

“A Feminism Aimed at Liberating All Women Must Be Anti-Capitalist”

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Women workers, people of color, and white men in the Rust Belt may not see each other as natural allies. But there is a path to uniting the social majority — so long as we recognize our common enemy in capitalism.

In the fight for equality, not all feminisms are just the same. Just as the youth climate strikes are utterly different in spirit to corporate greenwashing, the annual strikes on International Women’s Day have shown that the liberalism advanced by the likes of Hillary Clinton is far from the only kind of feminist politics.

Few writers have been as clear on this point as Nancy Fraser, a sharp critic of those feminisms that seek only to put more women in boardrooms and parliaments. Her [Feminism for the 99%](#), written with Cinzia Arruzza and Tithi Bhattacharya, instead argues for a feminism focused on the needs of the social majority.

This isn’t a matter of limiting feminism to narrow workplace issues — far from it. Instead, the feminism for the 99 percent is about how to rally the social majority behind a common agenda, uniting the material interests of working people with fronts of struggle like anti-racism, LGBT liberation, and the fight against male violence.

In this interview, Fraser spoke to Olimpia Malatesta about how feminism can help us see beyond the traditional demands of the labor movement, how anti-capitalist politics can unite the social majority, and how far engagement with parties and the state can advance the feminism for the 99 percent.

OM | One key merit of *Feminism for the 99%* is that it highlights the importance of “reproductive labor,” still today overwhelmingly lumped on women. This differs from many anti-capitalist analyses that only consider battles over “productive labor” (wages, hours, etc.). You argue for a broadening of the class struggle to the reproductive sphere, by fighting for services like universal health care, public education, public transport, and public housing. But this raises another question. If welfare is normally guaranteed by the state, but the state is now dismantling it, how should feminism relate to the state itself? Should feminist movements engage with the development of progressive parties (or the radicalization of existing ones, as in the case of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and so on)?

NF | One thing feminists, like all progressive forces, must do is defend public services against the austerity that states are imposing at the behest of the financial sector. We need to oppose the retrenchment and commodification of public services. But that isn’t enough.

Finance is a global force that pits different countries against one other — it can’t be defeated one country at a time. Many people don’t have a functioning state — they live in failed states or refugee

camps or kleptocracies. And even those who do have one are caught in a race to the bottom, orchestrated by investors and banks.

So, exclusively state-based approaches cannot be the answer — rather, we need a global counterpower. The fight against austerity can only succeed if we link state-level struggles to broader transnational struggles aimed at transforming the international financial order. We need to build cross-border alliances committed to fighting for social rights, not just nationally, but globally.

But I also want to address the second part of your question, about how feminists should relate to anti-capitalist parties and left-wing political currents. This is in part a tactical question, to be decided on a case-by-case basis in the light of local specifics. But such decisions should be guided by two general considerations.

First, any feminism aimed at liberating *all* women must itself be anti-capitalist — liberal, pro-capitalist feminisms can at best empower a small, privileged stratum of professional-managerial women, while leaving the vast majority vulnerable to abuses of every stripe.

Second, feminists, however numerous and radical we become, cannot transform society all by ourselves. The deep structural change we need can only be achieved through a broad-based anti-capitalist alliance, which must also include radical movements and political parties that have not so far prioritized gender. We'll have to push them to do that, as we join with radical environmentalists, anti-racists, immigrant-rights movements, labor unions, and others. That's the only path to large-scale social transformation.

It's also the only path to a genuinely liberatory feminism. Our chief concerns are gender and sexuality, to be sure. But these matters do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be abstracted from the larger social matrix in which they are embedded, which also includes other major fault lines of social injustice. So, feminists must broaden our agenda beyond conventional understandings of "women's issues." We rightly insist that labor movements broaden their agenda to include reproductive work, as you said. But *we* also need to broaden *our* agenda to include the whole spectrum of issues that affect women — and everyone else.

OM | Is there already a relation between feminist movements and parties in the United States? How is the Democratic Party acting in this respect?

NF | Second-wave feminism in the United States erupted as a radical anti-systemic movement; as part of the New Left, it had no direct links to political parties. But in the following decades, as its radicalism faded, the movement's dominant currents embraced liberalism and became an interest group within the Democratic Party. This proved problematic, because this was the very moment when that party was transforming itself into a force for neoliberalization and financialization.

The effect was to link the "official feminism," within the Democrats, with policies that deeply harmed the working classes. That has made life difficult for *all* American feminists, including those on the Left. The trouble is compounded by the peculiarities of our electoral system, which effectively locks in a two-party configuration, making it all but impossible for third (or fourth or fifth) parties to gain any traction. That makes the Democratic Party the only game in town. With nowhere else to go, radical movements can exercise political influence only by struggling within it to change its orientation.

That's exactly what is going on today. The Democrats are split between the Clinton/ Obama wing (the "progressive neoliberals," as I've called them) and the Sanders/Warren/AOC wing (the "democratic socialists" or progressive anti-corporate populists). These two forces are now in the

fight of their lives for control of the party. There is no question in my mind that feminists should be aligning with the Left in that struggle, even as we also insist that it should put feminist thinking at the center of its agenda.

OM | In your book, you talk about “global care chains” and about the “crisis of care work,” which allows wealthier women to hire poorer (often migrant or racialized) women to take care of their houses, children, and parents, while they can concentrate on their careers. As you argue, these underpaid women are left with no time for their own domestic and familial responsibilities and have to transfer them to other even poorer women across national borders, and so on and so forth. Could you explain this concept of “global care chains”? And given that the interests of the women at the top of this chain are radically different from those at the bottom, how can they reunite in one same feminist battle? Is there a common battleground?

NF | That’s a very good question. It’s unclear who exactly coined the phrase “global care chains,” but many people give the credit to an American sociologist named Arlie Hochschild. She wrote a much-cited article (“Love and Gold”), which suggests that love is the new gold, the new “natural resource” that the Global North is extracting from the Global South. Just as precious metals were extracted in earlier times, so care is extracted now, as privileged northern women assume demanding jobs, working sixty to seventy hours a week to climb the corporate ladder or make partner at prestigious law firms.

To do that, they need to offload their domestic and care responsibilities onto others. Male partners don’t step in, and public services are being cut — so where to turn? The answer: immigrant women, often racialized, who come from halfway around the world, leaving their own families in the care of other, poorer women, who must rely in turn on others who are poorer still. Ergo, a network of global care chains by analogy with global commodity chains. But, of course, this is no solution. Instead of overcoming the care deficit, it simply displaces it onto less privileged women further down the chain. It’s like musical chairs — when the music stops, someone must be left without a seat. In effect, the liberation of privileged metropolitan women is built on the extraction of “gold” from the periphery.

Where, you ask, does this leave the idea of global sisterhood? My own view is that this is not the best way to think about feminist politics. I prefer to say that we have a number of different, competing feminisms, with different, competing views of gender equality, of the sources of sexism, and of what must be changed and how. These views differ sharply in their class and racial/ethnic/national orientation. Seen this way, feminism is not a global sisterhood but a political-ideological battleground. And that’s a good thing — we *do* need to struggle over these matters.

You ask whether all women share the same interests. Certainly not, if we assume that people define their interests relative to current structures and institutions. In that case, the interests of migrant care workers conflict directly with those of the privileged women who hire them to work long hours at low pay and without labor rights. On the other hand, we needn’t take current understandings of interests as sacrosanct. In crisis periods, many people radicalize and begin to understand their interests differently. Attracted to projects for social transformation, they redefine them in a new light. Possibly, some women in the professional-managerial class who are now attracted to neoliberal forms of feminism will “convert,” so to speak, to the feminism of the 99 percent. But that will only happen if our movement becomes large, strong, and convincing in its claim to offer a better life for everyone.

What does this mean with respect to the crisis of care? Feminists for the 99 percent aim to transform the entire relation between “production” and “reproduction.” We say that no one should have to work sixty or seventy hours a week to have a meaningful life. Everyone should have a much

shorter working week and a lot more time for family life, political participation, and other enjoyments. No one should be caught in zero-sum games that force us to take away from one fundamental life activity what we give to another. Everyone should have access to ample, generous support for care work — from states, friends, neighbors, and civil society associations. Men should be every bit as responsible and engaged as women in these activities. Only this approach can truly solve the present crisis of care and make life better for everyone.

OM | The manifesto endorses a feminism capable of involving the large majority of women but also aimed at radical social transformation. In so doing, you unveil the hypocrisy of progressive-neoliberal or managerial feminism, with its ideology of “breaking the glass ceiling” — something that leaves other women (with less possibilities and less human capital) “in the basement.” But who is your manifesto intended for — feminist activists, or potential future activists? Even if your diagnosis is correct, this individualistic idea of “leaning in,” which erases every other consideration of class and race, is still very powerful for a lot of women — especially those who aren’t very politicized. And though neoliberal ideology is slowly fading, there is still a neoliberal anthropology that exists among not only the top 1 percent but also middle-class and maybe some poor women. Do we have to reject this type of feminism entirely? Or is there some way to use it for social or progressive ends?

NF | You may be right that the unreflective common sense of many middle- and upper-class people remains liberal or neoliberal. But I think that common sense has lost a lot of its credibility for other strata. Now that neoliberalization has hit a wall, the poor and working classes insist that it’s not working for them, as does the bottom half of the middle class. And that’s what makes the idea of a feminism of the 99 percent more than a pipe dream: social reality is meeting us halfway.

As more people lose faith in the established parties and politicians, they are willing to think outside the box. This is certainly the case for those who have turned to the likes of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, and Matteo Salvini here in Italy. But it also holds for those attracted to ambiguous formations like the Five Star Movement and to left-populist figures like Sanders, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Jeremy Corbyn.

In this situation of uncertainty, fluidity, and experimentation, it’s absolutely crucial that left-wing feminists (like leftists of every kind) jump into the fray and offer an alternative not only to right-wing populism but also to “progressive neoliberalism.” It’s a moment when people’s ideas can change very quickly, and we need to put our own best ideas into the mix.

You ask: For whom did we write the manifesto? Well, for a range of different readers. We wrote it in part for those who are already attracted to a left-wing form of feminism, a group that includes large numbers of very young women (and for that matter, young men!) who have been radicalized, who want to be activists. Many of them don’t yet know much about what capitalism is, nor about feminism or socialism. They’re newly politicized and hungry for a guiding perspective.

OM | And they don’t reject the word “socialism” . . . in the United States, at least.

NF | Well, it’s true that United States differs from Europe in this respect. Historically, Europe had large socialist parties, many of which are now collapsing because they supported neoliberalization. By contrast, the United States hasn’t had a major party that called itself “socialist” for nearly a century. So, it may be easier for us to reclaim that word; you [in Europe] might need to find other words. But on both continents (and on others, too!), lots of people are gravitating to the Left, including some who are already feminists and some who are only now becoming feminists.

These are among the many people reading the manifesto in many countries. Some caucuses in political parties and trade unions are using it in reading groups to educate their members. In universities, too, the manifesto is being read, both in gender studies programs and in other departments and programs. There are also readers who have not been particularly interested in feminism but who are active on the left wing of other movements, such as labor, anti-racism, or environmentalism.

That's important, because the manifesto can serve as a model for other movements. Green activists can adapt our strategy by developing an environmentalism for the 99 percent; anti-racists can formulate an anti-racism for the 99 percent — and so on. Remember, finally, that our manifesto was published simultaneously in twenty languages, and several more translations are in the works. This shows that there is a widespread hunger for this kind of thinking, that it appeals to a variety of different readerships that were previously separate but may now be converging.

OM | Too many people reduce everything to the “white working class,” arguing that feminism and anti-racism will inevitably create useless conflicts within the “class” (as if the class were solely composed of white, working-class men). How would you answer this? If many white, working-class men in the Rust Belt voted for Trump, how can a left-wing political force convince them that feminism and anti-racism aren't just problems of recognition for competing identities, but mainly of the distribution of resources? How can the Left create a hegemonic bloc able to ally working-class people associated with manufacturing, mining, and construction with others who depend on wages from service work, domestic labor, and the public sector — a group notably including women, immigrants, and people of color?

NF | The Left should try to convince both those groups of people, who don't usually think of themselves as allies, that they ought now to do just that. We should try to show both groups that, however differently their problems appear on the surface, they are rooted in one and the same social system, which is financialized capitalism. That means offering them a map on which each group can locate itself in relation to the other, identify their common enemy, and envision the possibility of joining forces against that enemy. That's my general idea of what the Left should be doing now.

The manifesto is one example of this sort of strategy. Of course, it doesn't speak directly to Rust Belt layers who voted for Trump in the United States, let alone to their analogues elsewhere. But it does speak to large feminist and left-wing readerships with whom we have credibility. And, as I said, it sketches for those readerships the sort of map that others can adapt for constituencies with whom they have credibility.

Incidentally, I have elsewhere proposed (in [The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born](#)) a left-populist strategy that could unite at least some of Trump's Rust Belt voters with other fractions of the US working class (women, people of color, immigrants) who have in the past supported his progressive-neoliberal opponents (Obama, the Clintons, now Joe Biden). I see feminism for the 99 percent as one important strand of that potential counter-hegemonic alliance, along with many other strands.

OM | What should a left populism do in order to win over Rust Belt workers? After all, most probably aren't inherently racists, homophobic, misogynists, and so on (even if some really are). There must be a way to address them anew.

NF | Yes, exactly. It's crucial that we address them. If we don't, we simply cede them to the Right. The first thing to do is to validate that they have legitimate grievances. That also means recognizing that they have a reason to reject the mainstream neoliberal parties, which destroyed the political

economy that afforded them some dignity and reason to hope that their children would have better lives — expectations that now lie in shreds.

The problem is that many of them are — for now at least — drawn to perspectives that give them the wrong interpretation of who's to blame. We have to say "you are right to be angry, but you're fingering the wrong suspect: it's not immigrants or people of color, not Mexicans or Muslims, Africans or Jews. The real culprit is global finance and neoliberalism."

This also suggests how we can distinguish left-wing from right-wing populism. Both mobilize a mass against an elite stratum that is considered as oppressing "the people" from above. But right-wing populists simultaneously mobilize against a lower stratum that they claim thwarts "the people" from below — whether that means blacks or Latinos or immigrants or Muslims or Arabs or Jews.

Right-wing populism thus places the beleaguered "people" in the middle, caught between "higher" and "lower" enemies; it combines resentment against wealthy elites with scapegoating of disadvantaged minorities. That's a key difference from left-wing populism. Far from practicing such scapegoating, [left-wing populism] instead invokes an enlarged understanding of the "people," uniting both middle and lower strata (or so the hope goes) against a small upper class or elite. The Occupy movement captured this perfectly when it targeted the 1 percent in the name of the 99 percent.

There is also another key difference. Right-wing populists tend to characterize the hated elites in identitarian terms, while left-wing populists identify them by their functional role or structural position in society. So, whereas right-wing populists rail against "liberal secularists" or "Jewish bankers" or "homosexuals," their counterparts on the Left target "Wall Street" or "Big Tech" or "global finance."

OM | In a [fall 2017 article](#), you argued that both progressive neoliberalism (the alliance of multiculturalism, feminism, LGBTQ, and environmentalism with what you have called the "Goldman Sachsification of the US economy") and reactionary neoliberalism (the neoliberal politics of distribution coupled with a reactionary politics of recognition) had slowly lost their hegemony in the United States after the economic crisis.

Their aftermath produced a "hegemonic gap" that has been filled with the rise of populism (be it progressive or reactionary). This battle for hegemony was at first won by Trump, thanks to his promises for a stronger politics of distribution.

Your point is that although during his 2016 campaign Trump presented himself as a "reactionary populist," his real policies have unmasked him as a "hyper-reactionary neoliberal." That is, he has abandoned the politics of distribution and solely pursued a reactionary politics of recognition. Is this intensification of reactionary (patriarchal, misogynist, homophobic, racist) identity politics without a politics of distribution enough to maintain an enduring consensus?

NF | It's fascinating to watch this Trumpian drama unfold: every new day brings something more shocking than the day before. But still, Trump has not lifted a finger to encourage the creation of high-paid manufacturing jobs or to institute big public-works projects aimed at repairing our decaying infrastructure. Even in the United States, we have bridges that collapse and kill people.

Although Trump campaigned on the promise to invest in such public-works projects, he has done nothing of the sort — he prefers the plane of phantasm, falsely claiming that he is building a "beautiful wall" on the Mexican border. His tariff war with China is equally phantasmatic and dishonest. All the national-populist rhetoric in the world cannot disguise the fact that his blue-collar

base derives no benefits from his incoherent policies. If Trump is wreaking havoc on global supply chains, in an integrated world economy organized for the benefit of the capitalist class, this does not benefit these workers.

So, yes, Trump is governing as a hyper-reactionary neoliberal. How long can he get away with that? Nobody knows. It's obvious, at some level, that his actions as president have betrayed those supporters attracted by populist promises. But how many of them will defect in 2020? That depends on what else is on offer.

Some of Trump's voters are union members who voted Democratic in the past. Far from being card-carrying racists, some of them voted for Obama, both in 2008 and in 2012, when he channeled Occupy rhetoric to campaign from the left. Equally telling, some voted for Sanders in the 2016 primary. Can the Democrats win them back? Their best shot, I think, is to nominate an unapologetic leftist, like Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren, both of whom are now campaigning as left-populists. They can give voice to the genuine grievances of this layer, while replacing Trumpian scapegoating with a valid structural diagnosis as to what's really wrong and must be changed. By contrast, a centrist progressive-neoliberal nominee like Joe Biden will drive white working-class voters back to Trump.

OM | Why do you think that the category of "fascism" is inadequate to describe the present time?

NF | I see the present as a moment of genuine openness and great fluidity. An interregnum, if you like, in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born." As mainstream common sense breaks down, people are all over the map. One day they vote Mélenchon, the next day for Marine Le Pen.

In this context, it is counterproductive to invoke the specter of fascism. Granted, Trump's policies and rhetoric are hateful and exclusionary, and have served to incite racist violence. But to say that the fascists are at the door and that we need to close ranks with the liberals is completely wrong. There is still an opening, and it's time to seize it.

Failing that, there may indeed come a time when the fascists will truly be at the door. When that time comes, I will fight shoulder to shoulder with anti-fascist liberals. But we're not at that point now. On the contrary, it's the liberals who brought us this vicious right-wing populism — it was their "progressive neoliberal" project that enabled the rise of Trump. And if we put them back in power, they will create the conditions for more vicious right-wing populisms, and for even worse Trumps.

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