



## ***The Effect of Immigrant Experiences on the Bifurcation of Women's Consciousness***

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*Marx believed that through labor, human kind would be able to realize its "species-being," i.e., its potential for creative and purposeful activity through work. What Marx envisioned was the use of labor for the enhancement of human life beyond material necessity, for the creation of a society in which aesthetic as well as material needs could be fulfilled. Labor could potentially provide such an opportunity, for it allowed persons to display creative and purposeful activity through their work under the right conditions. (Farganis 24)*

Thinking back to my childhood, I remember observing my mom getting up early in the morning to make sure my brother and sister were ready for school. She would check their school uniforms to make sure they were clean and neatly ironed. In the same way she would check their shoes to make sure they were clean and shiny. The previous night, before going to bed, she would check their homework for errors

and neatness. I was off the hook for a while, since I was younger than my brother and sister by four and five years respectively, but eventually I became part of the checking routine.

My mom was not a stay at home mom like many Latin American women. She was a working mother, partly for necessity and partly to fulfill her dream of being a professional as she used to say. For her, work was more than a means to gain a salary; it was a way to demonstrate her potential. Before, I didn't understand what my mom meant when she said she felt "fulfilled" by her work. Marx, as remembered by James Farganis in the quote above, knew exactly what this feeling is, it's the feeling that we are creative beings and that we have potential for something great. In the same way, it's the feeling experienced deep inside us, of having a purpose in life, knowing that we are here in this world not just by a random error but because we are meant to be here.

My mother would not have been able to do what she did, had she been born a couple of decades earlier. For example, my grandmother, a very intelligent woman, was not able to finish high school because she had to take care of her younger siblings while her parents managed the family business. The movie *Billy Elliot* shows a similar situation. Billy, a young teenage boy, has to assume the responsibility of taking care of his elderly grandmother while his father and brother work. In a way, this makes me think that in times of great need and uncertainty common attitudes are put aside. Billy's father was going through a strike situation where his older son was also involved. This was not a time to be considerate towards his younger son who should have been enjoying his childhood, instead of taking care of his grandmother.

My great grandparents were also going through a difficult time with their business and both had to work. It didn't matter that my grandmother was just a teenage girl;

she had to assume the responsibility of taking care of her siblings even if that meant giving up school. A couple of years later she got married and wanted to go back to school and later find a job but her husband told her that as long as he was alive she would never have to work, therefore, school was not a priority. For him her most important job was at home taking care of their children. My grandfather was not a mean, controlling man; he was very gentle and loving towards my grandmother and their children. He just expressed and followed the **social norms** that he had learned while growing up. It was customary that women stayed home taking care of their children. Sometimes we forget that society is all around us, influencing and shaping who we are. This brings to mind, what **Durkheim**, so eloquently said, “we know of its existence because society exercises control over our behavior, as rules of conduct, as laws, as customs, and as norms and values that we believe in and that shape our conscience and make us part of a collectively” (Durkheim, in Farganis 55). At the time when my grandparents married, women worked only if it was extremely necessary and usually the male was seen as a failure for not being able to provide sufficiently for his wife and family.

My grand parents’ situation also exemplifies **Parsons’ theory of action**, which includes the **pattern variables** to account for the categorization of expectations and the structure of relationships. According to Parsons, people are like actors who are oriented towards goals but have to fulfill certain conditions defined by established expectations. Parsons labeled relationships in traditional societies, for example the society my great grandparents lived in as **expressive** because they were personal and informal. In the same way, he labeled relationships in modern society as **instrumental** because they are impersonal and formal for the most part. So, when he analyzed **sex roles** in the family he concluded “the in-

strumental leadership role must be accorded to the father-husband, on whom the reputation and income of the family depend” (Wallace and Wolf, 31). In the same way, “because of the occupational responsibilities of the father, the mother must take on the expressive leadership role in the socialization of the children” (Wallace and Wolf, 31). Personally, I would say Parsons’ idea of expressive and instrumental relationships related to sex roles in the family are outdated and untrue. Women are very capable of finding jobs that will support the whole family and men are also able to take in their hands the responsibility of taking care of their children. But, putting myself in the shoes of my grandparents when they were young back then, I would say that it perfectly illustrates what people thought the roles of men and women were. It’s important to say that this point of view holds true for some cultures in our present time and the Hispanic culture is a good example. The Hispanic culture is basically still a **patriarchal** society. Men can do whatever they want and women can’t. Men have economic and political power and women have to conform to low paying jobs, which results in a low **socioeconomic status**.

But fortunately those behaviors, rules of conduct, customs, norms, values and so forth are open to change and not etched in stone. This means that as human beings change, society is shaped accordingly. When my mother was young, my grandmother encouraged her to go to college and become a professional. My mother married my father just a year after she finished high school. Pretty soon, their first child was on the way, my sister and later my brother. Even with two babies at home and a full time job, my mother tried to go to evening classes at a nearby college. She did this for a semester, but soon she realized she could not do it any more. We lived in a big city but in the neighborhood everybody knew everybody’s business. All of a sudden, people started talking about my mom and how she

left her two infants alone with my grandmother the whole day. Jennifer Dutcher in her essay "A precarious Balance: Views of a Working Mother Walking the Tightrope" (2003), uses **Simmel's** idea that "small town life rests upon more deeply felt and emotional relationships" to illustrate that she felt compelled to satisfy her family and community with her actions (82). My mother also felt compelled to please her community, her neighbors, people who had seen her grow up and who expected her to be a good mother even if that meant giving up her idea of a career. She decided to dedicate her time to her family and children and thought of eventually resuming her education. Five years later when I was born, it seemed even more difficult for my mother to go back to school but still she had to try. My father is a good man who helped her and was very patient, but unfortunately people started talking about my mom and how little time she dedicated to her family. Once again, she had to give up her dream of becoming a professional.

We migrated to this country mainly for political reasons and partly because my parents wanted us to have a better future in a free country, where we would not fear for our safety. My older sister was fifteen years old, my brother was fourteen and I was ten when we arrived. At first, it was very difficult for my brother and sister to learn a new language, **adapt to a new culture** and change their social behavior. Gradually, they learned that what was "cool" in our country was old fashioned in this country. In the same way, they had to readjust their wardrobes in order to "fit in." For me, the change went more smoothly. I was still a young girl and using my, what George Herbert **Mead** calls, the **emergent self** it was easier for me to create new **selves** that adapted to the new society in which I was living. My brother and sister had already created their selves or the sense of who they were; therefore, it was more difficult for them to readjust. Failure to readjust to the

new culture could have resulted in a feeling of **alienation**. P. Heim described this feeling of separation in her essay, "Alien Nation" (2002). She says "there were times in high school when I felt like an outsider and had low self-esteem" (36). According to her essay, I would say she felt alienated because she had different points of view or attitudes among people with whom she nevertheless shared a similar cultural background. But, if my brother and sister didn't conform to the new society they would feel alienated because they were from a different cultural background, which adds issues of racism and discrimination to the sense of alienation.

Although we never experienced **racism** or **discrimination** like William Wang recounts in his essay, "My Asian American Experience" (2002), we knew of its existence. William Wang related an episode when his father "arrived at the store to open it and found graffiti all over the front gate of the store... racial epithets were scattered throughout .... Remarks such as, "Get out chinks" and Chinaman go home" were quite devastating to my father" (75). This is a real firsthand account of racism. According to Hurst, "color continues to be a highly significant criterion defining the position of a group in the U.S. ethnic hierarchy" (Hurst 136). This kind of experience only increases the feeling of alienation and fear in immigrants. In the same way, it promotes inequality between groups in relation to their social status.

The American culture places great emphasis on **social status** and how they are **symbolically** represented. In other words, what you wear, the way you speak, the mannerisms you use, the town where you live, shows your position in the social scale. Some immigrants place a greater emphasis on this than others. For example, a cousin of mine came here when she was fourteen years old. She finished high school and went to college, very similar to what my sister did. The great difference is that my

cousin was never encouraged to speak Spanish and actually was encouraged to completely immerse herself into the American culture. She is the prototype of what an American woman is or should be. She is a professional; married a professional man and both have excellent salaries and work full time. They have a beautiful home, two cars, two girls, two cats and a dog. She does not speak Spanish anymore and in the same way, does not encourage her daughters to speak Spanish. All of her friends are Americans and she doesn't even speak in Spanish to her mother who is an elderly woman with limited English vocabulary. My cousin sends her daughters to private school and has them signed up for three extracurricular activities after school. When her daughters are not in school or after school activities, they spend their time at home with a baby-sitter. Now, by the American standards, she is doing the right thing. Her children are going to an excellent Catholic school, they have anything they want, and they are well-rounded girls who know how to play the piano, the violin and how to dance ballet. But, are they learning respect and the importance of family values? I'm afraid they are not.

As I said earlier, we live in a society where material possessions are more important than family values. In the PBS documentary *Affluenza*, we are exposed to the truth that many know but nobody talks about. We are a materialistic society where shopping centers have become the center of people's lives. We believe that material possessions are going to make us feel better about who we are, when in reality, all these temples of consumerism do is mask the emptiness inside us. Modern society has twice as many material possessions as it did in the 1950's and still fewer people consider themselves happy. This is a result of **capitalism** where seeking private property, wealth, and profit as ends in themselves are encouraged. In the same way, as **Weber** says, "capitalism has become a rational sys-

tem, an '**iron cage**' in which people have become money-making instruments" (Farganis 91). With so much money, people have nothing else to do but spend it. Now, companies are targeting children and teenagers with their advertisements by ads and games that will teach them to be consumers. The increase in material possessions is breaking up families because mother and father have to work twice as much so that they can provide everything their family needs. Accordingly, they spend less time with their children and therefore become alienated from them. Even if the parent spends time at home, there are so many material possessions in the home that everybody is in their own room doing something different.

In my cousin's house, there are four TVs, one for each family member; there are two computers, one in the living room and the other in the older daughter's room. This brings to mind what Charles Hurst said in *Living Theory* (2000): "internet usage over time resulted in decreases in family communication and maintenance of social relationships and increases in loneliness and depression" (Hurst 53). Children spend more time in front of a computer than with their parents. In the same way, "greater use of the internet is also encouraged by a sense of security bred by the apparent anonymity of communication among a multitude of strangers" (Hurst 53). Earlier I said that one of the roles of parents was to **socialize** the child; in other words, to show and teach her or him how society is structured. If parents fail to do this at home, then who is going to do it? Many parents think that the educational system is responsible for teaching their children how to behave and what constitutes moral behavior. But as Durkheim argued, "moral behavior requires *discipline*. Such discipline makes both social order and a meaningful goal-oriented existence for the individual possible" (Hurst 85). The main goal of the school system is to teach children academic material but moral val-

ues are not a priority.

I believe that some teachers are truly concerned with accomplishing both tasks but the majority are not. Math teachers can't spend their class time talking about respect and moral values instead of teaching children how to add and subtract. In the same way, if parents fail to convey moral values to their children, teachers will have trouble "commanding respect in the classroom." It has been suggested that "a majority of parents have only some or little confidence in the educational system." (Hurst 86) I believe the problem is not entirely in the educational system. The presence of parents at home is extremely important for the development of morale. I did not first learn that I had to be polite towards my teachers at school; I was taught by my mother that I had to respect my teachers. My mother used to tell me that teachers were like parents to us and that we had to treat them accordingly.

As a Spanish teacher in a Catholic school, I find that children behave differently depending on the amount of time they spend with their parents. On the one hand, children whose parents spend time with them are regularly better behaved than children whose parents spend less time with them. It's reasonable to say that children who spend more time with their parents have a model authority figure to emulate. On the other hand, children who spend less time with their parents have difficulty obeying an adult because they lack the figure of authority at home. Usually, if parents spend little time at home, like my cousin, they make up for it by indulging their children with anything they want. For Christmas, my cousin's daughters are given ten to fifteen gifts each. They open the gifts, look at them, put them aside and then add them to their already full closets. Sometimes they don't even get to play with all their gifts in one year. In the same way, there are promised lavish prizes if they do well in school, again, teaching them that ul-

timately everything comes down to material goods. What happened to the idea of learning in order to be a better person? Humans are capable of rational thinking, of deciding what is good or bad, in terms of **intrinsic values** of things, not just for **extrinsic rewards**. This subject has been studied, among others, by **rational choice** theorists in sociology. We are conditioning our children to be materialistically rationalizing and calculating by giving them extrinsic rewards in order to obtain a desired behavior instead of teaching them to think and rationalize why it is important to learn. At the end of the documentary *Affluenza*, a list of preventive actions is given and one of those actions is teaching our children that money and material possessions are not going to fill their inner self with happiness. Happiness is found in **voluntary simplicity** and a better family life.

Since I was little, I observed very closely what my siblings and friends did and later decided what I like and dislike about their behavior and tried to incorporate it or avoid it accordingly. If my brother or sister did something that my parents didn't like, I tried to avoid it. In the same way, if they did something that pleased them, I tried to incorporate it into my behavior. I guess that is the advantage of being the youngest in the family. My sister has always been a role model for me and she exemplifies the qualities of a young intelligent woman. When she finished high school, she went on to college with the intention of getting her BA in management. While she was studying, she met a hard-working man, fell in love and decided to obtain her Associate's Degree instead and then married her boyfriend. Pretty soon their first-born child came and soon their second child was born. Although this country influenced my sister, she maintained strong ideologies from the Hispanic culture. The fact that she had her children at a young age and decided to be a housewife instead of a working mom is a good example of her strong Hispanic back-

ground. I admire her because she has no trouble with her identity. She sees herself as a Hispanic woman living in this country. Most of her friends are Hispanic and the way she thinks and the food she cooks reflect the way she sees herself. She is a loving mother who spends time with her children, keeps her house clean and neat and always has a warm meal ready for her husband when he comes back from work. In the American culture, she might be criticized for not fulfilling herself as a working mother. But, who says she is not working? Her housework should be considered respectable. This brings to mind an episode when a housewife was asked, what her occupation was, she answered: "Well, I am a chauffeur, a cook, a nurse, an accountant and a teacher." I believe she is right, being a housewife implies tremendous amounts of responsibility and energy. It's not correct to undermine the importance of the work of a housewife for our society and in the same way it is not fair to say that staying home does not fulfill women. I know that my sister is the happiest woman staying home because she can spend time with her children, she can see them grow and she does not feel guilty because she is with her children when they need her the most.

In the movie *Erin Brockovich*, Erin feels good because she has a job and is supporting her family. In her mind, she is doing it for the well being of her children. But, she finds herself emotionally distraught when her boyfriend tells her that her baby girl spoke her first word and she missed it. I think that what made her feel worst was the fact that her little girl's first word was "ball" instead of "mom." It's a very difficult task to juggle work and family especially for a single mother. When Erin's boy was arguing with her as to when she was going to take him to a sporting practice, she answered that she didn't know because she didn't have time. His remark was that in his friend's home, his mom took him to practice. Erin's answer was that his friend had

both parents at home; so deciding who was going to take him to practice was not a big deal. Erin was working and managing her family at the same time so it was more difficult for her. Being a single parent is very difficult and I think it carries the same problems that parents have when both work. When Erin is able to earn a salary, she goes out with her children to buy them toys. In a way I think she was making up for the time away from them.

All my life, my family and a close circle of friends have protected me. I have been pampered as the youngest daughter and the youngest sister. I was never expected to be responsible except for school-work. I think that in a way, I was living in a **Matrix**, a world where we think we are in control but we are not. I especially like the scene in the film *The Matrix* where Neo is seen being fed intravenously. He is sleeping, his eyes have never been open, his muscles never been used. He is waking up for the first time. This is how I felt a year and a half ago when my husband and I decided to marry. It was the first time I had to think about getting a job, the first time I was in charge of managing a household, and the first time I had to get up when the alarm went off and not when my mom came into my room to wake me up. And curiously, it was the first time I questioned my role as a woman. During the first few weeks of marriage, I felt awkward cooking and cleaning the house. I thought to myself, "I have never done this, why am I doing it now?" In part I was doing it because I felt like that was expected of me because I am Hispanic. But, my experience of growing up in the U.S. had led me to believe that I was American and that I didn't have to cook like my sister did, but that it was something to be shared with my husband. I had seen my cousin and her husband, and they both share the responsibility of making breakfast and supper. This is when I realized that my role as a woman was still not completely specified. If I felt that I was a Hispanic woman I shouldn't

question why I was cooking. I don't see my sister questioning herself as to why she stayed home and why she cooks. In the same way, I don't see my cousin questioning why she goes to work and why she leaves her daughters with a stranger.

When I'm with the Hispanic community many people ask me, "When are you having a baby? You have been married for a year and a half by now?" But when I'm in the American community, I'm encouraged to stay in school as long as possible because I'm young and it's not time to have children yet. In the same way, my American friends encourage me to teach my husband how to cook because he has to help. But when I talk to my mother, she tells me to prepare delicious food for my husband, to take care of him and to keep my house nice and clean. **Dorothy Smith** says "the very organization of the world that has been assigned to us as the primary locus of our being, shaping our projects and desires, is determined by and subordinate to the relations of society founded in a capitalist mode of production" (Farganis 380). I believe she is right about how women's consciousness under capitalism is often **bifurcated** due to the works done at home and work. In my case, this bifurcation is exacerbated by the pull of the different cultural traditions as well. I think I have been assigned two organizations of the world or two societies that have shaped who I am, that influence what I do and what I want. I have been influenced by two different societies and cultures and each pulls me in a different way. The fact that I'm still going to school and that I'm postponing motherhood is an indicator of the strong influence by the American culture. On the other hand, getting married at the age of twenty says a lot about the influence of my Hispanic heritage. It is very difficult for my American friends to understand why I got married so young. In this society, this is the time when young women are supposed to be having fun and going out. It's not a time when young wom-

en have to be responsible. When my husband told his friends about my age, everybody told him not to get married. They didn't know me but they knew that at twenty most women are not willing to seriously commit in a relationship. In this case, I think that my Hispanic background has helped me not to fall in the **stereotype** of the twenty-year-old woman. Now that his friends and coworkers know me, they realize that I'm not a party girl but a mature woman.

I also have an ethnic dilemma. When someone asks me the question, where are you from? My answer is, I am from Guatemala. But am I really from Guatemala? Does it matter that I have received most of my education and ideology in this country? What makes us to be from this country or the other? Is it that we were born there or that we grew up in that country? I don't have all the answers for those questions. But I do believe that as an immigrant woman I have the option of fully integrating myself to this society or of maintaining my cultural background. This is a central problem for many immigrants who come to this country as young children. I know I'm from Guatemala, but when I talk to my family members in Guatemala, I find that I don't use the same vocabulary they use, I don't have the same accent they have and many of our points of view differ. But then, the same thing happens when I talk to my American friends.

Instead of seeing this as a problem, I have decided to see this as an advantage. By having two cultural backgrounds, I have the opportunity of having a broader sense of the world, two different perspectives. I don't want to give up my cultural background like my cousin did; on the other hand, I don't want to feel alienated by not integrating myself into this culture. The best solution to my dilemma is to accept that I am influenced by two cultures and to try to keep the positive aspects of each culture and integrate them into my life as well

as learn from the negative aspects of each culture.

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