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Women

“Feminism of the 99% is an anticapitalist alternative to neoliberal feminism”

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The Italian feminist Cinzia Arruzza is an associate professor of philosophy at the New School of Social Research in New York and author of the book *Dangerous Liaisons: Marriages and Divorces between Marxism and Feminism*. [1] She has just finished writing a “Manifesto for a Feminism for the 99%” along with Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya. In this interview for *ctxt - Revista Contexto* Josefina L. Mart nez asked her about the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, gender and class, in the new wave of international feminism. [2]

What is the objective and the main thesis of the “Manifesto for a feminism for the 99%”? [3]

Feminism for the 99% is the anti-capitalist alternative to the liberal feminism that has become hegemonic in recent decades, due to the low level of struggles and mobilizations around the world. What we understand as liberal feminism is a feminism centred on liberties and formal equality, which seeks the elimination of gender inequality, but through means that are only accessible to elite women. We think, for example, of the type of feminism embodied by women like Hillary Clinton. Or, also, the kind of feminism that in Europe is becoming an ally of the states in supporting Islamophobic policies “in the name of women's rights”, as Sara Farris details in her recent book. [4]

To be clear, it is a type of feminism that pursues gender equality within a specific class, the privileged one, leaving behind the vast majority of women. Feminism for the 99% is an alternative to liberal feminism, since it is openly anti-capitalist and anti-racist: it does not separate formal equality and emancipation from the need to transform society and social relations in their totality, from the need to overcome the exploitation of labour, the plundering of nature, racism, war and imperialism. Finally, it is directly positioned as part of transfeminism, defends the rights and needs of sex workers and seeks social and political alliances with all movements that fight for a better world for the 99%.

Do you think that the new women's movement that is developing around the world could be in advance of a more general return of the class struggle?

That is my hope, and also my bet. In the first place, this new feminist wave is the only existing transnational mobilization that brings together millions of women and men from all over the world. Secondly, in some countries it is already difficult to distinguish clearly the class struggle from the feminist movement: I think, above all, of Argentina, of course, but also of Spain or Italy. I believe that those who are sincerely interested in reviving the class struggle should abandon, once and for all, divisive and derogatory attitudes towards this new feminist wave; stop thinking that feminist mobilizations are an antithesis of the class struggle or, at best, an external complement. I prefer to invite thinking about the new feminist wave as a process of radicalization and politicization in which the subjectivity of the workers – often young, precarious, poorly paid, unpaid, exploited and sexually harassed in the workplace – is emerging as a combative and potentially anti-capitalist subjectivity.

It seems that, in the current and future struggles of the working class, women will play a leading role. Are they already doing so?

There is an interesting phenomenon to take into account: we are seeing a significant increase in strikes and mobilizations in workplaces within the scope of social reproduction. Think of the teachers' strikes in the United States (illegal strikes, which are significantly changing the dynamics of the labour movement), the strike of health workers in India, or that of teachers in Brazil. These are strikes in which women workers are the majority and have a key role. Although there is no explicit link between these strikes and the international women's strike of recent years, I believe

that the feminist movement is playing a role in empowering these women, demonstrating that rebellion is possible and necessary.

In the feminist mobilizations (in Spain or Argentina) we hear more and more: “Patriarchy and capital, criminal alliance”. Is the debate on the relationship between gender oppression and capitalism reopened?

Well, I think the reason is that we are thinking again about structural phenomena and the complexity of social relations, whereas in the last decades most of feminism was immersed in the so-called “linguistic turn”, focusing especially on issues of language, culture and interpersonal power relations.

From this point of view, it is a very positive sign that young feminist activists and thinkers are interested in understanding the structural connection between gender oppression and capitalism, in understanding the root causes of our current situation.

In several articles, you dispute the “dual system” thesis, which defines capitalism and patriarchy as autonomous systems. Why do you consider this theory incorrect and what are the practical consequences for the women’s movement?

There are several versions of the theory of “dual systems”, with different political consequences. The most classical, influenced by French materialist feminism, ends – in one way or another – by conceptualizing racial and gender oppression as systems of exploitative relationships; therefore, they conceptualize sex as class. I’m simplifying too much; the theory has had several developments in recent decades and has reached more nuanced conclusions in the case of some authors.

However, my objections are of two types. First, if we understand sex as class, then we also have to interpret sexual and gender oppression as class antagonisms, which basically rules out the possibilities of common alliances and struggles (between women and men). To put it simply: I would not make an alliance with my employer. Secondly, if sex, race and class express three autonomous systems that intersect or combine, it is not clear at all why they do so: what is the reason? In fact, the truth is that in some cases traditional forms of gender oppression literally conflict with capitalist interests.

In contrast to the “dual” theories, you defend the importance of the concept of “social reproduction” for a Marxist feminist theory

The way in which I interpret this relationship – along with authors like Nancy Fraser, Tithi Bhattacharya, Sue Ferguson, Sara Farris, David McNally and others – is based on the notion of social reproduction. In a few words, it refers to the activities and work involved in the biological, daily and generational reproduction of the labour force. But let’s be clear: reproducing a workforce means reproducing people and life. This is not limited to mere subsistence or survival needs, but also to the satisfaction of more complex needs and the reproduction of skills that contribute to converting labour power into that special commodity that can be sold in the capitalist market.

We are, therefore, talking about the socialization of children, of education, but also of health and social services. The labour force in this type of activity is strongly feminized in two senses: the vast majority of workers (salaried and non-salaried) are women, and their working conditions are among the most exploited.

And how are oppression and exploitation related to the sphere of social reproduction?

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The key to understanding what social reproduction has to do with gender oppression (and in part racial oppression) is that social reproduction – under capitalism – is necessarily subordinated to production as a function of profit.

The paradox is that capitalism needs social reproduction and that it is relatively functional but does not want to pay the cost for it. Especially because all the activities of social reproduction have low technology and are labour intensive, which means that they are expensive. The way in which capitalists (and states) manage to keep these costs as low as possible varies, but we can identify some common phenomena: the increase in the use of poorly paid and unorganized migrant labour in privatized sectors (for example, migrants who care for dependents or the elderly); the cuts in social spending and social services that force women to do this work free of charge at home; the commercialization of the most profitable aspects of social reproductive work-chains of restaurants, laundries and so on – using, once again, cheap migrant labour.

We can conclude that the exploitation of class, the oppressions of gender and race, form a complex totality in capitalism

There is much more to be said about these processes, the theory of social reproduction does not explain everything, but it provides us with the theoretical tools to see how apparently disconnected phenomena take place in a context of social relations of production and reproduction, which imprison the lives of people, greatly limit the available options and organize and restrict the temporality of our lives.

PS:

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[1] Cinzia Arruzza *Dangerous Liaisons: Marriages and Divorces between Marxism and Feminism*, Merlin Press, Resistance Books and the IIRE 2013. Available from [Resistance Books](#).

[2] *ctxt - Revista Contexto*, 15 August 2018 [“El feminismo del 99% es la alternativa anticapitalista al feminismo liberal”](#).

[3] To be published as *Feminism for the 99% – A Manifesto* by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, Verso London, March 2019. See [Verso](#).

[4] Sara Farris *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Duke University Press, April 2017.