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Anannya Bhattacharjee's 1996 article, "The Public/Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Undomesticating Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community," opened up new ways to think about women in community and the link between enforcement violence as manifested by private and public actors. This interview with her was conducted in New York City on June 6, 2003.

LR: You were in Boston a few months ago, on March 29, to give the keynote address at the New England Women's Studies Conference, shortly after the United States began its invasion of Iraq and while a large anti-war rally was taking place directly across the street on the Common. Addressing feminist citizenship in a changing world order, you noted that the nature of that change was particularly difficult to gauge at that moment. Now, several months later, do the dynamics of change have greater definition for you?

AB: I think first it will be useful to just talk about the word "citizenship" because in today's world of global migration we need a concept of citizenship that goes beyond a legalistic definition. Within the United States, given the wide spectrum of people who inhabit the immigrant communities--ranging from undocumented immigrants to people who are legal residents or who have legal citizenship--citizenship should have a broader meaning. We are also living through a time of increased, indeed draconian, restrictions on democratic participation. To counter this trend, we have to infuse the spaces that we are already in with citizen participation. By citizen participation, I do not mean only a token participation as in the rotes we cast every few years or the false choices we have as consumers. I am talking about engagement that

democratizes the various aspects of human existence making it possible for us to define a society at local, regional, national, and global levels based on transparency, accountability, equality, justice, respect for life, and peace. This would counter the current government trends toward greater secrecy and mystification in the name of national security.

LR: The increased emphasis on national security in the United States and the tightening of national borders has problematized "citizenship" as a usable word, and I noticed that you were using "engagement" rather than "citizenship."

AB: Yes. And if we want to build democracy, it's important for us to realize that voting is just one aspect of a democratic society. Just as it is not viable to say that if you don't have a passport then you are not a citizen, it's not appropriate to say that since you cannot vote you are not a citizen. To me the concept of citizenship extends to undocumented workers who have the right to engagement and participation to determine the conditions they live in and this goes far beyond just casting votes during elections. Electoral processes and political campaigns are of course important watersheds. However, if citizen action and participation are geared solely towards candidates and their campaigns, then citizen participation will wither away over time. This is especially true in the U.S. where electoral activism is limited to two parties with relatively little political difference between them and where new parties are not being generated out of mass movements.

LR: You often speak of your experiences at the World Social Forum where new forms of engagement and social organization from Latin America have gained visibility. One concept that excites me as a concrete juxtaposition to neo-liberal models of economic growth is what I think is called "community budgeting." Is anybody in the United States experimenting with that?

AB: One term for it is "participatory budget process." Organizing to determine the use of resources is key to self-determination. Resources can mean many things but budget is one of them. However you define your community--neighborhood, block, county, state, nation, even the globe--budgetary decision-making is definitely one aspect of self-determination and a venue for citizen participation and engagement. Porto Alegre has a

participatory budget process, which has excited North Americans at the World Social Forum. In the United States, organizations have brought up issues about taxation and think tanks have tried to put citizen's budget priorities together, but in Brazil it's actually an organizing approach where you slowly build from the bottom up what citizen participation would mean in budgeting. In India, it's been part of this whole concept of "self-rule"--Gandhi being one of its key proponents. So U.S. activists have come back saying "what if our city council members could be exposed to the potential of this kind of citizen participation? Wouldn't that make our elected officials much more activist? Much more engaged with their constituencies?"

LR: When a municipal or other governmental budget grows from the neighborhoods up does it turn out to be any more gender balanced in terms of whose needs are getting met?

AB: Women are very civic people. Women engage with their families and communities, and if they can access the opportunities, then they participate. However, violence in the home, men using women as voting proxies, and other gender inequalities can block women's participation.

LR: You've shifted my question which positioned "women" as the end-users or recipients of public services to a framing that positions "women" as allocators of resources, as political decision-makers, and I think this is significant. Ratna Kapur has recently raised concerns about the foregrounding of what she calls the "female victim subject" in campaigns aimed at mobilizing international support to stop violence against women (2002). She notes that placing individual women who have suffered in horrible ways at the center of appeals has proven a very successful means of building the political will to try to address various manifestations of gender-specific violence. But she also says that this approach can undermine an image of women as empowered agents or political actors in the popular imagination. She finds that such campaigns tend to result in legalistic remedies, which, in conservative political contexts, often means protectionist, regressive legislation.

AB: I firmly believe that legislations are only as strong as movements that inspire them. So unless there is a movement of women and men who take ownership of the legislation and stand

behind it and hold the legislation accountable after it has been passed, the passage of legislation has limited and sometimes even regressive consequences. I would say that it would be the same for a human rights approach that is narrowly legalistic. First one has to build a sense of participation and engagement with the issues which then crystallizes into legislation. To come at it from a legislative framework and say let's put the legislation in and then we will monitor it and see if it works--that's not my definition of transformative change.

LR: This has ramifications for the ways in which we organize our work around social issues, doesn't it?

AB: The broader issue is the kind of culture we are producing for social justice movements. Within the United States, non-profit organizations, or NGOs as they're called in some other parts of the world, are the dominant mode of institution building in the activist community. As a counterexample, the World Social Forum is an open space that brings together diverse entities engaged in bringing about transformative change in their communities. And it's important to note the phrase "diverse entities" because there are NGOs (non-governmental organizations) or non-profits; as well as mass-based people's movements, faith-based institutions, unions, academics, journalists, writers, cultural activists, and so on. So in this landscape, the NGOs are just one sector and there is a conscious decision that in order to fight the powers that be we need diverse entities at the table. In the U.S., however, given that the labor movement is a lot less progressive than one would want, there is a lot of pressure on non-profits and NGOs to then create social change. This has important consequences. First of all, you cannot rely on one sector to create a just change. Second of all, one needs to ask whether non-profits or NGOs have the capacity to bring about the desired kind of change at the necessary scale.

So, for example, in India, where we have mass-based people's movements, various types of trade unions, and political parties arising out of movements, there is a fairly vigorous debate about how NGOs fit into this field of activity in a way that is most constructive. In a mass organization or a trade union, you have certain constituencies and bases as well as leaders who are elected by the constituency. This is not to say that corruption and unaccountability do not happen, but at least there are mechanisms

to make leaders accountable. The resources of NGOs are really coming externally from foundations. Even though some non-profits are membership organizations, they don't exactly have mass base or accountability mechanisms that some of the older institutions have.

This raises issues about what exactly the role of an NGO should be. You know, some would say, for example, that, with their access to funding and professional staffs, NGOs are really good for doing research and support work for mass movements. However, in the U.S., non-profits often play the role of organizing in a community by building membership and bases. In that case, how is a professional staff organizer accountable to the constituency that she or he is organizing? How can such organizations achieve mass scale? I come from the world of such NGOs myself. Although an important sector, I have doubts about the potential of this sector to create the change that we need on the scale that is necessary in the absence of other adequately visionary sectors such as mass organizations, trade unions, etc.

LR: Well, the fact that there aren't a lot of other institutions means that any non-profit is going to want to address any problem it sees through many different activities--from direct service to advocacy and organizing to research and lobbying--which may mean that it tries to be too many things at one time.

AB: Sure, that can happen. It also happens that non-profits become very single-issue oriented, as we have seen in the rise of domestic violence organizations which have become very single issue and professionalized. So I think the loss of focus as well as the distilling of one issue to the exclusion of others--both dangers are there. I think a culture of professionalization and external funding that does not come from the constituents themselves can lead to an entrepreneurial spirit entering social change work which increases fragmentation rather than diversity. Some of the best NGOs have a deep appreciation of these hazards and work hard to counter them.

LR: Well, isn't it sometimes the case that the behaviors, the ways of being and acting that would be rewarded by the constituency, let's say of a neighborhood action group, can be very different from what external funders want to see in the staff?

AB: The management of the non-profit becomes an enormous issue in terms of being accountable to funders. Managing to respond to a constituency is different from managing to respond to funders. The non-profit field right now is full of consultants and trainers eager to help in these areas, and there is less and less attention, time and resources for building a transformative politics.

LR: You mentioned at the conference that there isn't a lot of intergenerational sharing of world view and experience, and this spoke to me of the ways in which a culture of professionalism may mask other realities. I began to wonder if professionals may themselves be blind to the ways in which the culture they have helped create privileges professionalism, in somewhat the same way that white people are blind to white privilege.

AB: Earlier I said that there is this sense that if you have a particular set of skills and know your heart is in the right place, you simply set up a nonprofit and do the work you need to do. But this is very different from more traditional institutions that go back beyond ten, fifteen years--like union and political party organizing--where there is, for better or for worse, a sense of institutional history. One cannot just say, okay so I'm going to start a party or a union. Since it's not unthinkable to start a non-profit, young people coming out of graduate school with good politics get the impression that all you need is a certain analysis and you can run these organizations. There is no infrastructure for mentoring people entering non-profit activism.

However, we should remember that with often unwelcoming trade unions and few mass movements, NGOs have often provided almost the only space for new social justice activism. Non-profit organizations have had a resonance because they are filling a void: people feel a great need to participate and engage, and right now there are few other paths available for doing so.

All the different forces of change have their problems, but I think that non-profits are new enough that they have not yet really developed a practice of internal reflection. This professionalized world with trainers, consultants, and philanthropists all too often excludes unconventional forms of action and stays with bourgeois ideas of what is legal and right. It's important to make a distinction between entrepreneurial, individual non-profit management

decisions and collective movement decisions which say here is out NGO which we will use for certain purposes. So, it's not so much the institution of the NGO itself that's necessarily problematic; it's more the culture surrounding this institution right now. Dedicated, intelligent activists and organizers can and do figure out creative ways to use non-profits as instruments, as only a means. So it's more that we need to be very aware of what it is that we're doing so that we can come at it with the right approach.

I want to distinguish my critique of non-profits or NGOs from that coming recently from the Right wing. The Right wing's criticisms are motivated by its desire to keep social justice discourse out of the political landscape. In fact, its critique only demonstrates that good NGOs can in fact play a useful and effective role.

LR: The footnotes to your essay "Private Spaces and Public Force" (2002) all point back to conversations inside the activist community which you take seriously, learning from and then re-using to actually produce new theory that comes out in your writing.

AB: Yes, it's coming out of my conversations. It's not just that I as an individual am thinking this way. As somebody in the activist community who is writing, I feel very responsible to all the people I work with. I have collaborated with INCITE and the Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (CWPE). I was part of the first Color of Violence conference where we were saying that we very much believe in ending violence against women but are also frustrated with current framework and strategies. We have tried strategies that have not worked, so you know we're critiquing ourselves.

LR: So you've created a space for reflection and self-criticism with colleagues and friends.

AB: Yes, yes. And I think we need those spaces desperately. There are not enough of them. A lot of people don't speak up. There are all kinds of implications. We get mired in the work we are doing as activists. We don't want to offend our colleagues. We don't want to jeopardize our funding. I mean, there are all kinds of reasons for self-censorship, including sometimes anti-intellectualism. So we need to figure out constructive ways to reflect on the work we do

and establish spaces where we can make mistakes, learn from them, and be able to speak about them, and write about them.

LR: I'd like you to be more explicit for a moment about process. You're talking with all these people and together you're developing some new angles, and reaching out to communicate with new groups. To me that's cultural work, because it's both creating new ways of doing and new communities of doers. It goes beyond the transmission of information, because new practices and ways of being in the world are evolving.

AB: I mentioned CWPE earlier. It is a space where some feminists come together and it's really been an important space for individuals who actually work in the women's movement to come together in. I use the word feminist with some specifications, but I think that writing and thinking collectively is important. I find the process to be quite transformative. I have to read in order to write so I learn. It clarifies my thinking. It gives me a sense of the larger context, like "why am I doing this at all?" "Why is it worth it?" (laughs). I discover new ways of looking at my work. You know you have one idea but it's actually part of something bigger and you cannot arrive at it until you start articulating it.

LR: You said feminist with some specifications. Do you want to put those on the table?

AB: The reason I said it is because many of us don't really know what the word means at this point. There are so many ways of defining feminism; you can take it from any perspective, as immigrants, as women of color, or identities like that within the United States or you can take it in the context of global south vs. global north. I mean there are different feminisms. The important thing is that I engage with feminism and I consider that a very important part of the work that I do whether I am organizing workers or fighting the prison industrial complex, or corporate power or violence against women. In all of this, my engagement with feminism, be it in a friendly way, be it as critic, whatever, my engagement is an important part of my identity. At a very basic level, I think women are central to any transformative change. That to me is feminism, and so I'm a feminist in that sense.

LR: And you don't see "understanding women as central to any transformative change" as the dominant or most common definition of feminism in our historical or cultural context?

AB: To pick up on your last phrase--"our historical and cultural context"--that is indeed a challenge facing feminism today. It is imperative that as we continually build a women's movement in the world, we also respect the different histories and contexts that shape feminism. Feminism is about understanding inequalities and privilege but we have to turn that analysis onto ourselves as well so that we take into account the differences in privilege among women. Without this understanding, feminism can begin to stand in for the lowest common denominator or the highest common privilege--however you want to look at it.

LR: You've expressed similar reservations about the use of "human rights" as a frame for transformative social change. How might "human rights" become a more useful instrument for that purpose?

AB: Well at the conference, I was surprised by how receptive the audience was to my remarks about political vision and ideology. A lot of people in human rights came up to me and said that human rights is a framework that encompasses vision and ideology, and could be used to do the work. I appreciate their comments to the extent that obviously they are not restricting themselves to a legalistic framework. But my sense is that the human rights discourse, especially in the U.S., does not address imbalances of power as they exist in the world today, like capitalism and corporate power. And I would like human rights activists to ask harder questions about how this framework can be used to change these imbalances of power.

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