

8-24-2012

# The Pros and Cons of Progress in a Neoliberal World: Transforming the Lives of Men, Women and Children

Roberto Bahruth  
*Boise State University*

# The Pros and Cons of Progress in a Neoliberal World: Transforming the Lives of Men, Women and Children

Roberto Bahruth, Ph.D. Boise State University

"Liberal arts were for 'the free man,' meaning not the man who had political freedom but he who need not take care of himself or his own 'natural,' that is, necessary needs in any way. Those, women, male slaves and servants - who made that freedom possible were 'lower' beings, conditions for the existence of the proper, genuine, and ideal man." Elizabeth Minnich (1990:45).

**ABSTRACT:** Careful consideration of changes occurring in a globalized world turning on neoliberalism provides insight into the many ways, both positive and negative, that cultural foundations are affected in societies around the world. Young people today are growing up in a world changing at the speed of the microchip with clear implications regarding the ways in which humanity is transforming for men, women and children alike. It is time for women to assert their voices as equal partners in the struggle for democracy, basic human rights, and social justice.

## Introduction:

All languages and cultures are in flux, so change is inevitable. The pace of change has been slower in Korea, but with globalization of technique-- a process whereby humans are required to accommodate to machines rather than the other way around-- change is coming at the rate of the microchip. This can cause great confusion as witnessed by numerous social problems such as suicide among youth, divorce and break down of the family, on the negative side, and more freedom for women on the positive side.

Critical pedagogy and multiculturalism, feminism, critical race theory - demonstrate how all cultures are damaged in some way. The dominant paradigm of patriarchy stems from an ancient contract born out of necessity whereby women agreed to subservient roles to ensure the survival of the species. (Lerner, 1986) This social contract between man and woman has

never been renegotiated despite the changing of conditions and technological advances, which make it no longer necessary for the hunters to be the only ones to venture forth and the nurturers to remain behind, keeping the home fires burning. Men, who were larger and stronger, used to walk in front of women so they would be the first to encounter and confront any danger along the path. These arrangements soon became habitus (done without question) and turned into traditions that today, have long outlived their usefulness in most civilized societies, yet we find it persists out of automaticity engrained through received cultures.

Most feminists would argue it is time for renegotiation of the subservient role of women, as it is obsolete in the modern contexts we now live in. In working with radical, multicultural feminists in Israel, they explained that their position is engagement in a life long struggle until not a single woman is oppressed and equality among all human beings is realized.

It is increasingly apparent that each generation has to engage in similar struggles of preceding generations as the struggle against habitus moves slowly toward more and more equal worldviews across genders.

Notice how widows were to remain widows in past generations and divorce was unthinkable, yet today in Korea, widows may re-marry, and women may divorce their partners if it is obvious the relationship is toxic. And they can do so with less and less stigma attached to their claims on a better way of living. Women are more mobile today than they were, more educated, and more vocal in asserting their rights.

Given that all cultures are damaged in some way, quite often in relation to oppression or repression of one group by another, it follows that all cultures can be improved upon. However, cultural work cannot be done by outsiders. It must involve a process of negotiation and conscientization of all groups affected by inequalities and injustices.

In America, it used to be illegal to teach a slave to read. I am convinced that literacy and scholarship hold the potential, which can eventually lead to liberation, but this cannot occur without deliberate action. It cannot be confrontational nor should one group plead with the other. Empowerment is not something given by the oppressor, it is something insisted

upon by the oppressed. The process involves extensive dialogue to arrive at a position of defining our non-negotiables. Any culture predicated upon the voice of the oppressor and the silence of the oppressed is unbalanced and out of harmony. Henry David Thoreau stated, "Most men live lives of quiet desperation." We can extend his argument to women as well. What mother, looking upon her newborn child, regardless of gender, would say, I hope my child's life is full of quiet desperation? Yet, mothers are often the strongest influence in laying down traditions that have worked against females, not just through their words, but through the examples of their lived realities. A submissive mother is teaching vicariously the gender roles for her offspring, male and female as they slowly conform to cultural patterns and expectations.

A mother who is active, mobile, educated and deliberate about her own self-actualization as a non-negotiable is teaching her children in transformative ways. According to Vonnegut:

Feminists have won a few modest successes in the United States during the past two decades, so it has become almost obligatory to say that the differences between the two sexes have been exaggerated. But this much is clear to me: Generally speaking, women do not like immoral technology nearly as much as men do. This could be the result of some hormone deficiency. Whatever the reason, women, often taking their children with them, tend to outnumber men in demonstrations against schemes and devices which can kill people. In fact, the most effective doubter of the benefits of unbridled technological advancement so far was a woman, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly, who died 134 years ago. She, of course, created the idea of the Monster of Frankenstein (1991: 119).

Part of the process of any liberation is the education of the oppressor, often through the struggles of the oppressed. Hegemony is a dance between the two, but it is usually the oppressed that stop in the steps of daily life to declare they do not like the music. This is seen in protests and strikes when it is peaceful, and abrupt revolutions, often bloody, when it is not. The massacre at Gwang Ju in 1980 is a clear demonstration of the oppressor trying to force his will unnaturally against his own people, even when they were demonstrating peacefully. The memorial park there is a tribute to the valiant citizens who refused to buckle under the brute force of a dictatorship. Democracy was their non-negotiable and they were willing to die for it. These are the heroes of modern day Korea and many today are enjoying a freedom these innocent, and socially conscious citizens stood for, armed only with

their courage and convictions that the Korean people could rise to a better expression of humanity than living under an ignorant and arrogant tyrant. Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1943) stated it well: "the quality of a nation's character is wordlessly depicted in the heroes it chooses to admire." I doubt there is a memorial in Korea for this dictator, but history has clearly absolved the brave students, professors and citizens of Gwang Ju who only found equality in death.

All advances in a society come from struggle initiated by an awakening oppressed class of people. In the case of women, men need to learn of the benefits to society both collectively and individually. An independent woman is happier, less frustrated, and a better partner. Men can enjoy the same tenderness with their babies that women have gleaned as a major benefit of being the primary caregiver of the family. Men and women should not be in compromised situations; rather they should work in complementary roles to ensure the healthy transformation of culture to a more efficient model, which celebrates the diverse talents, perspectives, and qualities of each member. Feminism is not about the masculinization of the feminine as much as it is about the feminization of the masculine. In strict patriarchal societies, the shaping of masculinity is a denial of certain human qualities: permission to cry in public, active participation in raising children, compassion for our fellow human beings, and in cases of armed conflict permission to kill one's enemy without remorse, and often with joy. Maintaining human qualities we are all capable of from birth requires a deliberate shaping of males and females into sensitive adults who recognize complementary relationships across genders. Aldous Huxley stated the challenge of men succinctly in reference to one of his characters:

There was native intelligence there and native kindness; there was sensitiveness, generosity, a spontaneous decency of impulse and reaction. Charming and beautiful qualities! The pity was that by themselves and undirected as they were by a right knowledge of the nature of things, they should be so impotent for good, so inadequate to anything a reasonable man could call salvation. Fine gold, but still in the ore, unsmelted, unworked. Some day, perhaps, the boy would learn to use his gold. He would have to wish to learn first—and wish also to unlearn a lot of things he now regarded as self-evident and right. (1939: 113).

A pedagogical awareness would recognize a process of unlearning as a fundamental

characteristic of transformational praxis. Media literacy is another basic skill required to filter and protect youth from the forces of propaganda.

Presently, some change is due to corporate agendas designed to put consumerism at the center of our lives. Often these agendas are affected beyond the scope of our awareness and comprehension. The main mechanism of the shaping and control of human behavior in consumer societies is technology in a variety of forms working together to distract us from larger questions about living richer, more meaningful lives.

Some unpredictable changes are occurring even beyond the control of those who are setting the agendas. The consequences of corporate media, technologically controlled lives, and consumerism as a way of life are becoming increasingly apparent as people are unfulfilled by superficial behaviors intended solely for the neoliberal purpose of generating financial profits.

As materialism becomes central, the resulting spiritual and intellectual bankruptcy has led to a feeling of emptiness for many. It is hard to ignore increasing numbers of people who are medicated, depressed, malnourished by poor diets, detached from nature, stressed out, and no longer interested or able to search for meaningful ways to self actualize. The growing rates of suicide, slaughter in schools, malls, theatres and other public places, the breakdown of families, the abuse of drugs and alcohol are some of the warning signs that all is not well in the human family.

The critical pedagogical response is through dialectical encounters, so thoughtful and concerned citizens can begin to see options available to protect children from the agendas of corporations, and to explore alternative ways of living that have led to deeper satisfaction for many people who became alienated by, and discouraged with, consumerism.

## Participation of Women as Full Citizens

I would argue that all cultures are damaged cultures, meaning they can all be improved upon. The subsistence cultures of the world have the longest history of figuring things out and generally have a better record of living in balance with nature, than do consumer

cultures. In any case, coming from the most damaged culture suffering from the heaviest influences of marketing, propaganda and consumerism, brought on by the forces of neoliberalism, I would be the first to admit it is up to each culture to sort out its progress towards democratic ideals. What I can say about America is that, while we are burdened with many of the ills caused by consumerism, it is still a country of great potential because of the incredible diversity of its people.

Korea is a country of monoculturalism in many ways, yet it is also bending under the weight of capitalism and consumerism. It has been argued that the purest expressions of Korean traditions are to be found in North Korea, which is less globalized than the modernized south. As South Korea becomes increasingly westernized some difficult challenges must be faced in determining which of those aspects of Korean culture should be protected and maintained at any cost, and which can be modified to improve upon the social experiment.

It is necessary to recognize the tremendous influence of Confucianism on Korean society, but to do so critically to assess ways in which this influence is positive, but also ways in which it is detrimental to progress. My personal experiences in Korea have been extremely positive in so many ways. I enjoy the kindness of the people, their hospitality and respectful nature, their orderly way of getting things done. The scholars I have worked with are gentlemen in the best sense of the word. Yet, I cannot ignore the patriarchal inheritance of Confucianism that relegates women to second-class citizenship as evidenced by the under representation of women in college faculties.

Living as a guest in Korean households and sharing with women who play a central role in their families, it is apparent that their responsibilities require much sacrifice of their own wishes, dreams, and desires. I don't claim to be an expert on the subject, so I would suggest that these are topics to be discussed among Koreans of both genders in an honest exchange with equality of representation of all voices concerned and across generations as well.

Signs of change and threats to culture in Korea are part of the consequences of globalization. The sound diet of Korean food has a history of thousands of years, but can it

withstand the forces of marketing, and fast food "chic" portrayed in American movies and popular culture? Will Korea follow America into the abyss of childhood obesity and type-two diabetes? In fashion, will Korean children follow the craze of deafening music, tattooing and piercing their bodies, drug and alcohol abuse? The prevalence of I-pods, smart phones, and social media is already evident. Many young people walk college campuses and the Disneyland type amusement parks of consumerism across the street from their universities, seemingly more interested in distractions than the classes they are taking. Consumer patterns and the hectic pace of life have led to the disappearance of study and leisure time. Increasingly, grandparents are no longer just members of extended families; they are becoming surrogate parents for their grandchildren. Mobility of career-oriented women has required an abdication of their roles as mothers. If a sharing of roles across genders were possible, both parents could take responsibility for raising their children.

Having studied and lived through a paradigm shift which is still in progress in America - both North America, and more recently in Latin America - I would say the struggle for equality of opportunity and responsibility has not been without its challenges. Perhaps a lot can be learned from the social experiments under way in other parts of the world to avoid some of the mistakes already committed by others. Korea has the opportunity to profit from mistakes elsewhere to make the transition from a gender-biased society to one that recognizes, respects and capitalizes upon the strengths each gender has to offer to the common effort for a more humane society.

As I have studied the movement of feminism over the years I have come to the conclusion that equality requires the conscientization of both genders in order to reach a balanced society where every citizen has an equal share of opportunities and responsibilities. One mistake in earlier attempts at feminism was the idea that women should begin taking on men's jobs as an expression of equality. It became common to see women driving large trucks and buses, or working in jobs requiring physical strength. Corporate models require women to become patriarchal in order to advance in the power structure. I am not opposed to women working in physically demanding jobs if these are jobs they wish for and are able to do. However, conforming to patriarchal, authoritarian ideologies in management roles is a waste of feminine talent, and an impoverishment of the diversity they then only represent physically. Macedo (1994) refers to this as the politics of representation without the



representation of politics. We see this as tokenism with regard to race and class as well as gender in the United States. In the Disney film, the Little Mermaid, in order for her to get legs she must surrender her voice. This is a symbolic representation of the price patriarchy requires women to pay in order to gain social mobility.

Clearly, in order for an eloquent resolution of balance across genders -- if this seems like a reasonable goal -- a critical effort must be made towards the "feminization of the masculine." I believe Confucianism is not antithetical to this notion. Men must become nurturing, caring, and engaged partners in the daily routines of the household. Fathers should begin to play a more active role in the education of their children, the preparation of meals, the cleaning up chores of the home, etc. in order to lighten the load carried mostly by the mothers. Men would soon discover that much of the work presently done by mothers might lead to stronger bonds of tenderness and intimacy with their children should they begin to read bedtime stories, attend to their children when they have nightmares, or need a glass of water, when they are sick, when they wet the bed, as well as getting their children ready for school in the morning. Men often miss such moments of closeness as they leave such "interruptions" to their wives. Many do not know the full range of joys of fatherhood until they are grandparents, and I have heard several men --traditionally acculturated in sexist societies --express remorse for the opportunities they missed with their own children.

America is a country of feminine consciousness even though we still do not enjoy equal rights across the sexes. Women continue to earn eighty cents on the dollar in comparison to men doing the same work. Still progress is undeniable. Sexual harassment in the workplace is no longer tolerated the way it had been in the past. Some women have been bold enough to take on roles of leadership without compromising their feminine strengths. They serve as good role models for other young women who aspire to lead. We have stay-at-home fathers (Mr. Mom) who take full responsibility for the household while the wife is employed as the breadwinner outside of the home. We have many more women represented in college faculties and in educational administration roles, reaching more balanced proportions.

Beyond tokenism, it is clear that the female form is not the only requirement for equality. Mobility without the feminine voice is not progress, but the illusion of progress. Women

need to be competent and confident in their roles as wage earners and professionals, without sacrificing their feminine strengths and talent.

Hegemony is a dance between the oppressor and the oppressed. While I am in no position to judge whether Korean women are oppressed, I would say things could be more balanced as far as opportunity and responsibility are concerned. As Korea becomes more and more westernized and globalized, issues of gender equality must be part of the discussion. The social contract of patriarchy will need to be renegotiated if women are to gain access to more intellectual participation in the emerging transformations that are inevitable. Every citizen should have a voice in what is too dear and too essential to the Korean heritage, and what needs to change for the better. Equality is not a loss for men or a victory for women. Society as a whole will benefit from the maximum use of each citizen's strengths and talents regardless of class, gender or sexual orientation. Women will make the greatest transformations. According to Catherine Bateson:

Today, the materials and skills from which a life is composed are no longer clear. It is no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations. This is true for both men and women, but it is especially true for women, whose whole lives no longer need to be dominated by the rhythms of procreation and the dependencies that these created, but who still must live with the discontinuities of female biology and still must balance conflicting demands. Our lives not only take new directions; they are subject to repeated redirection, partly because of the extension of the years of our health and productivity. Just as the design of a building or of a vase must be rethought when the scale is changed, so must the design of our lives. Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment (1989: 2).

Wisdom is manifold and the layers of every society should be recognized and respected for contributions made for the benefit of all. Without the farmer, there is no food. Without engineers there are no transportation systems. Without professors there can be no professional development. But without women, there would be no children! Women give birth to cities, nations, and future leaders. It is time for them to claim their rights to be full participating members of humanity with equal opportunities to explore their human potentials. These rights

have to be fought for through the democratic struggle because those seeming to benefit from the present patriarchal system may resist changes toward equality. It is time to unlearn what holds all of us back. Feminization of the masculine represents an effort to educate men about the benefits of feminism without masculinization.

I wish to conclude with an appreciation for gentle, humble scholars written by one of my heroes, Pearl S. Buck:

Meanwhile, I like very much to be in the company of the learned, deservedly or not. They are truly learned men and therefore without conceit or bombast. They are simple in manner, kind and mildly humorous, and they are careful not to wound one another. This is because they are civilized as learning alone can civilize the human being (1954: 338).

## Bibliography

- Bateson, M. C. 1989. *Composing a Life*. NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Buck, P. S. 1954. *My Several Worlds*. NY: John Day Company.
- Canfield Fisher, D. 1943. Editor's Introduction. P. 15. *What Men Live By*. A Collection of Short Stories by Leo Tolstoy. NY: Pantheon books, Inc.
- Huxley, A. 1939. *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. Chicago: Elephant Paperback Edition, 1993.
- Lerner, G. 1986. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Macedo, D. 1994. *Literacies of power: What Americans are Not Allowed to Know*. CO:Westview Press.
- Minnich, E. 1990. *Transforming Knowledge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Vonnegut, K. 1991. *Fates Worse than Death*. NY: The Berkeley Publishing Group  
(Original speech 1985 M.I.T.)



[12 한국여성학회 대학원생 여름캠프]

# ‘나’를 넘어 ‘우리’로: 차이의 정치와 다문화적 연대

2012년 8월 24일(금)~25일(토)  
한림대학교

주최 한국여성학회

주관 서울대학교 여성연구소, 한림대학교 사회조사연구소

후원 

문의 02)880-6449, kwss21@hanmail.net, <http://www.kaws.or.kr>

