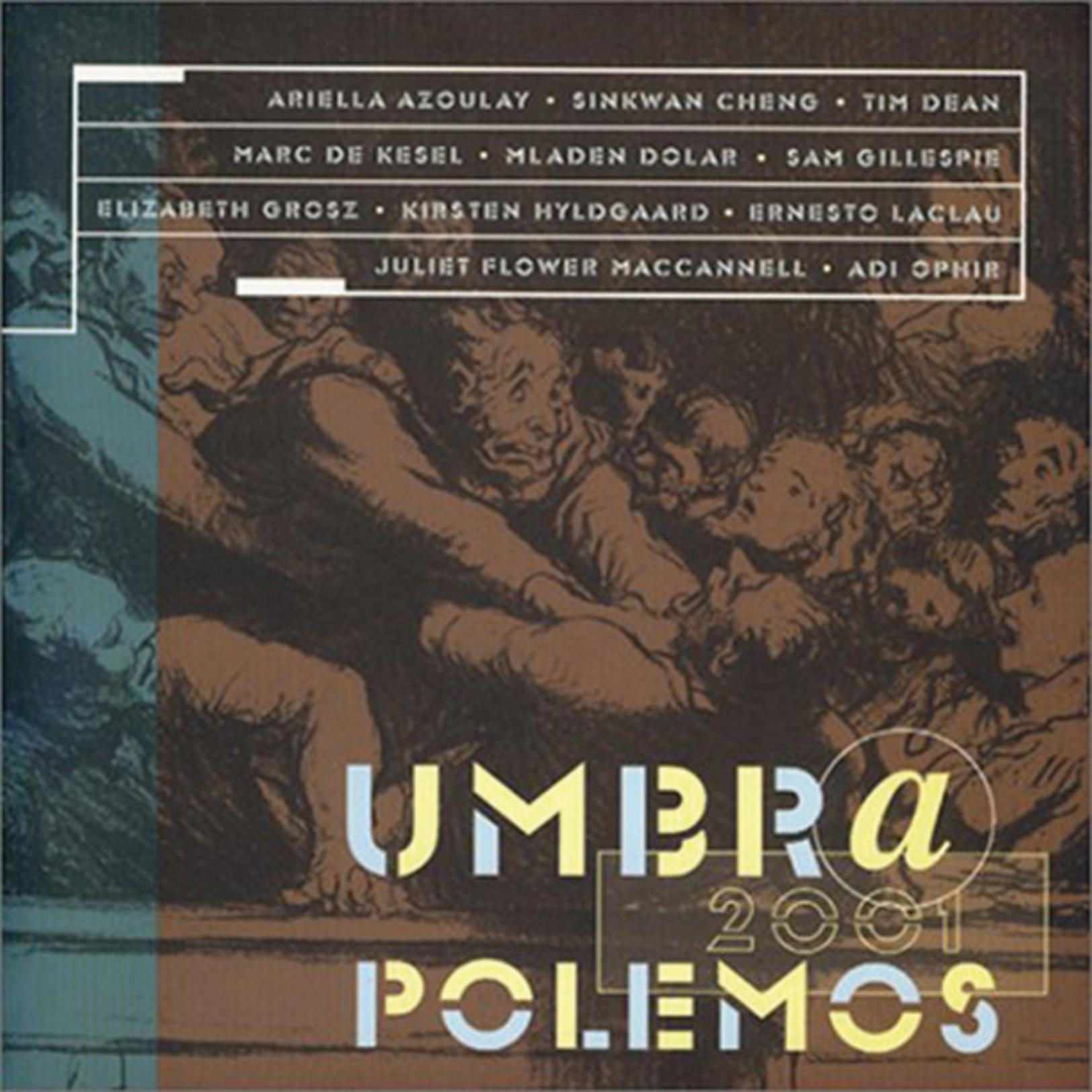


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BOOK REVIEWS

A PLEA FOR CIVILITY: AN ASIAN WOMAN'S REPLY TO SUSAN MOLLER OKIN'S "IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?"

sinkwan cheng

Susan Moller Okin's essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" has drawn enormous attention and triggered responses from major thinkers across genders, cultures, and disciplines, including Homi Bhabha, Martha Nussbaum, Joseph Raz, Will Kymlicka, Saskia Sassen, and Robert Post. Okin argues that "many (though not all) of the cultural minorities that claim group rights are more patriarchal than the surrounding cultures." She does not stop at suggesting that group rights are harmful to women. According to her, minority women might be "better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become *extinct*...or, preferably, to be encouraged to *alter* itself so as to reinforce the equality of women."¹

Okin's conclusion, I am afraid, is symptomatic of a lack of serious research into non-Western cultures, of faulty reasoning and argumentative methods, and of a forgetfulness of the basic spirit of democracy as the civil welcoming of differences. To be fearful of differences to the point of advocating the extinction or alteration of other cultures undermines democracy at its very foundation. Many critics have pointed out errors in Okin's portrayal of non-Western cultures. I would like to focus instead on three topics unexplored by other critics. First, I will tackle Okin's constant confusion of political ideals with cultural practices and the inconsistencies in her application of these evaluation categories to the West and the Rest(-of-the-World). Second, I will challenge Okin's politics on her own terms by questioning if her proposal can really be considered "liberal." Finally, I will situate Okin's focus on cultures rather than on nations in the context of globalization and propose to replace Okin's focus on "cultures/civilizations" with Etienne Balibar's emphasis on "*civility*" as the democratic basis for championing feminism in the global era.

I. BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY, BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE NON-WEST

Okin attempts to give moral authority to her proposal by grounding her overall arguments on the political ideal of equality as it is upheld by a particular version of Western liberalism.² The normative force of this lib-

eralism rests on its prioritization of the right over the good, of empty formalism over substantive judgments, and of distributive justice over the value of various goods. It is on these grounds that Okin argues for gender equality as a universal injunction: “By *feminism*, I mean the belief that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men can” (10). So far, so good. If she had limited herself to saying that equality of gender is a universally binding *morality*³ and as such should be part of the legal and political *principles* of every country, I could not agree more with Okin. I would also raise no objection if Okin had studied all cultures carefully and demonstrated how all of them — Western as well as non-Western — fall short of this political principle. Okin’s problem is her inconsistency in applying these categories to Western and minority cultures. Whenever Okin tries to prove the moral superiority of Western liberal societies, she is careful to limit herself to legal and political *norms*; in contrast, she references only cultural *practices* in non-Western societies, with no mention at all of their legal and political principles. This asymmetry in the categories she uses to judge Western and non-Western cultures is already evident in her thesis statement, where she poses the following question: “what should be done when the claims of minority *cultures* or religions clash with the *norm* of gender equality that is at least *formally* endorsed by liberal states (however much they continue to violate it in *practices*)?” (9, italics added). The rest of Okin’s essay continues to highlight the moral undesirability of minority *cultural practices* against the desirability of the *legal and political norms* of the West. From the beginning of her essay, she brackets both figuratively and, as she does above, literally the issue of how liberal states “continue to violate [the norm of gender equality] in practice.” The repressed issue, however, returns at one point in her essay. After several pages of indictments against minority cultures for their sexist practices in the section titled “Gender and Culture,” Okin is obliged to also say a few words about the West. Her brief ten-line reprimand of sexism in Western culture, however, is quickly forgotten and displaced by the reassertion of Western *legal norms*, which stand out as infinitely superior to non-Western *cultural practices*:

Western cultures, of course, still practice many forms of sex discrimination. They place far more importance on beauty, thinness, and youth in females and on intellectual accomplishment, skill, and strength in males. They expect women to perform for no economic reward far more than half for the unpaid work related to home and family, whether or not they also work for wages; partly as a consequence of this and partly because of workplace discrimination, women are far more likely than men to become poor. Girls and women are also subjected by men to a great deal of (*illegal*) violence, including sexual violence. But women in more liberal cultures are, at the same time, *legally* guaranteed many of the same freedoms and opportunities as men (17, italics added).

Offenses committed on a daily basis against women in the West are conveniently made to look like contingent failings owing to the fact that Western law denounces them in an abstract way as

“illegal.” At the end of her cursory acknowledgement of shortcomings in the West’s patriarchal culture, Okin easily dodges further questions about the sexual inequalities in Western cultural practices by redirecting people’s attention to the Western legal system and its *formal* principle of gender equality. I do not deny the importance of maintaining the formal notion of equality as a regulative principle. However, I question why Okin makes no reference at all to *formal* policies about women in non-liberal societies — particularly since many of these countries have very special laws about women’s entitlement to health care, maternity leave, affordable childcare, and other issues that should catch the eye of any feminist.⁴ I find Okin’s silence on the legislation of non-Western societies to be incomprehensible also because Okin repeatedly attempts to prove her point about the “barbaric” nature of non-Western patriarchy on the basis of information submitted as evidence for criminal defense procedures.⁵ Focusing on criminal cases as ethnographic evidence of gross subjections of women in minority cultures, Okin nonetheless seems to be either ignorant of, or unwilling to include in her arguments, the legal statutes of the cultures she alleges to be “condoning” or even encouraging crimes against women (18).⁶

Okin’s silence about the *legal regulations* of non-Western cultures is mirrored by her disregard of how gender relationships are *actually lived* in the West. Okin voices her outrage at how “a Chinese immigrant man in New York who battered his wife to death for committing adultery and a Japanese immigrant woman in California who drowned her children and tried to drown herself because her husband’s adultery had shamed the family relied on cultural defenses to win reduced charges” (19). She is convinced that women are much better protected legally in the West (16) but does not explore the issue of crimes against women in Western culture or cite a single court proceeding involving a white defendant. Bhabha points out the high rate of crimes against women in England,⁷ which is still low compared to the daily cases of assault on women in the United States.⁸ One wonders why Okin does not compare domestic crime rates in the West to the rates of domestic violence in Japan,⁹ whose male chauvinist culture she accuses of driving women to commit mother-child suicide when shamed by their husbands’ infidelity (19). These statistics raise the question: Is the legal system of Western cultures really more successful at protecting women from violence? Is the West in its daily practice truly less violent toward women than the rest of the world? And, outside the courtroom, the contrast between infidelity rates in the West and those in traditional societies leads one to question Okin’s assumption that women are more respected in liberal than traditional societies.

Okin avoids addressing the real differences between Western and non-Western cultures by limiting herself to the *abstract* principle of formal equality in the West while discussing *concrete* cultural practices in minority cultures (a subject about which she seems to have little knowledge).¹⁰ Addressing the *ideal* of equality in the West but the cultural *practices* in the Rest(-of-the-World), Okin ends up interpreting the discrepancies between ideals and practices as cultural differences

rather than as categorical differences. This confused and confusing way of thinking gives rise to a stark contrast between an idealized, progressive West and a backward, non-Western world in Okin's discourse.

II. "EQUALITY FOR ALL" AND "RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM OF MINORITY WOMEN"

EQUALITY FOR ALL?

As a liberal who believes in political equality, Okin advocates eliminating unjust disparities between the life-chances of men and women. However, if she were really true to the principle of equality for all, she would have respected all cultures' equal rights to exist and every nation's equal right to self-determination. If she had really respected the principle of equality as morally binding, she would have been respectful of each culture's equal right and moral capacity to define its own concept of the "good life" instead of arguing for its extinction or alteration. As the editors of Okin's volume comment in the introduction on the moral foundation of the multiculturalist movement: "human beings in other cultures, foreign or domestic, are human beings too — moral equals, entitled to equal respect and concern, not to be discounted or treated as a subordinate caste" (4). In arguing that the West is more advanced and progressive (16), Okin is really saying that non-Western cultures are *morally inferior* to the West. Far from allowing other cultures and peoples full membership and parity of participation in the world, Okin perpetuates institutionalized patterns of discrimination that constitute members of cultures outside the West as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem. This self-presumed Western moral authority compels Okin to take on her "White Woman's Burden" and advocate the extinction or alteration of other cultures.

Okin could of course reply that it is precisely because she is operating within the politics of equality that she does not want to recognize cultural difference. Yet it is one thing to disregard cultural difference but quite another to advocate that other cultures become "extinct" or be "altered" to become like one's own. More important still, respecting other cultures' mores does not necessarily contradict the politics of equality. If Okin had done even preliminary research on multiculturalism, she would have found that the multiculturalists' demand for recognition had its origin in, and still derives part of its moral impetus from, the politics of equality — and this despite the fact that multiculturalism finds the politics of equality inadequate to the task of guaranteeing the survival of minority cultures. It is the principle of universal equality — the principle of equal respect for all participants and equal opportunity for achieving social esteem — that allows minorities to denounce discrimination and refuse second-class citizenship. As Charles Taylor points out, the concept of equal dignity is the only one compatible with a

democratic society.¹¹ The fact that even communitarians such as Charles Taylor underscore the significant role of the principle of universal equality in multiculturalist claims¹² is indicative of the fact that minority cultures' politics of recognition is, no less than the liberal politics of equality, a justice claim.

Despite this shared ground, multiculturalism differs from liberalism by going beyond abstract, formal justice claims to making a substantive demand for equality. I am not trying to valorize group identities as some multiculturalists do. My argument is that not only do different cultures have equal rights to exist, but they also have equal rights to choose their *own* ways of life and to pursue their *own* happiness in their *own* distinct manners. In other words, all cultures should have equal rights to demand recognition for their distinctness. This demand is not only appropriate but a practical necessity if one wishes to ensure *equal dignity* of all peoples. Sander L. Gilman touches on a similar idea in his response to Okin: "Intuitively, human rights are claims we make for the protection of our vital interests in bodily integrity, material well-being, and *human dignity*. To secure respect for our rights, we must concede the right of others to make similar claims for the protection of their vital interests."¹³ Nussbaum, too, regards the right to "search for the meaning of life in one's own way" as fundamental to "a life that is fully human."¹⁴ Far from contradicting universal human rights, the equal right to assert one's distinctness is what honors the consistency and validity of this universal principle. As Taylor puts it, "we give due acknowledgement only to what is universally present— everyone has an identity— through recognizing what is peculiar to each."¹⁵ The politics of recognition goes beyond abstract equality and seeks substantive justice by demanding *reciprocal* recognition of cultural distinctiveness.

RESPECT FOR INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM?

In addition to realizing in concrete terms the abstract liberal idea of equality, the politics of recognition is also compatible with liberalism's respect for individual decisions. Contrary to Okin's claim that respecting cultural differences is "inconsistent with the basic liberal value of individual freedom" (11), I would argue that Okin's refusal to honor minority cultures' own ways of life contradicts liberalism's respect for the individual. Okin seems unaware that the very idea of respecting each culture-bearing people on its own terms was actually developed out of Western respect for the individual, according to which "[e]veryone should be recognized for his or her unique identity."¹⁶ Each individual has an original way of being human and has his or her own "measure": "This way of being cannot be externally derived, but must be inwardly generated."¹⁷ The individual's right to self-definition, self-fulfillment, and self-realization gives rise to the idea of a people's right to self-determination. Taylor points out how "Herder applied his conception of originality at two levels, not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to

the culture-bearing people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a *Volk* should be true to itself, that is, its own culture.”¹⁸

The compatibility between minority rights and liberalism is evident in the widespread support for minority rights among liberals in the nineteenth century and between the two World Wars.¹⁹ Okin is far from being liberal in recommending either the extinction or the alteration of minority cultures whose gender relationships are configured in ways different from those of the liberal West. This recommendation smacks not only of intolerance but even of cruelty. To cut off people from their own culture is to subject them to an extreme state of *disempowerment* and *abjection*. To be abruptly uprooted from one’s tradition amounts to being cast into “the impossible-unthinkable-unsayable.”²⁰ Understanding — that is, one’s capacity to engage the world in some meaningful way — cannot even take place without the horizon of one’s own cultural tradition. This is a point that Gadamer and other hermeneuticians have repeatedly emphasized.²¹ Political theorists such as Will Kymlicka also underscore cultural membership as the precondition for an individual’s capacity to develop self-esteem and to make personal choices.²² Culture, in other words, is the necessary and inescapable context of a person’s life. No one can function in a cultural vacuum. Feminists ought to respect the different cultural backgrounds of women around the world as they go about promoting gender equality. As Abdullahi An-Na`im rightly states, “compliance with human rights standards cannot be achieved in a principled and sustainable manner except through the internal dynamics of the culture concerned.”²³

DOES OKIN RESPECT THE INDIVIDUALITY OF THIRD-WORLD WOMEN?

Ironically, even as Okin defends her program of extinction or alteration of non-Western cultures on the grounds of protecting the individual freedom of their female members, she has no respect for the individuality and individual decisions of minority women. There exist only two monolithic categories of non-Western women in Okin’s discourse: “co-opted/older” women and “non-co-opted/younger” women. Okin sets up these categories to circumvent possible resistance from Third-World women to her white feminist tutelage²⁴ by labeling them in advance as “co-opted” voices of older women.

Despite her claims to being a liberal, Okin has no reservations about practicing age discrimination in addition to cultural discrimination. Even if we set aside the discrimination issue, a purely factual focus would lead one to wonder about Okin’s capacity for careful and precise thinking in her unquestioning presupposition of a *necessary* relationship between age and co-optation. Okin’s reasoning would imply that established female scholars who have pursued years of rigorous learning and careful research would belong to the “co-opted” category given their relatively advanced age.

Okin simply cannot accept that Third-World women — even established scholars and highly educated women — can have minds of their own. Those who don't share Okin's Western feminist view of what constitutes well-being are quickly dismissed as "victims of a culturally generated false consciousness and in need of liberation by well-meaning outsiders."²⁵ Robert Post points out how Okin's repeated references to "older women" who are "co-opted into reinforcing general inequality" suggest that Okin would persist in this position even if minority women "were to report that they did not view themselves as 'disadvantaged' because they had 'freely chosen' their lives, which they found 'fulfilling,' and because they viewed themselves as having equal 'dignity' with men, although that dignity was expressed through distinct social roles."²⁶ Okin's gaze on non-Western women, in other words, "comes resolutely from above and elsewhere. Her version of liberal feminism shares something of the patronizing and stereotyping attitudes of the patriarchal perspective."²⁷ Azizah Y. al-Hibri calls this "patriarchal feminism." I would take this one step further: Okin is not merely patriarchal; her patriarchy is of the special form associated with colonialism. Okin makes no attempt to be conciliatory in her replies to critics regarding her association of co-optation with older women. It is impossible to persuade Okin to let go of her "White Woman's Burden."

III. "CIVILITY" VERSUS "CIVILIZATION": TOWARD A NEW DEMOCRATIC BASIS FOR FEMINISM IN THE GLOBAL ERA

SAMUEL HUNTINGTON, SUSAN MOLLER OKIN, AND "THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS"

Interestingly enough, Okin keeps referring to "cultural" rather than "national" differences in her essay. Her discriminatory discourse is not directed at nations but at cultures and shared ethnic origins on both international and intranational levels. Okin advocates policing not on, but across or inside, national borders. The following statement is typical of the cultural focus in her thinking: "Many of the world's traditions and cultures, including those practiced within formerly conquered or colonized nation-states — which certainly encompasses most of the peoples of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia — are quite distinctly patriarchal" (14). In the list of criminal cases Okin uses as proof of her "ethnographic" argument, her targets of attack are grouped mainly under ethnic-cultural rather than national categories:

the four types of cases in which cultural defenses have been used most successfully are: (1) kidnap and rape by Hmong men who claim that their actions are part of their cultural practice of *zij poj niam*, or "marriage by capture"; (2) wife-murder by immigrants from Asian and Middle Eastern countries whose wives have either committed adultery or treated their husbands in a servile way; (3) murder of children by Japanese or Chinese mothers who have also tried but failed to kill themselves, and who claim that because of their cultural backgrounds the shame of their husbands' infidelity drove them to

the culturally condoned practice of mother-child suicide;²⁸ and (4) in France — though not yet in the United States, in part because the practice was criminalized only in 1996 — clitoridectomy. (18)

Note that Okin makes national distinctions only when she discusses the West — that is, France and the United States.²⁹ The rest of the world's peoples look to Okin like an undifferentiated mass vaguely divided into cultural categories. She makes an observation about “Japanese *or* Chinese mothers” (italics added) in the above-quoted passage. When she provides “grounds” for her assertion on the next page, it becomes obvious that the vague conjunction “or” is used by the author to cover her incapacity or reluctance to differentiate between the two countries. It turns out that Okin's sweeping claim about Japanese and Chinese women is made on the basis of one case about “a Japanese immigrant woman in California” (19).³⁰

“Cultural difference” is an easy way out for an author who has little knowledge of non-Western countries. Okin's focus on cultures rather than nations also finds a friendly audience in the new Global Age, where attention has been turned from the conflicts among nation-states to what Samuel Huntington calls “the clash of civilizations” and “the politics of ethnic relations in the post-communist world.” According to Huntington, what emerges in the twentieth century — and particularly after the Cold War — is no longer the conflict between nation-states. Globalization brings peoples closer together on conflictual as much as on commercial terms and is likely to be a force that crystallizes conflicts between cultures.³¹ Okin's argument sounds like a xenophobic, feminist extrapolation of Huntington's thesis.

Huntington's theory follows from his concern about the decline of the West after the two World Wars and the process of decolonization. His preoccupation over the decline of the West is compounded by an anxiety over the rising economic, military, and political strength of Asian civilizations on the one hand and the demographic explosion in Muslim countries on the other. Above all, Huntington has misgivings about how “non-Western civilizations generally are reaffirming the value of their own cultures.”³² Huntington concludes his book by recommending that “*the survival of the West* depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners... uniting to renew and preserve [Western civilization] *against* challenges from non-Western societies.”³³ Not surprisingly, Huntington is adamantly against multiculturalism (for example, within the United States), even though he argues against any attempt of the West to impose universal values, for fear that such endeavors will antagonize the non-West and set off “fault line wars.”

Although Okin diverges from Huntington in her insistence on universalism (that is, universalizing her feminist program), both seem to be compelled to defend the values of the West. Huntington pursues this goal by advocating a strong alliance among Western societies “against” the challenges of the non-West. Okin is much more aggressive in her “defense” of the West with her recommendation of the extinction or alteration of other civilizations. In response to such xenophobia, Bonnie Honig warns against a feminist backlash directed at “foreigners who come

from somewhere else and bring their foreign, (supposedly) ‘backward’ cultures with them.”³⁴ The kind of xenophobic tone that troubles Honig can also be found in the blurb on the back cover of Okin’s volume:

Polygamy, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, punishing women for being raped, differential access for men and women to health care and education, unequal rights of ownership, assembly, and political participation, unequal vulnerability to violence. These practices and conditions are standard in some parts of the world. Do demands for multiculturalism — and certain minority group rights in particular — make them more likely to continue and to *spread* to liberal democracies?(italics added)

Huntington’s defense of Western values and Okin’s militant assertion of Western feminism, in other words, are underpinned by fears that barbarism will “spread” to the liberal West.

Huntington reduces the civilizations in conflict to basically “two worlds: Us and Them.”³⁵ Likewise, Okin’s feminist crusade is carried out by the West against the Rest, by the First World against the Third World.³⁶ Okin’s war on gender inequality, in other words, is not waged on the “peoples of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia” *individually* (14). Rather, these peoples are unified in Okin’s writings as the common enemy of the West. Under Okin’s gaze, these multiple cultures become one culture: the non-Western, Third-World culture. As Bhabha puts it, “[Okin] allows herself to produce ‘monolithic,’ though gender-differentiated, characterizations of minority, migrant cultures — kidnap and rape by Hmong men, wife-murder by immigrants from Asia and the Middle Eastern countries, mother-child suicide among Japanese and Chinese provoked by the shame of the husband’s infidelity.”³⁷

“CULTURAL DIFFERENCE” AND NEO-RACISM

Etienne Balibar rightly observes that “racism is not receding, but progressing” in the age of globalization. The dominant theme of the new racism in our times is “not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences.” It postulates “the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions; in short, it is what P. A. Taguieff has rightly called a *differentialist racism*.”³⁸

This “neo-racism” is highly pertinent for understanding the fear and hostility Huntington and Okin experience when confronted with multiculturalism. Balibar explains that neo-racism has decolonization as its specific historical context: “The new racism is a racism of the era of ‘decolonization,’ of the reversal of population movements between the old colonies and the old metropolises, and the division of humanity within a single political space.”³⁹ Decolonization is apparently very much on the minds of Huntington and Okin. For Huntington, a major cause of the decline of the West is former colonies’ declarations of independence, both politically and culturally. For Okin, barbaric patriarchy is associated with the Third World — especially “formerly conquered or colonized nation-states” (14). The backward culture of the Third World is seen

as “constitut[ing] obstacles” or is itself “established as [an] obstacle (by schools or the norms of international communication) to the acquisition of [respectable Western] culture.”⁴⁰ Hence Okin’s advocacy for the extinction or alteration of non-Western cultures.

FANTASIZING THE JOUISSANCE OF THE OTHER

The main factor fuelling neo-racism — the kind of racism so prominent in Okin’s discourse — seems to be one’s fantasy and hatred of the Other’s secret enjoyment (jouissance). The sexual overtones in the term are by no means inappropriate in a discussion of racism. Racial discrimination cannot be reduced to sexual discrimination. Nonetheless, sexual dynamics are often involved in xenophobia. A good illustration of this is the West’s fantasy about the uninhibited plenitude available to “primitive” peoples. What Okin cannot tolerate is the Other’s *excessive, ob-scene* enjoyment.⁴¹ Her essay is full of incriminations of the Other’s jouissance. Witness, for example, her storm of outrage at the enjoyment of non-Western men — a storm that sweeps quickly “from veiling to polygamy to efforts to control female sexuality to the denial of maternal rights over children to the (paradoxically contradictory) enforcement of maternalism as women’s proper role to clitoridectomy to child marriage to forced marriage to one’s rapist to marriage by capture.”⁴² This tumult of emotions culminates in Okin’s indignation at the prospect of immigrant men from Asian and Middle Eastern countries receiving “dropped or reduced charges” for wife-murders by using cultural defenses (18). Significantly, it is not only the Third-World Man’s secret enjoyment that provokes Okin. She is equally incensed by the Third-World Woman’s ob-scene jouissance — for instance, the Asian Woman’s servility to men, and the “special privilege” of the cheated Asian Wife to have her crime of child-murder excused as “culturally condoned practice” in U.S. law courts (18-19). Jacques-Alain Miller gives an insightful diagnosis of the dynamics of jouissance inhabiting racism:

Racism is founded on what one imagines about the Other’s jouissance; it is hatred of the particular way, of the Other’s own way of experiencing jouissance.... [The Other] takes his jouissance in a way different from ours. Thus the Other’s proximity exacerbates racism: as soon as there is closeness, there is a confrontation of incompatible modes of jouissance.... [The Other] is always endowed with a part of jouissance that he does not deserve. Thus true intolerance is the intolerance of the Other’s jouissance.⁴³

Miller’s analysis sheds light on the kind of xenophobic feminism championed by Okin. The Other’s jouissance is what plagues the xenophobic feminist. Prior to the age of mass immigration, the Other that was held responsible for stealing the xenophobic feminist’s jouissance was the (white) man. With the process of globalization, however, the Other who lives in close proximity to the xenophobic feminist, threatening her with its secret jouissance,⁴⁴ is no longer primarily the white man — who, after all, shares her white values. Instead, the position of the Other is now

increasingly occupied by those with different cultural habits and dark, mysterious skin color. Okin's obsession with the Other's secret enjoyment can be seen in her relentless voyeuristic invasions into the "private sphere" and "personal law" of the Other (13). Her fixation on unveiling⁴⁵ the secret *jouissance* hiding in the "home" of the Other (13) reminds one of the practices of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, which showed an equal lack of respect for the distinction between the private and the public.⁴⁶ Okin also seems to share the paranoia of totalitarian leaders. Take, for instance, her assumption that Third-World women who resist her judgment must be *conspiring* with their male patriarchal leaders: "strict control of women is enforced in the private sphere by the authority of either actual or symbolic fathers, often acting through, or with the *complicity* of, the older women of the culture" (22, italics added).

A PLEA FOR CIVILITY

In order to subdue the ob-scene *jouissance* of the Other, Okin proposes "civilizing" the Third World in the image of the West. Her campaign to Westernize the world turns out to be quite unnecessary since, even without her militant campaign, the Rest(of-the-World) is already becoming like the West. Unfortunately, the global exportation of Western culture, contrary to Okin's *theoretical* argument, is not necessarily bettering the lives of women in developing countries. The solid research work of Zillah Eisenstein, a feminist legal and political theorist, reveals the stark reality of the exploitation of Third-World women by global capital from the Western liberal market: "As global capital spreads, women work harder — either in and from their homes and/or in specified Third-World markets. They become the third world of the Third World, and the third world of the First World. They are the cheapest of the cheap workers. Reebok and Nike hire the women in Indonesia for 16 cents an hour and the women in China for 10 to 14 cents an hour."⁴⁷ Western feminism as a global export also carries a malign by-product despite its benign intentions. Okin's discourse partakes of what Eisenstein pinpoints as a fantasy created by the media romanticizing the "freedom of the 'West.'" Such discourse constructs *fantasmatic* images of progressive, healthy, and sophisticated Anglo-Western women symbolizing the freedom of the liberal market, while *in reality* globalization produces appalling forms of exploitation and subordination of women in developing countries.⁴⁸ The *ideology* of beautiful, "free and independent" women in the West in contrast to the *real* wretched conditions of Third-World women is then re-presented by Okin and her colleagues as the contrast between the liberal West and the patriarchal Rest, thus contributing further to social dissatisfaction and tension in developing countries.

Okin simply dodges the issue that global feminism has been appropriated by the global economy. Eisenstein astutely discerns how "Western feminists are themselves being privatized by the market and reduced to self-help strategies, while women, especially poor women, are losing all forms of public help, as government programmes are dismantled" under the influence of the liberal market

economy.⁴⁹ The shrinking health benefits for women in today's China is a case in point. Eisenstein notes a similar downsizing and privatizing of the U.S. government under the aegis of corporatist feminism: "The market advertises the successes of feminism as justificatory of the rollback of an affirmative-action state. The rearticulation of racialized/sex/gender borders for the twenty-first century are undermined by the global market, even as the boundaries of the fantasmatic 'East' and 'West' are re-encoded in the 'export' version of feminism."⁵⁰ Eisenstein further points out the colonialist implications of Western feminism — an ideology that is "marketed domestically, as well as offered as a part of colonialist and global politics."⁵¹ This diagnosis effectively explains why so many Third-World and racial minority thinkers find Okin's essay objectionable.⁵²

Here we must ask where Okin's program goes wrong. How does her "civilizing project" turn into a "colonizing project"? Okin's attempt to intervene in the "barbaric," patriarchal non-Western societies on behalf of "the *human* rights of women"⁵³ resonates with the few military "humanitarian interventions" into the Third World in the global era, each pursued with the intention or pretension of preventing human civilization from degenerating into savagery. Why, even when these humanitarian interventions were carried out with the best intentions, did they often unsettle us with a certain dark ambiguity? Balibar's recent work on violence, civilization, and civility offers great insight into the source of the problem.

Balibar identifies a certain "cruelty" left over from the dialectic of "savagery" and its negation in the "civilizing process." This "cruelty" — which psychoanalysis associates with the superego — is heterogeneous and irreducible to either "savagery" or "civilization," "violence" or "counter-violence," even though it has a *direct* and *immediate* relation to both.⁵⁴ Civilization, in other words, is intertwined with "cruelty" in a highly ambiguous manner. In the civilizing process, one has to be wary of this dark superego. Likewise, in the implementation of humanitarian ideals to "save human civilization against the onslaught of savagery," one has to be mindful that "any move that is made *against violence*...will have to come to terms with its backlash; it will not be reducible to a program of the elimination of violence."⁵⁵

This backlash — the dark leftover — is precisely what Okin and her fellow humanitarian "crusaders" — all avid believers in the integrity of "civilization" — overlook. Okin is blind to the ob-scene jouissance in her insistence on "(Western) civilization and its specific types of police, policy, and politeness."⁵⁶ Such blind insistence, as Balibar points out, is often the cause of extreme violence.⁵⁷ Okin's advocacy of the extinction or alteration of other cultures is one instance of such violence driven by her idea, ideal, and idealization of (Western) civilization.

Given the failings of Okin and her *civilizing* project, how are we to find a democratic basis for realizing the vision of feminism in an age of both globalization and localization? The possible answer lies with Balibar's concept of *civility*. Balibar proposes that, instead of responding to violence with counter-violence, thus running the risk of being caught in its "backlash,"⁵⁸ we must "civilize

the state” and all of its “civilizing apparatus.” This would include “educat[ing] the educator” and civilizing the civilizing process, as well as civilizing the civilized subject in its subjection and subjectivation.⁵⁹ Civility, in other words, is like Slavoj Žižek’s “sacrifice of sacrifice.”⁶⁰ Both practices aim at enabling us to cope with the ob-scene superego lurking in the dark spot of civilization.

Regardless of “civilization’s” etymological and conceptual links to police, policy, and politeness, Balibar’s civility does not suppress conflicts and antagonism. “[M]uch the contrary, [civility] can and should mean rather the conditions for a political conflict, a play of antagonistic forces capable of developing and creating historical effects.”⁶¹ Furthermore, “there does not exist anything like *one single* politics of civility.”⁶² Civility has no fixed pattern, and its conceptual antinomies compel us to keep the project of democracy open to ongoing democratic interrogation.

This, then, is what I propose for the project of feminism in the global era. We should engage, on the one hand, the universal injunction of gender equality and, on the other, the radically singular situation of individual women and their cultures, in a constant process of critical dialogue. As Balibar puts it, democracy is fragile, precarious, and has to be continuously recreated through civility. Otherwise, we could easily end up in a state of war both within and across borders.

1. Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 14-15, italics added. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text. Okin is the Marta Sutton Weeks Professor of Ethics in Society and Professor of Political Science at Stanford University.
2. Okin certainly departs from classical liberalism — the kind of liberalism associated with Locke which "interprets constraints on liberty as positive acts...that prevent people from doing what they otherwise could do" (J. P. Sterba, "Political Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 628).
3. Note the contrast between morality-as-abstract system and ethics-as-praxis in Western philosophy. This distinction follows the well-known Aristotelian-Hegelian definition of ethics as a practical way of conducting one's life and a direct engagement with human affairs and the social-political world, as opposed to morality, which is an abstract system of codes and formal principles.
4. Paid maternity leave, which is so important to protecting the health of the mother and the child as well as promoting equal career opportunities for women, is non-existent in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Interestingly enough, the societies Okin condemns are by and large more progressive and committed than is the West — both in legal *principles* and in *practice* — to protecting women's opportunities to find fulfillment *simultaneously* as professionals and mothers. Brazil, for example, guarantees a 3-month paid maternity leave. China provides routine health care for women, including an annual 1-day leave for all women to undergo a free pap smear. All pregnant women are entitled to periodic health checks and advice on diet and childcare. At least until the 1980s, pregnant women were also given a shorter working day and whenever possible the least strenuous work. See Arthur W. Chung, "Maternal and Child Health in China 1949-1976," in *Advances in International Maternal and Child Health Care*, eds. D. B. Jelliffe and E. F. Patrice Jelliffe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981); and Victor W. Sidel, *Serve the People: Observations on Medicine in the People's Republic of China* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974). These particular benefits for women are gradually disappearing as China is "altering" herself to become like the West. The following important event in the history of the women's rights movement plainly reveals the *naiveté* of Okin's assumption that the West offers women better *legal* protections of their rights than other societies. On June 3, 2000, the United States voted against an international treaty, pressed for by women's groups from around the world, that would increase guaranteed maternity leave from 12 to 14 weeks. Australia, most Western European nations, and Japan — the non-Western country most influenced by the West in its political and economic structure — joined the U.S. The treaty was originally ratified mainly by countries in South America and Eastern Europe — countries whose cultures Okin recommends for extinction or alteration. See "Women Press for More Maternity Leave," *New York Times*, 7 June 2000, late ed., A.14+.
5. Okin does not often document her information about minority cultures. Judging from her footnotes, a significant number of her sources turn out to be *The New York Times* or other people's writings on minority cultures. There is no evidence that Okin has done any direct archival research on non-Western societies.
6. Okin's specializations in Ethics in Society and Political Science, and the prestigious positions she holds in those departments, make her "negligence" look even more peculiar.
7. Homi Bhabha addresses his British experience as follows: "The British civil liberty group Liberty would demur at Okin's description of the egalitarian and empowering 'Western' domestic scene. *Human Rights and Wrongs*, an alternative report to the UN Human Rights Committee,

- concludes that one-third of all reported crimes against women in Britain result from domestic violence and take place at home; in London, in 1993, one woman in ten had been assaulted by her partner. Adult women and children are overwhelmingly more likely to become the victims of violence at home than on the street or at the workplace” (Bhabha, “Liberalism’s Sacred Cow,” in Cohen et al. [eds.], 80).
8. The American Medical Association estimated that more than 4 million women were beaten by their partners in 1995 (M. Easley, “Domestic Violence,” *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 27: 6 [1996]: 762-763). M. K. Feldman notes that domestic violence is the single largest cause of injury to women in the United States — more common than injuries from automobile accidents, muggings, and rape combined (Feldman, “Family Violence Intervention,” *Minnesota Medicine* 75 [1992]: 20-23). More disturbing still is that more than half of the women murdered in the United States were killed by their male partners (B. Parker and J. McFarlane, “Identifying and Helping Battered Pregnant Women,” qtd. in Linda Poirier, “The Importance of Screening for Domestic Violence in All Women,” *The Nurse Practitioner* 22:5 [1997]: 106).
 9. The Office of Women’s Affairs, in the Japanese Prefecture of Kanagawa, conducted a Survey on Society for Gender Equality in 1995, using anonymous mail questionnaires to sample 2,658 residents. According to this survey, 10 percent of married women reported having experienced physical violence from their husbands (Kanagawa-ken, “Report of the Questionnaire Survey on Society for Gender Equality [“*Danjyodoshakai nikansuru anketo chosa hokokusho*”], qtd. in Mieko Yoshihama, “Domestic Violence in Japan: Research, Program Developments, and Emerging Movements,” in *Battered Women and Their Families: Intervention Strategies and Treatment Programs*, ed. Albert R. Roberts [New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1998], 405-447). Another survey conducted by Yoshihama in Ota Ward, Tokyo in 1993 yielded similar rates.
 10. Some of Okin’s incorrect generalizations about “non-liberal cultures” have been pointed out by critics such as Bonnie Honig, Azizah Y. al-Hibri, Sander L. Gilman, Abdullahi An-Na`im, Bhikhu Parekh, Saskia Sassen, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Their responses to Okin can be found in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*
 11. Charles Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 27.
 12. Taylor’s communitarianism is not the same as multiculturalism. He favors a hermeneutic “merging of horizons” and is critical of some of the multiculturalists’ premature valorization of difference. Nonetheless, I would say that “the politics of recognition” — the demand for recognition of both the equal dignity and unique identity of minority cultures and communities — underpins both communitarianism and multiculturalism.
 13. Sander L. Gilman, “‘Barbaric’ Rituals?,” in Cohen et al. (eds.), 62, italics added.
 14. Martha C. Nussbaum, “A Plea for Difficulty,” in Cohen et al. (eds.), 108.
 15. Taylor, 39.
 16. *Ibid.*, 38.
 17. *Ibid.*, 30.
 18. *Ibid.*, 31.
 19. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), ch. 4.
 20. This expression is adopted from Jacques Derrida.
 21. See, for example, Hans Georg-Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993).

22. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 165.
23. Abdullahi An-Na`im, "Promises We Should All Keep in Common Cause," in Cohen et al. (eds.), 62.
24. Some Third-World women's objections can be found in the "Responses" section of Okin's volume.
25. Bhikhu Parekh, "A Varied Moral World," in Cohen et al. (eds.), 73.
26. Robert Post, "Between Norms and Choices," in Cohen et al. (eds.), 66.
27. Bhabha, 82.
28. My first draft included a response to this ignorant, absurd, and xenophobic condemnation of Chinese women and culture. Unfortunately, I cannot find the space to fit that discussion into my paper and have to reserve it for my future work.
29. Note also Okin's criticism of France does not have as its target the French culture which is part of the Western civilization; rather, she is complaining about the French government's inept tolerance of patriarchal Muslim practices such as polygamy and clitoridectomy. See, for example, her lengthy discussions of these issues on pages 9-11 of her essay.
30. Note that Okin provides no documentation of either this case or any other of her four examples of "cultural defenses" invoked by racial minority offenders.
31. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Not surprisingly, Huntington draws particular attention to the conflict between Islamic nations and the West. Okin also pays special heed to this "fault line."
32. Huntington, 20. See Part II of Huntington's book for details.
33. *Ibid.*, 20-21, italics added. See also 301-321.
34. Bonnie Honig, "My Culture Made Me Do It," in Cohen et al. (eds.), 36.
35. Huntington, 32.
36. Okin's supporter Katha Pollitt explicitly disparages multiculturalism for its "connections to Third Worldism" and "the appeals Third Worldism makes to white liberal guilt" (Pollitt, "Whose Culture?," in Cohen et al. [eds.], 28).
37. Bhabha, 79.
38. Etienne Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, and Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), 21.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 25.
41. The added hyphenation to the word "ob-scene" is to invoke the meaning of "off-stage" which Lacan associates with jouissance.
42. Honig, 35.
43. Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimité," *Prose Studies* 11:3 (1988): 125-126.
44. Miller points out how fantasies about the Other's surplus enjoyment tend to be intensified by his or her proximity: "the Other's proximity exacerbates racism: as soon as there is closeness, there is a confrontation of incompatible modes of jouissance" (*ibid.*).
45. It is interesting to note Okin's repeated protests against the Muslim veil.
46. It is not surprising to see Okin, the Western liberal, endorsing totalitarian practices. The Clinton-Lewinsky trial is just one more example revealing the fragile boundaries between totalitarian statesmen and self-righteous bureaucrats in

- the liberal West. For a brilliant analysis of conservative feminism and the politics of the Clinton trial, see Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Politics in the Age of Sex: Clinton, Leadership, Love," *Cultural Critique* 46 (2000): 241-271.
47. Zillah Eisenstein, "Women's Public and the Search for New Democracies," *Feminist Review* 57 (Fall 1997): 146-147.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Ibid., 148.
 50. Ibid.
 51. Ibid.
 52. See, for example, the many responses included in Okin's volume.
 53. Okin highlights "women's human rights" as her main concern in her essay "Feminism, Women's Human Rights, and Cultural Difference," *Hypatia* 13:2 (Spring 1998): 32-52.
 54. Balibar, "Violence, Ideality, Cruelty," *New Formations* 35 (1998): 12.
 55. Ibid.
 56. Balibar, "Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence," a lecture given at Columbia University, April 11, 2000.
 57. I would add here that such violence includes, but is not limited to, the dramatic "clash of civilizations" and the "remaking of the world order."
 58. Balibar, "Violence," 7. This is precisely Okin's problem when she fantasizes herself countering "barbaric patriarchal cultures" with a violent advocacy of their extinctions or alterations, only to find herself caught in the jouissance of colonialism.
 59. For details, see Balibar's essay "Subjection and Subjecti-

tion," in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 1-15.

60. In Okin's case, it would entail the sacrifice of her "White Woman's Burden."
61. Balibar, "Specters of Violence," a lecture given at the School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, July 14, 1998.
62. Ibid.

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