Latin American Feminist Philosophy

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In its early forms worldwide, feminism advocated equality of rights between women and men. Although Latin American feminists were no exception, they distinguished themselves from their European and North American peers by also insisting, from the outset, on fundamental differences between the sexes – a view now mainstream among feminists in the West. Latin American feminism has also been distinctive in its struggle against the Latin culture of *machismo* (from *macho* – literally, “male”). In Latin America, this is the term of choice for the social and cultural tendency to underestimate women’s achievements and capabilities and to overrate those of men. Owing to machismo, even women of unquestioned ability, such as Clorinda Matto de Turner (Peruvian, 1852-1909), Alfonsina Storni (Argentinean,1892-1938), and Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907-1954), faced obstacles in their careers.

That this bitter legacy of male dominance affects the lives of nearly all Latina women today is beyond dispute. But the phenomenon can trace its historic roots to the Spanish conquest, which conferred a tacit entitlement on the Iberian invaders in failing to stop their common abusive practices toward native women. The relationship between the Spaniard Hernán Cortez (1495-1547) and Doňa Marina or “La Malinche,” one of twenty Indian women presented to him as human “gifts,” is a notorious example. She traveled with Cortez as his companion and translator of the native languages – thus becoming instrumental in the fall of the Aztecs and ultimately of Mexico itself. The case of Malinche has achieved a certain iconic status among Latin American women, who have been assigned subservient roles for centuries.

Even so, there is in Latin America also a long tradition of women’s vigorous defense of equal rights. A pioneer among them was Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695). Often referred to today as ‘the Tenth Muse’ and ‘the Phoenix of Mexico,’ Sor Juana was a Mexican nun of considerable accomplishments as a poet and playwright. Together with her scientific and philosophical interests, unusual for a woman at the time, these achievements gained her a wide reputation in colonial Mexico. Her erudition, learned conversation, and literary talent impressed the participants of animated *tertulias* which often included prominent intellectuals and leaders of the local society. The Church’s unofficial criticisms of her intellectual activities as inappropriate for a woman were rejected by Sor Juana in her *Reply to Sor Philothea*. This is at once a feminist manifesto and also a memoir describing the development of her passion for learning. It is perhaps the earliest modern vindication of women’s intellectual competence and rights.

Contemporary Latin American feminists have also struggled tenaciously for equal rights, focusing, through the1990s, on a strategy of grassroots organizing. But both traditionalist and progressive male political leaders have continued to resist these efforts, the former appealing to conventionalist and religious arguments, the latter holding that feminist concerns are less pressing than other problems facing Latin American society (Álvarez, 1998). Today Latin American feminists pursue a more global, top-down strategy, through *NGO*s and the United Nations. Although considerable progress has been made, independent-minded women in Latin America continue to feel stifled in a machista society that ignores their capacity for achievement and restricts them to subservient roles, as attested in the work of Rigoberta Menchú (Quiché-Guatemalan, b.1959) and Gloria Anzaldúa (Mexican American, 1942-2004). The repudiation of machismo is also echoed by the “liberation philosophers” Ofelia Schutte, Linda Alcoff, and Enrique Dussel, who hold that there can be no liberation of society without the liberation of women.

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