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Analytic Paper II

**Community:  
The Missing Link between Practical and Strategic Interests of Cuban Women**

Julie Shayne utilizes Maxine Molyneux's conception of practical and strategic interests to avoid the "tendency to categorize all women activists as feminists" (Shayne 2004: 5). Shayne describes this theoretical distinction as a difference between organizing to counter deficiencies from the gendered division of labor (practical interests) versus overtly organizing to counter systems of patriarchy (strategic interests). In this way, the concepts of practical and strategic interests are helpful for understanding not only what women organize around but why. However, exploring the case of women's roles in the Cuban Revolution, something seems to be missing within this theoretical frame. It is clear that women's activity in the Cuban Revolution did not strictly revolve around either of these interests, yet women were certainly active in these periods. In this paper, I propose that another element would greatly enhance the conception of practical and strategic interests and further allow us to understand what motivates women to organize together. By looking at the experience of women in Cuba, I identify an incentive for women's mobilization which stems from the power of human bonds and relationships rather than practical or strategic interests. I begin by identifying the ways in which Shayne admits that practical and strategic interests alone do not explain women's activity in Cuba, but contend that she does not go far enough in offering a supplemental concept to their application. I then pinpoint motives for women's involvement in the Cuban Revolution to suggest that practical and strategic interests would be enhanced conceptually by including a provision for what I term 'community interests'.

Shayne acknowledges that the Cuban case is unique in its nonconformity to the concepts of practical and strategic interests, but, in my opinion, does not adequately supplement these concepts to offer another explanation for women's organization. Shayne states, "many of the extremely militant and armed revolutionaries I spoke to in El Salvador and Cuba saw their actions as completely disconnected from feminism" (Shayne 2004: 5). To accommodate this, Shayne makes the distinction between female and feminist consciousness: "female consciousness is the bedrock of feminine mobilization, or that which strives to meet what Molyneux calls the 'practical' needs of women" (Shayne 2004: 4). In this way, while women may begin to organize around non-gendered practical interests such as survival or human rights, oftentimes a feminist consciousness may emerge after experiences are shared between women, turning once practical into strategic feminist interests. However, Shayne importantly notes that in the case of Cuba, women's practical needs by and large were met before and during the revolution which, "decreased the likelihood of feminist mobilization" (Shayne 2004: 6). Therefore, Shayne makes the case that women played a pivotal role in furthering the Cuban revolution, but did not themselves have a feminist revolution.

I will make the point that the Cuban case still provides an example of women organizing with women for a common purpose, simply around communal rather than practical or strategic interests. I further believe this third conceptual 'interest' must be present since there was a gendered division of labor as well as a patriarchal system that could have prompted women to mobilize. Shayne notes that Cuban women utilized the gendered division of labor and patriarchic culture to their own strategic advantage. These social institutions allowed them to move around under less suspicion and gave them moral authority over male opposition. Granted, within a socialist context, equality was not widely considered an issue for Cuban women, but it

still seems that a feeling of fighting for each other and in the interest of a larger human connection was present in women's activity in the Cuban Revolution. I will now elucidate what I refer to as 'community interests' through specific examples from women's roles and relationships during the Cuban Revolution.

Early on, women in the Cuban Revolution often played a role of connecting factions within the revolution bringing the movement together as a greater community. The women not only knew that it was essential to meet this community interest, but often saw that they were uniquely suited to accomplish it. One of the first organizations to form against Batista and in favor of the Cuban Revolution was the Marti Women's Civic Front started by Aida Pelayo and Carmen Castro in 1952 (Shayne 2004: 117). In Pelayo's words, the group's "platform was very simple: we demanded Batista's ouster and the establishment of a government responsive to our [the people's] needs" (quoted in Maloof 1999: 57; Shayne 2004:118). As a nonpartisan effort, the Marti Women's Civic Front sought to unite many different revolutionary groups. While they may have been working towards achieving practical interests, their motivation seems to spur from a greater connection to the larger revolutionary community and grassroots solidarity. Similarly, While Castro was in prison for several months in 1953, the movement was, "held together largely by women, including Haydee Santamaria, Melba Hernandez, Natalia Revuelta and Castro's sister Lidia" (Shayne 2004: 119). These women also built alliances with the Marti Women's Civic Front, Association of United Cuban Women and other anti-Batista groups. From these early examples of women's mobilization in the Cuban Revolution, we see a theme of unifying in the interest of alliances as well as connecting the larger revolutionary community for its own interest.

Overall, women in the Cuban Revolution seemed to be viewed as having a high concern for the interest of others and espousing very nurturing qualities, in general and amongst each other. Tete Puebla described Celia Sanchez as, “the soul of the Sierra Maestra, very capable, yet very sensitive to the needs of others...she was loved by all. Those of us who were guerilla fighters consider her the mother of the Rebel Army” (quoted in Waters 2003: 34; Shayne 2004: 122). Even though this is an example of just one female, clearly her awareness of community interests shaped other movement members around her as well as her contribution to the revolution. Women were also often acknowledged as the “emotional caretakers” of the revolution (Shayne 2004: 128). Marcel Garcia-Perez was in charge of a women’s front that kept families connected with their imprisoned husbands and fathers. She notes that these women, “gave social support to prisoners,” but also that “all women were related to one another in some way so their field of action was oriented not only toward their families but also toward other women” (quoted in Shayne 2004: 128). Shayne reasons that these women were not just organizing around doing “good deeds,” but were rather focused on the interest of feeding the morale of the movement and supporting each other. This sentiment clearly shows that not only were women concerned about the emotional interests of the movement, but they organized together to advance community interests and ultimately the longevity of the revolution.

Further, I contend that there are identifiable bonds between the women who organized in the insurrection and that their relationships made their passion and commitment to community interests stronger. Marcel Garcia-Perez’s quote above is a prime example of this sentiment. Another example is the Mariana Grajales Women’s Platoon, formed by Castro in 1958 to give desiring women an opportunity to fight in the armed struggle. Maria Antonia Carrillo speaks to her experience in the platoon saying, “It was a beautiful experience. We were all so united and

so in love with the Revolution. There weren't any bad feelings of rivalry or jealousy among us" (Shayne 2004: 120). The creation of this unit was further indicative of Castro's confidence in women and a demonstration of his commitment to women's equality (Shayne 2004: 121). Therefore, if women's practical and strategic needs were more or less being addressed, their motivation to mobilize seems to have sprouted from a desire to further community interests, as women but for each other and the greater good.

Additionally, though women played a wide range of strategic roles in the movement, at least one such role was to recruit and train other women. Elvira Vallina notes this function saying, "revolutionary women executed tasks and guided other women combatants in the actions that needed to happen" (quoted in Shayne 2004: 126). We see that women were not only interested in unifying the entire movement, but also bringing each other together. Since women were often transporting dangerous materials and putting their lives in danger, they organized around the interest of caring for and protecting each other when the risks were high (Shayne 2004: 127). In her interview with Betsy Maclean, Haydee Santamaria emphasizes this occurrence: "We risked such fine women *companeras* to bring in a few little pistols that could only be used for self-defense in the city. The need was great and there was no alternative, but it all fell far short of what was really needed" (quoted in Maclean 2003: 51). We see then that in these logistical cases, women organized each other for the interests of the revolutionary community and their deep commitment to furthering the movement.

It is the perspective of Haydee Santamaria which perhaps offers the most nuanced perspective on a commitment to community interests. Santamaria discusses the deep rooted personal connections organizers developed within the revolution. Since Santamaria worked often with other women, she developed lasting bonds with them but undeniably with their male

counter parts as well (Macclean 2003). She also notes the incredible solidarity she felt among families in Santiago for protecting movement members on November 30<sup>th</sup> (Macclean 2003: 35). It seems that as movement members organized around bonds and their connection to the greater community, the community in turn attempted to organize for the interests of the revolution. For Santamaria, it was Cuba and the Cuban people that seemed to inspire her commitment to the revolution. It was thinking of a free Cuba that kept her going even in times of great personal loss. Santamaria's perspective and her commentary on her fellow female revolution seem to show a desire not to advance practical or strategic interests, but rather a commitment to each other and the public interest at large.

However, some might counter argue that Cuban women organized not as women, but in favor of the revolution overall. Sheryl Lutjens explores the ways in which socialist ideology shaped the activity and roles of women not only during the revolution, but in the development of the socialist state (Lutjens 1995). She explores the ways in which the Federation of Cuban Women organized women in the interest of a socialist strategy, not around specifically women's issues. She notes a critique from Maxine Molyneux who argued that the socialist system resulted in, "no autonomous women's movement, and no feminist critique of socialist theory and policy...Official women's organizations mobilized women in the service of the economic and political goals of the state...They did not challenge state policy, or tackle the gender inequalities which survived the substantial social transformations" (quoted in Lutjens 1995: 107). It is clear that these women were socialists and that equality was heavily espoused within the movement, especially by Castro, thus making practical and strategic feminist interests less of a priority. However, I still argue that the illustrations given provide evidence that as socialists, women were connected not only to the greater socialist community but deeply in tune with the feminine

community. It was their feminine socialism which structured how and why they fought for the creation of the greater Cuban socialist state.

In conclusion, Gladys Marcel Garcia-Perez seems to summarize it well saying:

The insurrectional woman does not defend the project as the vanguard sector of the women's sector, but instead as part of this revolution that defends work, the right to work, the right for schooling. In other words, she defends a particular way of thinking; she defends certain laws that favor everyone, but does not propose this as part of the feminist movement. (quoted in Shayne 2004: 115).

We see that women as unifiers, caretakers, female-to-female trainers and relationship builders organized often around the community interests of the Cuban Revolution, defending public rather than purely feminist interests. It may be true that a socialist mentality caused Cuban women to strive for the interests of the socialist state. However, despite the lack of a feminist consciousness, a feminine solidarity was still present. Thus, the concept of practical and strategic interests in women's mobilization could be enhanced by a third frame of community interests.

Works Cited:

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