

A critic of present mainstream feminism in the US: A Feminism Where ‘Lean In’ Means Leaning On Others

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This interview, the latest in a series on political topics, discusses philosophical issues concerning feminism. My interviewee is Nancy Fraser, professor of philosophy and politics at The New School. She is the author of “Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis.” - Gary Gutting.

Gary Gutting: You’ve recently written: “As a feminist, I’ve always assumed that by fighting to emancipate women I was building a better world — more egalitarian — just and free. But lately I’ve begun to worry that . . . our critique of sexism is now supplying the justification for new forms of inequality and exploitation.” Could you explain what you have in mind?

Nancy Fraser: My feminism emerged from the New Left and is still colored by the thought of that time. For me, feminism is not simply a matter of getting a smattering of individual women into positions of power and privilege within existing social hierarchies. It is rather about overcoming those hierarchies. This requires challenging the structural sources of gender domination in capitalist society — above all, the institutionalized separation of two supposedly distinct kinds of activity: on the one hand, so-called “productive” labor, historically associated with men and remunerated by wages; on the other hand, “caring” activities, often historically unpaid and still performed mainly by women. In my view, this gendered, hierarchical division between “production” and “reproduction” is a defining structure of capitalist society and a deep source of the gender asymmetries hard-wired in it. There can be no “emancipation of women” so long as this structure remains intact.

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G.G.: Why can’t responding to feminist concerns be seen as just one major step in correcting the social and economic flaws of our capitalist society, not a fundamental transformation of the system?

N.F.: It certainly can be seen that way. But I am questioning whether today’s feminism is really advancing that process. As I see it, the mainstream feminism of our time has adopted an approach that cannot achieve justice even for women, let alone for anyone else. The trouble is, this feminism is focused on encouraging educated middle-class women to “lean in” and “crack the glass ceiling” - in other words, to climb the corporate ladder. By definition, then, its beneficiaries can only be women

of the professional-managerial class. And absent structural changes in capitalist society, those women can only benefit by leaning on others — by offloading their own care work and housework onto low-waged, precarious workers, typically racialized and/or immigrant women. So this is not, and cannot be, a feminism for all women!

But that is not all. Mainstream feminism has adopted a thin, market-centered view of equality, which dovetails neatly with the prevailing neoliberal corporate view. So it tends to fall into line with an especially predatory, winner-take-all form of capitalism that is fattening investors by cannibalizing the living standards of everyone else. Worse still, this feminism is supplying an alibi for these predations. Increasingly, it is liberal feminist thinking that supplies the charisma, the aura of emancipation, on which neoliberalism draws to legitimate its vast upward redistribution of wealth.

G.G.: Can you give some specific examples of what you see as mainstream feminism aiding capitalist exploitation?

N.F.: Sure. In the 1970s, feminists developed a powerful critique of the postwar cultural ideal known as the “family wage.” That ideal held that women should be full-time homemakers and their husbands should be the family’s sole (or at least principal) breadwinners, earning enough to support an entire household. Certainly, only a minority of American families managed to achieve this ideal. But it had enormous currency in a phase of capitalism premised on mass-production manufacturing and relatively well-paid unionized work for (especially white) men. All that changed, however, with the eruption of second-wave feminism, which rejected the family wage as sexist, a pillar of male domination and women’s dependency. At this stage, the movement still shared the anticapitalist ethos of the New Left. Its critique was not aimed at valorizing wage labor, still less at denigrating unpaid carework. On the contrary, the feminists of this period were challenging the androcentrism of a society that prioritized “profits over people,” economic production over human and social reproduction. They sought to transform the system’s deep structures and animating values — in part by decentering wage work and valorizing unwaged activities, especially the socially necessary carework performed by women.

G.G.: So how has the critique of the family wage changed?

N.F.: Today, the feminist critique of the family wage has assumed an altogether different cast. Its overwhelming thrust is now to validate the new, more “modern” household ideal of the “two earner family,” which requires women’s employment and squeezes out time for unpaid carework. In endorsing this ideal, the mainstream feminism of the present aligns itself with the needs and values of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. This capitalism has conscripted women into the paid work force on a massive scale, while also exporting manufacturing to the global south, weakening trade unions, and proliferating low-paid, precarious McJobs. What this has meant, of course, is declining real wages, a sharp rise in the number of hours of paid work per household needed to support a family, and a desperate scramble to transfer carework to others in order to free up more time for paid work. How ironic, then, that it is given a feminist gloss! The feminist critique of the family wage, once directed against capitalism’s devaluation of caregiving, now serves to intensify capitalism’s valorization of waged labor.

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G.G.: But not all feminist efforts focus on upper-class women. What about the project of providing small loans (“microcredit”) to poor women in underdeveloped countries to help them develop small businesses?

N.F.: I'm really glad you asked about this because it's another example of the way in which feminist ideas are being twisted to serve neoliberal, capitalist ends. Microcredit is touted as a way of "empowering" women in poor rural regions of the global south. But it is also supposed to represent a new, more participatory, bottom-up way of combating poverty, which releases grass-roots entrepreneurial energies, while avoiding the bureaucratic red tape of the large-scale, state-led development projects of the previous period. So microcredit is as much about the glorification of the market and the vilification of the state as it is about gender equality. In fact, it weaves those ideas together in a dubious amalgam, invoking feminism to dress up free-market ideology.

But the whole thing is a sleight of hand. Microcredit became the rage at exactly the moment when international financial institutions were pushing "structural adjustment" on the global south — setting conditions on loans that require postcolonial states to liberalize and privatize their economies, to slash social spending, and to abandon macro-level anti-poverty and employment policies. And there is no way whatsoever that microlending can replace those policies. It's a cruel hoax to suggest otherwise.

So here again feminist tropes are invoked to legitimate policies that are deeply harmful to the overwhelming majority of women, as well as to children and men.

G.G.: Does tying feminism to a fundamental critique of capitalism turn it into a lost cause? Most Americans seem to think capitalism is here to stay.

N.F.: Well, I'm not at all convinced that transforming neoliberal capitalism is a lost cause. It seems to me that this social system is in a very deep, multidimensional crisis — a crisis at once economic, ecological, social, and political) — and that something will have to give, as was the case in the 1930s. So I would say that the question is not whether this capitalism will be transformed, but how, by whom and in whose interests.

I would like feminists to join other progressive and emancipatory social movements in efforts, both intellectual and practical, to shape the direction of change.

G.G.: Does this mean limiting efforts to improve conditions for women in the current capitalist system for the sake of a hoped-for revolution?

N.F.: Not at all! I would recommend a strategy of "nonreformist reform," to use an expression of the French eco-socialist thinker André Gorz. That means conceiving and pursuing reforms that deliver real, present-day results while also opening paths for more radical struggles for deeper, more structural change in the future. Feminists can embrace this approach in an agnostic spirit. We don't need to decide now whether the end result must be a postcapitalist society.

My own view, as I said before, is that male domination cannot be overcome short of abolishing capitalism's deep-seated preference for economic production over social reproduction. And so I think that radical change is actually a more realistic agenda than "leaning in." But I wouldn't be unhappy to be proven wrong; if a new kind of capitalism can liberate women (and I mean all women) without screwing everyone else, I'm for it. So I say, let's pursue nonreformist reforms and see where they lead.

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G.G.: Many feminists today are especially concerned with unconscious biases against women — biases found even in those who consciously support women's rights, including

women themselves. How important do you find this issue?

N.F.: Unconscious bias against women – and indeed against everything coded as “feminine” – is pervasive in our society. And you are right: it influences the thinking of women themselves, including of self-identified feminists. I could give lots of examples, but one of my favorites is a riddle. It concerns an emergency room surgeon who is set to operate on a boy who has been critically injured in a car accident in which his father was instantly killed. The surgeon takes one look at the boy’s face and says, “I can’t operate; he is my son.” The riddle is, how can this be?

You’d be amazed how long it takes most people, women and feminists included, to figure out that the surgeon is a woman — many are more likely to say that it’s a gay man. And of course, there are lots of more consequential examples, such as the way that sexist bias influences judgments about the qualifications of job applicants.

G.G.: But is it just a matter of individual prejudices, whether conscious or unconscious?

N.F.: By no means. The norms that rank “masculine” qualities above “feminine” ones are hard-wired into our social practices and institutions, including law, medical practice, corporate culture and social-welfare entitlement criteria. So it’s no wonder they are in people’s heads. But my point is that they are not only in people’s heads. On the contrary, cultural values that subordinate women are deeply embedded in the social structures that regulate social interaction in everyday life. So feminism cannot restrict itself to changing consciousness. We must also eliminate sexist values from our social institutions and replace them with values that foster equal participation between men and women — and indeed, among everyone.

G.G.: Could you give some examples of how such values are hard-wired into our social practices and institutions?

N.F.: Sure. Here’s one: several courts have ruled that employers’ failure to provide pregnancy leave does not constitute sex discrimination because it does not deny women a benefit provided to men. By presupposing the standard of a male worker, these rulings effectively penalize women for being “different.” Then, too, current welfare regulations push mothers of young children into “work.” By tacitly assuming that child-raising is not work, these regulations effectively position recipients as scroungers who are getting something for nothing. Finally, legal norms that define what counts as self-defense presuppose a typically male socialization, in which one learns to fight back on the spot. Thus, abused women who wait for an opening to disable their abusers have difficulty claiming self-defense. In all these cases, and there are many, many more, our institutions and social practices operate on the basis of androcentric and sexist norms, which prevent women from participating fully in social life, on terms of parity with men.

G.G.: Another major feminist concern has been what many see as a “rape culture,” particularly on college campuses. What’s your view of this?

N.F.: Well, this is certainly a hot-button issue today, and I must confess that I have mixed feelings about that. This is in part because I always worry when one issue becomes so dominant that it eclipses the rest of the feminist agenda — as abortion has often done in the United States. But it is also because I have a certain feeling of déjà vu — it’s as if we are replaying a previous argument between a “protectionist” strand of feminism, focused on violence against women and seeking remedies through criminal law, and another, liberationist strand, which seeks to validate women’s agency and sexual freedom.

Personally, I have always wanted to develop a third approach that would assure not only sexual

autonomy for women but also civil liberties for everyone. And I would like this approach to deal not only with sexual assault but also with other, more impersonal or systemic forms of coercion that limit women's autonomy in sex and in other spheres. For example, I'd like to reclaim the insights of the 1970s "battered women's movement," which stressed the importance not only of criminal sanctions, but also of "exit options" in the form of decent, affordable housing and jobs that pay enough for a woman to support herself and her children.

G.G.: How would you apply this general view to the college-rape issue?

N.F.: I worry about accounts that paint college and university campuses as open-season hunting grounds for rapists. I appreciate that there do exist enclaves that really do merit the label of "rape cultures," but I believe they are fairly restricted, and I don't want to see that expression used so loosely that it gets emptied of meaning and critical force. The more common situations of sexual exploitation (and that expression is often more accurate than "rape") are characterized by ambiguity of communication, mixed feelings, difficulty in identifying one's desire or lack thereof, and diminished sense of entitlement in articulating it — all circumstances that work against women's sexual and relational autonomy, especially (but not only!) in heterosexual milieus. It is very important to promote a critical and transformative understanding of these dynamics. But I suspect that the current, rather hyperbolic campaign against "rape culture" is much too blunt for that task.

P.S.

* "A Feminism Where 'Lean In' Means Leaning On Others". The New York Times. OCTOBER 15, 2015 3:21 AM:

http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/15/a-feminism-where-leaning-in-means-leaning-on-others/?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&_r=0

* This interview was conducted by email and edited. Read the entire series of interviews with philosophers on political issues, here:

http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/philosophers-on-political-issues/?_r=0

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