cult battles or claims to feminist demands. Subordination occurs because one struggle’s borders hide or render invisible demands made in the name of the other struggle. For example, nat-cult claims may be ignored by transnational feminist analysis. Conversely, nat-cult struggles have often “postponed” feminist demands to the postliberation period rather than fully integrating them in the emancipatory
process—a “postponement” that may last forever. Failing to account for the impact of double allegiances on Québec and ROC feminists also limits the potential of constructive dialogues and coalitions. However, strategic thinking does not imply that a consensus on goals will necessarily be reached. Distinct strategies are unavoidable, as well as political and ideological disagreements about which tactics to adopt in different settings. Yet such conflicts may lead to imagining and deploying even more creative and original intersectional strategies because of the struggles and coalitions they will compel.

Notes

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2. I have coined the expression “nat-cult” to avoid making a statement about the nationalist or cultural component of Québec’s emancipatory struggle. I use the hyphen (-) to refer to the idea of the alternative as well as the combination of a proportion of both.

3. However, sometimes, the same phenomenon operates in a reverse way. Women are given more rights and power during the nat-cult emancipatory struggle that they are denied after liberation.

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