

In her memoir, *Dancing with Cuba*, Alma Guillermoprieto recounts a conversation with Galo, a fellow dancer. He was middle-class before the revolution; now he is poor. His homosexuality was tolerated by his society and accepted in his milieu; now he risks imprisonment for it. Almost every consumer good is scarce; even if supplies were abundant, Galo couldn't afford to buy much, because the job market in the performing arts is all but nonexistent; and even if dance companies were hiring, the government has imposed forced labor for the sugar cane harvest. Many Cubans like Galo had left the country. Why, then, does he support the Castro regime?

"Do you know what it is," he inquired, "to wake up in the morning and know that what you're eating for breakfast hasn't been stolen from anybody else's mouth? That if your son or your nephew graduates from medical school, you don't have to feel guilty, because the son of the guy who cleans your building can be a doctor if he wants to? It's all because of Fidel and Fidel alone."<sup>1</sup>

Did the Castro regime invent a new freedom to trump every guarantee of the Bill of Rights and Franklin Roosevelt's famous four? Freedom from guilt is apparently so precious to Galo that it makes up for the freedom from want and fear that he has lost. There is only so much any regime, however authoritarian, can do to keep order; some voluntary compliance is necessary. Religions, official and otherwise, have facilitated compliance by conflating God and country; atheistic regimes needed a substitute. Cuba followed the lead of the USSR and the People's Republic of China in substituting self-criticism for confession and repentance and in proclaiming "Suffering will make you a better Communist" instead of "unearned suffering is redemptive."<sup>2</sup> And, while theology tends to concentrate on guilt for what people have actually done (or left undone), Cuban indoctrination extended the notion of guilt to include the effects of accidental circumstances. Post-revolutionary propaganda proved effective, at least in the short run. Taking privileges away from people and convincing them to embrace the deprivation by rescuing them from an emotion they had not previously felt is a feat worthy of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Without genetic engineering, soma, or sleep-learning, the new Cuba instilled a morale fit for a communist state.

If guilt provided the sludge that kept communist populations meek, what emotions might provide the energy that 21<sup>st</sup>-century democratic states encourage? Consider the message of "Privilege in America," an ABC News report broadcast in the United States in 2006. The correspondent, John Stossel, does not mean by "privilege" anything close to the status Galo has lost. The program's subtitle, "Who's Shutting You Out?" reveals that the subject is, instead, the advantages enjoyed by the rich, famous, and well-connected compared to middle-class Americans. Stossel's conception of modern capitalist "class war" has nothing to do with the means of production; it's all about the haves versus the have-mores. Guilt was about the last emotion the program was likely to produce, at least in its target audience. The hour was an incitement to *ressentiment*, self-pity, envy, and anger. It directed these emotions not toward preferential treatment for women and minorities, a pet conservative target, but toward favoritism for elites.<sup>3</sup> Both conservatives and liberals could relate. So could feminists, who had no difficulty finding parallels between class privilege and gender privilege.

It is tempting to explain the difference between *ressentiment* and self-pity with reference to who is feeling the emotion: I feel *ressentiment*; you feel sorry for yourself; they wallow in self-pity. Both are passive emotions that imply powerlessness. When they do motivate people to action, it is often to mischief or sabotage: the riot over soccer tickets, the

rotten fruit in the new car's engine, the selling of a celebrity's medical records to a scandal sheet. But envy and anger can move people to strive to get more, to reduce their disadvantages vis-à-vis others. As long as strivers stick to legal means of self-improvement, their labor and consumption strengthens the economy (though not necessarily the environment or the community.) Envy is forbidden by the Tenth Commandment, but religion and capitalism part company here.

Now that capitalism has fallen on hard times, envy and anger are rampant among the newly deprived. Much of the noise is being made by relatively privileged middle-class Americans who run little or no risk of losing their homes or jobs. We need look no further for evidence that "class war" is no longer a Bad Word than the curious affair of the AIG bonuses in the spring of 2009. This largesse, paid to present and former employees of the American International Group from its share of the federal bailout, produced an outcry that may provoke surrender, voluntary or otherwise, of this money.

Communism did not eradicate envy or anger, any more than capitalism has abolished guilt. The founders of communist states may have hoped that subsequent generations would accept austerity as a given, but it has not worked out that way—however close any regime actually got to eliminating privilege. It took no more than a generation for people to perceive what Rubashov, the hero of Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*, told his inquisitors: "Acting comprehensively in the interests of coming generations we have laid such terrible privations on the present one that its average length of life is shortened by a quarter."<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union collapsed, China turned entrepreneurial, and Cubans, who are much better off than residents of the old Soviet Union, continue to leave their homeland to seek their fortunes, as Galo eventually did.

The idea of guilt divorced from behavior seems on its face to be incompatible with liberalism's emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility, an emphasis it shares with both capitalism and socialism, and even with some strains of conservatism. Liberal feminists prioritize the individual as much as other liberals do. But, on analysis, beliefs that appear contradictory in theory turn out to co-exist in practice. "Liberal guilt," separated from individual action, is a familiar phenomenon. Women's propensity to guilt feelings—a propensity from which liberal women are not immune—is something feminists know only too well.<sup>5</sup> Relative advantages explain some of these feelings, but there seems to be ample guilt left over for women *qua* women, whatever their political stance is. The old joke about the woman who apologizes to her family when rain interferes with their picnic, like most jokes, contains a piece of reality.

The economic collapse of 2008-09 has led to renunciations that display elements of guilt or shame. These sacrifices range from the trivial to the remarkable. A news story about a Corcoran Group executive who decided to give up her leased Rolls-Royce, at huge cost and bother to herself and no benefit to anyone else, provided some healthy comic relief last March.<sup>6</sup> But when the schoolteachers in Montgomery County, Maryland, making "on average \$67,000 a year, recently voted to give up their 5 percent pay raise...so programs and teachers would not have to be terminated,"<sup>7</sup> Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times* found this sacrifice heroic. Maybe it was. But it came from members of a notoriously overworked and under-rewarded profession—a group that, in comparison to the general population, is disproportionately Democratic, disproportionately liberal, and *disproportionately female*. Admiration is not the only possible feminist post-liberal reaction to this renunciation.

Why is guilt characteristic of liberals and problematic for feminists? The subject of women's guilt is intriguing, and has rarely if ever been studied in political science. I suspect that the source of much of this guilt is women's internalization of the responsibility that society has assigned to them, a phenomenon I have examined elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> "Guilt: the woman's disease" proved too vast and unwieldy a subject for a paper devoted to feminism and liberalism.<sup>9</sup> I concentrate here on the narrower question of feminist guilt. Women's guilt will have to wait for another paper, or perhaps a multigenerational, multidisciplinary project. There's no rush, because women's guilt isn't going anywhere. Feminism has not cured, controlled, contained or weakened the woman's disease. Guilt, whether felt by feminists or urged upon them, emerges as a powerful force in feminist discourse.

What are the sources of liberal and feminist guilt? Is guilt a characteristic error for liberals and feminists, or a characteristic asset? What effects does this guilt have, both on individuals and on society? Addressing these questions, and beginning to answer them, are crucial tasks of feminist post-liberalism. This paper shows that the idea of guilt disconnected from personal wrongdoing pervades the cultures in which liberal democracies flourish. The idea is there, available to everyone, regardless of gender or political stance. I suggest, however, that liberal guilt and feminist guilt are different in kind. Liberal guilt arises from privilege and equality. Feminist guilt is rooted in responsibility and inequality. Feminist guilt, which is, in part, a subcategory of women's guilt, has more connection than liberal guilt to actual commission or omission.

### Being Guilty and Feeling Guilty

Galo feels he has been spared guilt, while the Corcoran executive and the Maryland schoolteachers seek to avoid it. But what kind of guilt is this? The feeling the Communist regime tried to instill departs from the traditional understanding of guilt in Western jurisprudence. Legal, religious, and moral doctrines of wrongdoing, punishment, repentance, and forgiveness entail what the law calls crime and Abrahamic religions call sin. The former calls for secular punishment; the latter requires confession, absolution, penance, atonement, restitution, or some combination thereof. Catholics confess to a priest and receive a penance; Jews ask forgiveness during the High Holy Days from those they have wronged. The twelve-step self-help programs modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous (which is itself modeled on Judeo-Christian tenets) exhort their members to confess their wrongs (all of them, not just those related to their addictions), ask "God as we understand him" to correct their faults, and make amends to their victims.<sup>10</sup> I call this kind of emotion *positive* guilt, parallel to positive law. Guilt feelings are expected of criminals and sinners; a penitentiary, by definition, is a place to be penitent. These feelings might be called *primary* guilt when they occur, but they need not and often do not. Transgressors need not *feel* guilty in order to *be* guilty. Wrongdoing does not entail guilt feelings. Hannah Arendt noted in the 1960s that "The youth of Germany is surrounded...by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who *feel* nothing of the sort."<sup>11</sup>

Even if Galo had inherited his privileged status from capitalist predators, the status would have resulted from an accident of birth. If "life is unfair" is the usual response to unlucky accidents, why doesn't the cliché apply to lucky ones as well?<sup>12</sup> Expecting people to accept the former and agonize over the latter makes sense only if we are obligated to be as hard on ourselves as possible. As we shall see, Galo's *secondary* guilt is not peculiar to the steadfast communist. But a perspective less compatible with liberalism would be hard to find.

It is possible, even easy, to feel guilty without being guilty. English dictionaries confirm this disengagement by defining guilt first as wrongdoing and responsibility and secondly as a sense of culpability or inadequacy. Reflection will show that several types of secondary guilt exist, and they differ significantly from one another. People often feel guilty about an accident, or about an incident for which someone else was responsible. “Those nightmare doubts that sometimes torment us at four o’clock in the morning when we have not slept very well” can include such thoughts as “I should have yielded the right of way/stayed out of the bar/left him the first time he hit me,” etc.<sup>13</sup> These assessments may or may not be correct. The other driver might have been playing chicken; the assailant might have been spoiling for a fight; or the husband might have stalked and killed his wife after she fled. Guilt feelings, though, do not depend on the realities of the situation. Some people go so far as to feel guilty about the impact of their own illnesses or injuries on their families or co-workers. This *acquired* guilt varies with the degree of general responsibility that individuals feel for what happens to them.

People may also feel guilty about actions they themselves did not commit or omit. *Ascribed* guilt can be ascribed *by* people to themselves or *to* people by others. The individual feels the emotion, but the source of the emotion is outside the individual. “In Adam’s fall/ We sinned all,” reads the New England Primer. The Christian doctrine of original sin separates fault from action, whether interpreted literally, as above, or figuratively, as deriving from human nature.<sup>14</sup> Survivor guilt, first noted among Holocaust survivors, can affect those who escape disasters when others were not so lucky: For the survivors, the phrase “Why me?” connotes not “poor me” but “lucky me.” Collective guilt attaches remorse to wrongs committed by groups to which individuals belong, even if these events occurred before they were born. Germans born after World War II have expressed guilt feelings about the Nazi regime. Americans might have, and some have had, similar feelings about racism. An Episcopal priest described the 1961 freedom rides as “a kind of prayer—a kind of corporate confession of sin.”<sup>15</sup>

Ascribed guilt implies a unity of humankind through history, a collective responsibility. The school of modern feminist theory that posits women as “essentially connected, not essentially separate, from the rest of human life,” or prioritize “a network of relationships that extends over time” over individual autonomy, could move from unity to shared guilt.<sup>16</sup> Versions of these ideas pervade both conservative and radical thought. Edmund Burke’s vision of an “eternal society” composed of the living, the dead, and the unborn clashes with liberal principles, but no more so than this example from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Christian left: “I was there [at the crucifixion], Jesus, as you know. I am a part of mankind...I am involved in your murder, Jesus, as in the lives and deaths of countless Jews.”<sup>17</sup> These authors do not speak for all conservatives or all radicals any more than John Stuart Mill, for example, speaks for all liberals. Some conservatives equal or even surpass liberals in their devotion to the “separation thesis.” But the conservative and radical thinkers I have quoted here are starting not with the individual, as liberals do, but with society, community, and interpersonal relationships.

Collective or ascribed guilt differs in kind from what Germans who helped vote the National Socialists into power in 1933, whites who effectively disenfranchised African Americans by instituting closed primary elections, or people who have polluted the environment might (or might not) feel. These are instances of primary guilt shared. Anti-liberal consequences may arise when collective guilt is assigned downward to subject populations, for instance, by adults to children: “everyone stays after school unless I find out

who erased the board.” People disagree both about what events call for collective guilt and about the legitimacy of the concept itself. Arendt, for example, dismissed collective guilt as “cheap sentimentality.”<sup>18</sup> I wonder, too, whether the young Germans she discusses might have substituted collective guilt for the difficult process of examining their own consciences to correct their own transgressions. Collective *shame* might be a better term. Whether or not guilt belongs where wrongdoing or responsibility is absent, shame can exist and has existed without them. Collective shame may be self-limiting. It is easy to understand why some Americans are ashamed about acts of global aggression they had nothing to do with, but I have yet to hear anyone suggest that men should feel collective shame about rape.

The idea of ascribed guilt resembles the guilt Galo was spared more closely than any other type I have described, but the two are not interchangeable. The guilt Galo did not feel would have arisen not from what he or others did but from who he was: a person with more privileges than some of his fellow Cubans. This guilt derives not from what you do (or don't do), but from who you are and what you have. The executive with the Rolls Royce was guilty of nothing except showing off; she felt guilty because could afford the car. *Status* guilt attaches to accidental, and therefore unearned and undeserved, privilege and luck.

In liberal democracies, privilege entails not guilt but responsibility. Socialist states collect taxes from the advantaged to help the disadvantaged. Capitalist systems do the same, though reluctantly and stingily, and try to fill unmet needs by encouraging charity from the advantaged. These arrangements are liberal versions of a principle that is not liberal in origin: the paternalistic notion, popular among 19<sup>th</sup>-century British conservatives, that “the governing class ought to care for the welfare and happiness of the people.”<sup>19</sup>

Abrahamic religions go further. Jews, Christians, Muslims alike are obliged to give to the poor, not as penance for their sins, but as fulfillment of the duties they acquire by professing their faiths. Both the New Testament and the Koran admonish the faithful to give proportionately to their own resources and praise those who exceed this goal.<sup>20</sup> Believers may even be required to live like the poor. One purpose of the Ramadan fast is to help Muslims identify with the deprived. Many Catholic religious orders require vows of poverty. Not giving, or not giving enough, would be an occasion for guilt. But neither politics nor religion expects people to feel guilty for relative advantage, any more than they encourage people to pity themselves for relative disadvantage.

People who take identification with the poor to extremes are not unknown in capitalist and socialist societies. One need not take religious vows or even believe in a deity to do this. The French philosopher Simone Weil starved to death in England, apparently “thinking that the food she did not eat would somehow go to her compatriots in France.” The coroner ruled Weil's death a suicide “whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed,” a finding her admirers still dispute.<sup>21</sup> Peter Singer's argument that those who fail to give all they can spare to the poor share responsibility for poverty is an atheistic variation on this theme that goes even further than religious doctrine.<sup>22</sup> Diane Chomsky lived in dire poverty in Nicaragua for several years. Her mother described her life as “pitiful,” but Diane “says, 'Ninety-five per cent of the world lives this way, why should I live better?'”<sup>23</sup> Chomsky's rhetorical question evinces a standpoint close to Galo's. People like Chomsky, Weil, and Singer give the impression that they were compensating for their own guilt and expected others to emulate them.

While the jury is still out on Singer, there is little if any evidence that Weil's or Chomsky's sacrifices did much good. But lay Catholics like Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin,

who founded the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s, have been honored by their church. Two scholars, writing about Gandhi, observed that “Self-restraint may be and has been another way of mastering the environment, including the human environment.”<sup>24</sup> Nobody has suggested that the balance of Gandhi’s mind was disturbed. Weil’s self-denial might have been a symptom of anorexia nervosa, but it might equally have been as inseparable from her intellectual contributions as Gandhi’s was from his power. The distinctive feature of Communist regimes is their demanding from entire populations a degree of sacrifice that liberal societies consider extreme and about which they are conflicted. But the frequency with which terms like “liberal guilt,” “class guilt” and “white guilt” recur in American discourse indicates that status guilt is a common conception among liberals.

### Why Liberal Guilt?

Conservatives are driven by rage; liberals by guilt.

This epigraph comes not from a work of political theory but from an op-ed column in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. The author, David Morris, criticized a liberal Democratic Senator’s statement after the 2000 election that “A Republican president ought to be able to appoint people of strong conservative ideology.”<sup>25</sup> This attitude could not have been more diametrically opposed to the Republicans’ approach to Bill Clinton’s appointments. The conservatives attacked; the liberals caved in.

The 2008 presidential campaign prompted one pundit on the left to write “in praise of liberal guilt.” This author reviewed several conservative “think pieces” opining that liberal guilt about American racism explained the widespread support for Barack Obama.<sup>26</sup> While outlets like *National Review* are not objective sources of information about liberals, they do provide reliable indicators of what conservatives think. So evidence is not lacking that liberals think liberals feel guilty; conservatives think liberals feel guilty; and commentators think liberals feel guilty.

Awareness of relative advantage is a partial explanation. Public reading, writing, and ruminating require that one either gets paid for these activities (like the above authors and their academic counterparts) or has spare time to devote to them. The theory and practice of politics is the province of the advantaged; those who work at two or three jobs (and/or) care for dependents (and/or) fall asleep exhausted on the couch every night lack opportunity to join in. Activists are privileged relative to most people.

But everything I have just said about liberals is equally true of conservatives, who seem immune to guilt. Are there ideas shared by liberals, but rejected by conservatives, that encourage guilt feelings? This analysis must start with the recognition that conservatism is not monolithic; several subspecies exist, and their fundamental presuppositions—what Oliver Wendell Holmes called their “can’t helps”—differ sharply. I have already mentioned the paternalistic conservative notion that the advantaged had obligations to help the disadvantaged. These conservatives also believed that members of the “ruling class” were inherently superior to the less fortunate. Authorities like the established church—as in the lyric, “The rich man in his castle/The poor man at his gate/ God made them high or lowly/And ordered their estate—did their best to inculcate this attitude in the poor—apparently with some success, if British fiction before World War II is any guide.<sup>27</sup> George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* had a significance that *My Fair Lady*, the 1956 musical version, lacked; when the former premiered in 1913, some people still

believed the rich spoke “correctly” because they were innately superior. The idea that speech patterns could be taught and learned was unfamiliar in many circles, though evidence to support it existed in Shaw’s time.

Paternalistic conservatism, and the belief in social hierarchy that accompanied it, have gone the way of moribund ideologies. Proclaiming that some people are better than others has fallen out of vogue in the last century. No recent candidate for public office in a democracy has won votes by proclaiming his or her superiority. Many conservatives have found it useful to present themselves as populists rescuing the people from the out-of-touch liberal elite. “Who are they to force school integration on you when they send their kids to all-white private schools?” is a favorite conservative rhetorical question.<sup>28</sup> Justice Antonin Scalia struck a similar tone in his dissent in *Romer v. Evans*, where he rebuked the majority for “imposing upon all Americans the resolution favored by the elite class from which the Members of this institution are selected.”<sup>29</sup> But the sense of superiority that is punished at the polls has been the foundation of many successful careers. It is difficult to consider William F. Buckley, for example, without suspecting that he viewed himself and others like him as natural patricians. Even those conservatives whose backgrounds are in no sense elite may believe that they have earned status through their own efforts. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, for example, is well known for contrasting his self-sufficiency with his sister’s dependency.<sup>30</sup>

People who believe they deserve more than others do—and get no more, or even less, or pay a price for their victories—may react with anger.<sup>31</sup> Consider the conservatives’ preference for “merit” over preferential hiring and affirmative action.<sup>32</sup> Those conservatives who believe that they deserve more than others, and who actually have more, are unlikely to feel guilty about their advantages. They do not view their privileges as accidental at all.

But not all conservatives insist that they deserve their advantages. The conservatives who gained ascendancy in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, typified by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, did not long for the old days of social hierarchy. Instead, they valorized the free market as the (possibly unattainable) ideal economic arrangement. A free market distributes resources according to no other criterion than the perceived wants and needs of the moment; it experiences cycles that are governed by no rules of merit or desert; and it answers to no moral authority. If men earn more than women, so be it. If college professors earn more than schoolteachers, so be it. If a city’s labor force packs up and leaves after a hurricane, or personal computers automate typists and stenographers out of their jobs, that’s just the way things work. A managed economy would cause more problems than it would solve. Skewed distribution is not maldistribution. There is nothing to feel guilty about.

Liberals are not immune either from feelings of superiority or from uncritical acceptance of accidental benefits. Some readers might even suspect that I’m accusing conservatives of what I’m doing myself: considering myself superior to those who consider themselves superior to others. But, first, the critic’s mental state is irrelevant to the validity of the criticism; and, second, feeling superior to people who disagree with them is the least of liberal offenses in this regard. Liberals have justified exclusions from their ideal republic of rights and independence. Thomas Jefferson left out the slaves and the “merciless Indian savages,” while John Stuart Mill believed that much of the earth was populated by “barbarians” who were, at least for the time being, incapable of self-government.<sup>33</sup> Even the American abolitionists, whose commitment to equality was considered extreme in their time, thought white Americans superior to the “negro race” they sought to free from slavery.<sup>34</sup>

Liberals have also allowed exclusion *de facto* to continue, by reinforcing the social arrangements that preclude full participation: women (Mill was an exception), day laborers, domestic workers, farmers, the unemployed, and the disabled are among those who have confronted such barriers.

Although liberal *practice* has co-existed with inequality, liberal *doctrine* has trouble with any explicit or implicit ranking of people as superior and inferior. The abolitionists, of course, were as wrong as Jefferson had been about blacks' inability to master Euclidean geometry, and as Aristotle had been about natural slavery and men's intellectual superiority to women.<sup>35</sup> But the abolitionists' legacy to American political thought was not provide yet another inaccurate generalization about inequality to an already long list, but to break the logical connections between formal equality and merit, between autonomy and ability. To be more precise, the abolitionists continued an intellectual process that began two hundred years earlier, when the English Puritans broke the connection between autonomy and land ownership. Major William Rainborough famously said in the Putney Debates of 1647, "I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under."<sup>36</sup> The abolitionists said in effect "the stupidest he... has a life to live as the cleverest he."<sup>37</sup> Once that link was broken for one group of people, the *intellectual* steps required to break it for others were minor (as opposed to the *historical* processes, which have split the world open.<sup>38</sup>)

Severing the link between merit and equality does not entail severing the link between merit and reward. The fact that some inequalities are accidental does not mean that no inequalities are earned. People may do better than their peers because they work harder or more efficiently, learn more, think more clearly, understand better, or study longer. It is important to understand that the lucky advantage most middle-class professionals have is not having affluence handed to them but having the opportunity to acquire it. Metaphorically speaking, far fewer people have silver spoons in their mouths than have silver keys in their hands. Once you have conceded that you are no better than the people without the keys, your advantage is hard to justify. Once recognized, privilege is fertile ground for status guilt.

This guilt manifests itself in a variety of ways. The first type of manifestation can be trivial: the renounced Rolls Royce, the tip given to the server from hell because "she didn't get the chance to go to college," the toleration of careless and even deliberate clerical errors because the staff "doesn't get a living wage."<sup>39</sup> But when similar sentiments pervade public discourse, the results are far from trivial; liberals begin channeling Karl Marx and turn against each other.<sup>40</sup> When the National Organization for Women (NOW) became an exemplar of second-wave feminism in the U.S., critics frequently tried to make these activists feel guilty by characterizing them and their constituency as "women lawyers" and asking in effect, "Why are you complaining when there are so many women worse off than you?" The fact that women lawyers won employment discrimination cases on behalf of women blue-collar workers escaped the notice of liberal critics, who forced feminists to expend resources on defending themselves that might have been better used in improving the situation of women.

Similar criticism has confronted efforts within the liberal Episcopal Church to persuade its parent organization, the less liberal Anglican Communion to accept



homosexual clergy and bishops. A reporter who views the world as “pretty much divided between people who have a pot to piss in and people who don’t,” regards “the church crisis, at least in America, as I see most other political disputes between bourgeois conservatives and bourgeois liberals: as cosmetically differentiated versions of the same earnest quest for moral rectitude in the face of one’s collusion in an economic system of gross inequality.”<sup>41</sup> Does the reporter think that homophobia is a “secondary contradiction” that will disappear when class distinctions do (an opinion considerably discredited with respect to race and gender), or does he think economic injustice is the only kind that matters?

The liberal guilt David Morris was writing about is of a different kind. On the surface, it looks less like status guilt than like timidity. Why should the losing party cede its share of the appointment power to the president? Because that’s what a majority of the people want? Well, Morris was writing after the 2000 election, which was decided by a vote of five to four.<sup>42</sup> Because the losers feel guilty about having lost—as well they might, at least in some elections past? But timidity characterizes liberals even in victory. When the Democrats controlled the White House and the Senate from 1993 to 1995, they strove to placate and accommodate the Republicans; witness the firing of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, the withdrawal of Lani Guinier’s nomination as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, the appointment of moderates Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer to the Supreme Court. The Democratic majority that accompanied Barack Obama into office in 2009 has shown uncharacteristic gumption—while the opposition continues its mode of attack.

Morris quotes Robert Frost’s definition of a liberal as “a man so broadminded he won’t take his own side in an argument.” Liberalism is committed to the idea of what James Madison called “reason in her progress toward perfection;” the duty to recognize that your reasoning may not have quite gotten there is a core precept of liberal theory.<sup>43</sup> One might question whether this duty applies to public officials whose constituencies expect them to represent their interests, but free-lance liberals try to remember to “think it possible you may be mistaken.”<sup>44</sup> Aware that they are no better than anyone else but better off than most, liberals have a hard time saying, “I’m right and you’re wrong,” even when they word it more diplomatically than that. After all, equality means that the other person’s interests and opinions count for as much as yours. Claiming the rightness of your own opinion is awkward enough with people of similar class background, but, done across class lines, it is fraught with traps. Accusations, spoken and unspoken, like “You think you’re better than I am because you have more power/education/money, etc.” “You think you’re so smart, but you have only book-learning and no common sense,” or “You didn’t graduate from the school of hard knocks like we did” trigger attacks of status guilt. Made self-conscious about using their advantages to win arguments, liberals bend over backward to accommodate those who disagree with them. But bending over backward is no more productive than falling flat on your face.

One context in which liberal diffidence has had dire results is in civil liberties, especially the rights of the accused. The Democratic Leadership Council, founded in 1985 by prominent party members including Bill and Hillary Clinton, responded to the conservative victories of the past three general election cycles by changing positions that Republicans had characterized as “soft on crime.” One conventional liberal view that went by the wayside was opposition to the death penalty; which had already taken a hit on response to victim’s rights advocates and the fear of crime. Support for capital punishment had risen from a low of 47% in 1966 to 66% shortly after Ronald Reagan took office. By 1994, it had risen to a high of 80%. Support has declined as news story after news story about exonerated Death Row inmates made the headlines. The most recent Gallup Poll

found that 69% of respondents supported capital punishment.<sup>45</sup> The liberal retreat from opposition removed a safeguard against a result nobody wanted: the execution of the innocent.

The weakness of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century liberalism was exposed in the second debate between presidential candidates George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis in the 1988 campaign. When the moderator asked Dukakis his famous question—if your wife were raped and murdered, would you support the death penalty—all he could do was mumble, “No, I don’t think so.” This unsatisfactory response may have cost him the election (although some analysts maintain that he had already lost it.) There are satisfactory answers to that question, the best of which speak to the injustice of allowing someone to be a judge in his own cause. John Locke, a founder of liberalism, identified this principle as a primary reason for forming civil society.<sup>46</sup> Dukakis didn’t need Locke; he could have responded without sounding like the Swarthmore graduate he was. He needed only to remind his audience, in language a child could understand, that we don’t get to decide what happens to those who wrong us, and vice versa. The candidate’s failure to answer the question well was not nearly as disturbing as the fact that the answer mattered so much. Even worse was the fact that the question was asked at all. Matters of privacy and good taste aside, the question and the voters’ response presumed that the appropriate way to think about crime is to inquire how victims and survivors feel, to give over public decisions to those least able to make them objectively. Whatever else this is, it is not liberalism.

If secondary guilt helps explain why liberals got tough on crime, the recent history of the death penalty may call for some primary guilt. Liberals share responsibility for the debacle, at least for letting it happen. One reason public support for criminal procedure rights declined after the 1960s was that liberals seemed to have lost the ability to defend them. In the liberal milieu where I grew up, anyone who questioned whether suspects’ rights must always take priority over safety and security, or even distinguished between rights that protected innocent suspects and rights that exculpated suspects caught red-handed, was considered too stupid to understand. In college, the rights of the accused were never questioned. Liberals, never having “thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them and considered what those persons may have to say,” did not know “the doctrine which they themselves profess.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Status Guilt, Liberalism and Feminism**

The labels “feminists,” “liberals,” and “women” identify overlapping groups. Not all feminists are liberals, or vice versa. Not all women are feminists, or vice versa. But many feminists are liberals, and most feminists are women. Although women liberals, feminist or not, are disadvantaged relative to their male counterparts, they too are privileged relative to most men and women. So are feminists, whether or not they are liberals. The liberal moment within feminism means that guilt over privilege is available to feminists; the overlap between feminists and women, and the fact that the proper subject of feminism is women, makes women’s guilt available to feminists. Asking whether a particular instance is an example of liberal, women’s, or feminist guilt would be a useless exercise; analysis to locate and identify varieties of guilt would not be.

Should feminists hire domestic workers?<sup>48</sup> Should they eat meat, formalize work relationships, or compete against other women in the workplace?<sup>49</sup> Should Western feminists criticize Third World practices?<sup>50</sup> These questions, and similar ones, obsess feminist thinkers and their critics. The fact that questions like these are usually answered in

the negative—if there were an English equivalent of the Latin “num,”<sup>51</sup> the speakers would surely use it—is predictable, but not nearly as problematic as the threshold question: why are they asked at all? “Guilt, thy name is ‘should have;” the popularity of discussions about what feminists should do suggests a moral scrutiny which provides frequent opportunities to be weighed and found wanting.<sup>52</sup> Analyses of the contexts in which the first and last of my questions commonly arise bears out that impression. Each dialogue offers feminists a choice between guilt and sacrifice. Whatever the feminist movement is about, it is not about women making sacrifices.

The feminist movement that re-emerged in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included among its goals the critical analysis and discouragement of women’s guilt.<sup>53</sup> An important source of this guilt was the then- prevailing orthodoxy of parenting, which maintained that healthy child development required a mother who was a full-time homemaker. Feminists recognized this a staple of child-rearing advice since the end of World War II as a “form of antifeminism in which men—under the guise of exalting maternity—are tying women more tightly to their children than has been thought necessary since the invention of bottle feeding and baby carriages.”<sup>54</sup> Early second-wave feminists insisted that women’s liberation required a redistribution of responsibility for household labor. They encouraged their audience, which at the time consisted of middle-class, college-educated women, to put these ideas into practice. But the early years of the second feminist wave were “a very bad time to be in need of domestic help.” Because the civil rights movement and antidiscrimination laws had opened up new employment opportunities to members of minority groups, many African American women who had done this work were moving on. Redistribution of domestic labor within families meant, in practice, that men and women should share housework and child care equally.<sup>55</sup>

A generation later, some few households—including antifeminist and/or conservative ones—approximate this ideal.<sup>56</sup> Men do more domestic work than their fathers did. Most mothers work outside the home. Some want to, but even more have to, because most families now require two incomes to survive. Women’s disproportionate share of domestic labor remains “the problem that won’t go away.”<sup>57</sup> That generalization applies to male-female dyads. Equalizing domestic labor between men and women does nothing for single parents, same-sex couples, or people living alone. They do the work themselves, or hire others to do it if they can afford to. Feminists do not try to instill guilt feelings among women who leave their children in the care of others and go to work. But guilt has entered the picture again, and feminists are prominent participants in the dialogue.

Hiring someone else to do your housework and/or child care usually means hiring women. They comprise a large majority of the people who do domestic work for pay. Since about 1990, women from Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean were emigrating to the West to fill the gap in the labor market left by minority women who had taken advantage of the better opportunities. Many of these immigrants left young children at home, and got jobs as nannies, housekeepers, or cleaners. Most of the native-born women for whom domestic work is a permanent occupation are poor, African American, Hispanic, and badly educated. The largest employers of domestic workers are cleaning services like Merry Maids, Maid Brigade, and The Maids International; these corporations exploit both their employees and their customers.<sup>58</sup> Independent local contractors must keep costs low in order to compete with these services. Wages are low, hours long, conditions unpleasant, and tenure precarious in domestic work.. Even households that hire workers to clean a few times a month are taking advantage of unfair market conditions.<sup>59</sup>

Both feminists and their critics have challenged the ethics and morality of women's exploiting women in this way. It is easy to respond that anyone who buys food or clothing is taking similar advantage. Barbara Ehrenreich has argued that housework is different in kind from these activities:

We can try to minimize the pain that goes into feeding, clothing, and otherwise provisioning ourselves—by observing boycotts, checking for the union label, and so on—but there is no way to avoid it altogether without living in the wilderness on berries. Why should housework, among all the goods and services we consume, arouse any special angst?

Yet it does...[T]here are ways in which housework is different from other products and services. First is its inevitable proximity to the activities that constitute 'private' life. The home that becomes a workplace for other people remains a home...Someone who has no qualms about purchasing rugs woven by child-slaves in India, or coffee picked by ruined peasants in Guatemala, might still hesitate to tell dinner guests that, surprisingly enough, his or her lovely home doubles as a sweatshop during the day...[S]omeone is working in your home at a job she would almost certainly never have chosen for herself.<sup>60</sup>

Ehrenreich's analysis is informed by her own experience as a domestic worker while gathering material for a book about the work and lives of unskilled laborers. Her experience working for a franchise of The Maids International affirms her refusal ever to hire household help: "this is just not the kind of relationship I want to have with another human being." But this is precisely the kind of relationship men have had with their wives at least since the Industrial Revolution separated the home from the workplace. Ehrenreich gives herself away when by attributing her repugnance in part to the influence of "a mother who believed that a self-cleaned house was the hallmark of *womanly* virtue."<sup>61</sup> Division of labor by class is strained at while division by gender is swallowed whole. But feminists strive to eradicate gendered division of labor, and a feminist post-liberalism must take gender exploitation as seriously as class exploitation.

Ehrenreich's insistence that domestic labor is a forced occupational choice is equally vulnerable to scrutiny. In what sense has a woman who finds care for her own children, moves from a poor country to the West, and gets a job as a nanny or a cleaner not "choosing?" Yes, she is being exploited; but it does not follow that she and her family are worse off than she would be otherwise. She, like other domestic workers, has probably made the best choice she can. While this choice is forced on her by economic circumstances, she deserves admiration, not pity.

Women have left the domestic labor market in droves at least twice in U. S. history: during World War II and in the 1960s and '70s. Both times, better jobs became available to them. If this happens again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can expect today's domestic workers to leave their jobs. Feminists would do better to direct their energies toward *making* this happen—by political activity aimed at influencing their own countries' foreign policy and distribution of resources—than to doing their own housework when they need not. Feminist can also help domestic workers by patronizing independent contractors rather than giant corporations, and by encouraging and facilitating the workers' training and education.<sup>62</sup>

Domestic labor does not provide the only context in which guilt enters feminist and liberal discourse. Much writing by and on behalf of Third World women and children has criticized feminists and liberals for condemning practices like female genital cutting, child

prostitution, and sexual slavery. These critics have called for less *j'accuse* and more *mea culpa* from the West. The critics have rarely *defended* FGC<sup>63</sup>; in fact, some are working through local power structures to eradicate it.<sup>64</sup> But they have accused Western feminists of cultural imperialism: of seeking to impose their own standards of morality on the rest of the world; of making little or no effort to understand the role of the tradition in the cultures where it exists; of choosing to emphasize sex-related practices instead of the rampant poverty, disease, and violence that afflicts much of Africa; and of ignoring the role of their own governments in perpetuating these conditions.

The feminist debate over FGC has gotten downright nasty.<sup>65</sup> The Western critics of the practice and the African feminists who responded to them kept the dialogue spirited but calm. It was Western critics of the critics who took the attitude that Jeane Kirkpatrick once caricatured as "Blame America First." Or, at least, *criticize* it first, if not first, last and always. In a 2006 article, Alexander Cockburn presented a radical variation on this theme. He criticized *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who had publicized child prostitution in Asia and bought and released two young prostitutes who were sold by their families, for ignoring what Cockburn identified as the root of the problem: neoliberal "reforms" by the World Trade Organization that have destroyed Third World Industries. "If Kristof wants to confront the prime promoter of prostitution, he can take his video camera to the World Bank and confront its current president, Paul Wolfowitz."<sup>66</sup>

Radicals have proved as reluctant to censure culture and family as conservatives are. The latter idealize the two, while the former consider them irrelevant, asserting that the cause of child prostitution and sexual slavery is economic necessity. Feminists who have scrutinized the gendered components of their own culture may have little respect for its norms or those of other societies. And anyone who has read Kristof's accounts of Asian family behavior, let alone radical feminist analyses of the family, may hesitate to accept Cockburn's interpretation. However apt this radical analysis of Third World child prostitution may be, it is wide of the mark with respect to FGC or, for that matter, honor killings. No one can claim that the West is the *cause* of these practices.<sup>67</sup>

On analysis, much of the debate over multiculturalism turns out to be a debate about anger versus guilt. Western feminists and liberals get angry; their critics admonish them to feel guilty. "Don't criticize us; look at yourselves." But anger energizes and guilt paralyzes. Sexual slavery, child prostitution, and FGC (at least when performed on children) are customs that all sides of the debate want to end. The first two, in particular, are entrenched by the vested interests of procurers and clients. The practices continue, while the opponents become one another's enemies instead of working together against these powerful interests.

We have seen how guilt can make liberals reluctant and even unable to defend their beliefs. The feminist controversies over domestic work and Third World practices reveal efforts to produce modest, humble, self-critical, and conciliatory behavior among the participants. Western feminists have learned a lot about the relative merits of, and the times and places for, conciliation and confrontation. This information could be useful in other places and circumstances. But feminist guilt, like liberal guilt, confounds and weakens.

## Conclusion

The capacity for guilt is part of what makes us human. Guilt feelings can motivate us to examine our consciences, to recognize our faults, to make amends, to correct our behavior, and to consider the effects of our actions on others. Even when the guilt we feel

has no relationship to anything we did, the emotion can still lead us to try to rectify, or at least ameliorate, the damage done, and to make things better in the future. Guilt has a place in collective as well as individual life. A liberal cannot feel guilty about relative privilege without recognizing that she is privileged; self-knowledge is better for herself and others than ignorance. The internalized responsibility that encourages feminist guilt is often unhealthy, but it can motivate efforts to bring about change.

But the instances of liberal and feminist guilt that I have examined here show that guilt can also inhibit social and political change by encouraging timidity and self-doubt. We have also seen that guilt feelings are not necessarily spontaneous; all too often, guilt is imposed from outside by social and political forces. . The freedom from guilt that Galo and other Cubans got from the Castro regime came at the price of being told to feel guilty for any advantages they retained. Liberal guilt over privilege has often been encouraged by conservatives, especially those who purport to speak for the less privileged. Feminists exhort one another to feel guilty about their priorities. In the political arena, guilt becomes a weapon.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 2004:102.

<sup>2</sup> Respectively, Chang 2003: chap. 10; King 1958: 85.

<sup>3</sup> ABC News, 20-20, November 3, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> 2006: 162.

<sup>5</sup> Web searches confirm these impressions. The phrase “liberal guilt” produced about 830,000 hits, “class guilt” six million; and “white guilt” over one million, and “women’s guilt” two million Google, April 25, 2009. These searches did not enclose the words in quotation marks.

<sup>6</sup> Dominus 2009.

<sup>7</sup> “Obama’s Real Test” (March 17).

<sup>8</sup> Baer 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Pehrson 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, Steps 3, 5, 7-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, revised edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1964: 251. Emphasis original.

<sup>12</sup> Does this example occur to me because I have a birth defect? I don’t know. If it does, Mari Matsuda’s case for “multiple consciousness as jurisprudential method” has certainly been strengthened. 1989: 7

<sup>13</sup> Sayers 1958: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 3; Romans 5: 12-21; 1 Corinthians 22:15; United Methodist Book of Discipline (1992), Article VII.

<sup>15</sup> Boyd 1965: 3.

<sup>16</sup> Respectively, West 1988: 1-3; Gilligan 1982: 159. See also Baer 1999: 41-55.

<sup>17</sup> Respectively, Burke 1852: 97; Boyd 1965: 37. Emphasis original.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Beer 1969: 268.

<sup>20</sup> See Mark 10:21, 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4; Koran, Sura 9:34-35-61; Deut. 15:7-15; Lev. 25:35-38. Nanji 1991: 106-118.

<sup>21</sup> Stuart 2008. See also Sontag 1963..

<sup>22</sup> Note 10 above; Singer, 1972, 1999, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> MacFarquar 2003..

<sup>24</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 185

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<sup>25</sup> Morris 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenbaum 2008

<sup>27</sup> Alexander 1848. See, for example, the novels of Dorothy L. Sayers and Josephine Tey.

<sup>28</sup> I didn't say the statement in the subordinate clause was accurate. It didn't have to be. Nor were the speakers expected to send their children to public school.

<sup>29</sup> 1996: 636.

<sup>30</sup> Mayer and Abramson 1994, chap. 2.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Thomas 2007.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Justice Antonin Scalia's dissent in *Johnson v. Transportation Agency in Santa Clara, California*, 107 S. Ct. 1442, 1475-76 (1987.).

<sup>33</sup> 1869: chapter 1.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Baer 1983: 80-87; Berger 1977: 10.

<sup>35</sup> Respectively, *Notes on Virginia*, Query XIV (Koch and Peden eds. 1944: 257); *The Politics* I: vii, xii.

<sup>36</sup> <http://courses.essex.ac.uk/cs101.putney.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Lindsay 1962: 144.

<sup>38</sup> Rosen 2000.

<sup>39</sup> For the first example, see note 6 above. The next two vignettes come from actual conversations recalled over 40 years. The first statement is not always accurate. Restaurants in university communities often hire students. The second statement, alas, is correct in the area surrounding Texas A&M University, where I have worked for over 20 years. Substituting the word "decent" or "fair" for "living" broadens the application.

<sup>40</sup> And not for the first time. Liberals have defended the practice of paying men more than women for the same work on the (inaccurate) grounds that only the men had families to support. But even Marx reserved the application of the principle, "From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs" to societies where the proletarian revolution had succeeded.

<sup>41</sup> Keizer 2008: 43.

<sup>42</sup> Bush v. Gore 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Padover ed. 1953: 296-97.

<sup>44</sup> Cromwell 1650.

<sup>45</sup> Jones 2002; Newport 2007

<sup>46</sup> 1690 II.7-8; VII 87-89.

<sup>47</sup> Mill 1869: chapter 2.

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<sup>48</sup> Flanagan 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Respectively, Adams 1990, George 1994; Gordon 1991; Meece 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Dawit and Mekuria 1993; James and Robertson 2002; Okin ed. 1999; Walker and Parmar 1993. The term “Third World” has two original meanings: economically underdeveloped countries and countries outside both the industrialized capitalist world and the industrial communist bloc (Sauvy. 1952.) Some commentators rejected the terms “Third World” and “underdeveloped” as pejorative. I reject a common substitute, “developing countries,” because it implies that industrialization is inevitable. I use “Third World” because its second meaning, though now uncommon, is value-neutral.

<sup>51</sup> *Num me amas?* : “You don’t love me, do you?”

<sup>52</sup> Greenfeld 1970: 87.

<sup>53</sup> Much of this discussion is a revised version of Baer 2006: 114-21.

<sup>54</sup> Mead 1954: 477,

<sup>55</sup> Flanagan 2004: 112.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Faludi 1991: III.

<sup>57</sup> Baer 2002: 315. See also Hochschild 1989.

<sup>58</sup> Ehrenreich 2001:51-119; 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Flanagan 2004..

<sup>60</sup> 2002: 101.

<sup>61</sup> 2001: 91 (emphasis supplied.) The author has not, of course, said quite what she meant; if one’s house literally cleaned itself, there would be no virtue involved.

<sup>62</sup> Or by paying for your housecleaner’s child’s tutoring, as a colleague did. The reader who cringes at the Lady Bountiful overtones of this example should remember that it helps to destabilize an intergenerational cycle of poverty. The cleaner’s acceptance of help was as praiseworthy as the homeowner’s offer.

<sup>63</sup> For an exception, see Parekh (Okin ed. 1999): 71. But even he defends the practice only for adults.

<sup>64</sup> Dawit and Mekaria, note 50 above.

<sup>65</sup> See James and Robertson 2002; Baer 2006: 119-20.

<sup>66</sup> . 2006: 8.

<sup>67</sup> See Song 2007.