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Feminism

“The Feminism of the 1 Percent Has Associated Our Cause With Elitism”

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Recent years have seen an upsurge in the working-class women’s movement, from impressive protests against domestic violence and workplace harassment to the mass strikes marking International Women’s Day in Spain, Poland, and beyond. These actions point the way to an anti-systemic feminism, going beyond the liberal, individualist variant promoted by the likes of Hillary Clinton.

One of the expressions of this new wave is the popular manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* (Verso Books, 2019). It insists that feminism does not stand as an alternative to class struggle, but rather represents a decisive front in the fight for a world free of capitalism and all forms of oppression.

Nancy Fraser is co-author of the manifesto together with Cinzia Arruzza and Tithi Bhattacharya. She spoke to Rebeca Martínez of *Viento Sur* about the book, her critique of so-called “progressive neoliberalism,” and her understanding of a feminism that puts the voices of working-class and racialized women front and center.

RM: What exactly is *Feminism for the 99%* and why launch such a manifesto now?

NF: The manifesto is a short piece of writing that’s intended to be popular and accessible rather than academic. I’ve written it together with the Italian feminist Cinzia Arruzza, who lives in New York, and Tithi Bhattacharya, an Indian-British woman who teaches in the United States.

This is the first time since I was a “68er” an activist in the 1960s and 1970s that I have written a piece of real agitational political writing. I am, after all, mainly a philosophy professor. But the times now are so severe, the crisis of politics so acute, that I really felt that I had to jump in and try and reach a broader audience. So, the manifesto attempts to articulate a new path for the feminist movement, which has been dominated for the last couple of decades by a liberal-corporate wing of feminism, as personified in the United States by Hillary Clinton.

That was the feminism of the professional-managerial class, of relatively privileged women “middle- or upper-middle-class women who are highly educated and mostly white” who are trying to get ahead in the worlds of business or the military or the media. Their project was to climb the corporate hierarchy, to be treated in the same way as the men of their own class, with the same pay and prestige.

This wasn’t a genuinely egalitarian feminism “it wasn’t a feminism with much to offer for the vast majority of women who are poor and working class, who don’t have those privileges, who are migrants, who are women of color, who are trans or non-cis women. And this feminism of the 1 percent or maybe, at best, the 10 percent, has really tarnished the name of feminism. It has associated our cause with elitism, with individualism, with corporate life. It’s given feminism a bad name, associating us with neoliberalism, with financialization, with globalization, with anti-working-class politics.

The three of us thought this was a good moment to jump in and try and create a short, accessible statement of a vision and of a project of a feminism that takes the situation of poor and working-class women as its starting point, and asks what we really need to do to improve women’s lives. Of course, the three of us aren’t alone, in this “there are other left-wing feminists who’ve been trying to develop an alternative.

This is, indeed, emerging in the huge marches and demonstrations around March 8 [International Women's Day]: these protests have an anti-systemic character, for they protest austerity and the assault on social production. The movement to meet women's needs can't be focused only on women's issues as traditionally defined, like abortion rights — though those are very important. It also has to think more broadly about the larger crisis of society and articulate policies and programs for the benefit of everyone. That's why we call it a feminism for the 99 percent. That doesn't just mean 99 percent of women but 99 percent of human beings on the planet.

RM: You mentioned March 8 and the feminist strikes that have been organized since 2017 in many countries, including here in Spain. Indeed, even beyond that, in Spain in recent years most labor protests have been waged by women, for instance domestic workers and nursing-home workers. So, are we facing a new wave within feminism? And to what phase of neoliberal capitalism does it respond?

NF: I do think it's a new wave, or at least has the potential to become one, if it can make a split with this liberal corporate feminism. And I think it shows lots of signs of doing that.

Neoliberalism has engaged a fierce assault on what we call the sphere of social reproduction. That means all the activities and programs that support people and their reproduction: from birthing and raising children, elder care and the work that goes on inside the private household to things like public education, health care, transportation, retirement income, and housing. Neoliberalism has squeezed all of that. It says that women need to be working full-time in the paid workforce and at the same time that states need to cut spending on social programs as part of austerity and financialization.

So here we have both the withdrawal of public support in these areas, and the insistence that women put their time into producing profits for capital. That means a real crisis of care and of social reproduction. This sphere is where — as you said — the most militant strikes and fightbacks are.

In the crisis of the 1930s, the center of militant revolt was industrial labor — the forming of unions, the struggle for labor rights, and so on. Today the situation is different, partly because of deindustrialization and the relocation of manufacturing to the Global South. Now social reproduction is at the center.

You mentioned some important strikes led by women; I'd add that in the United States we have had a major wave of teachers' strikes. It's extraordinary: teachers are paid so little that many of them have to take second jobs working at Walmart in the evening in order to have enough to live on for themselves and their families. But these teachers' strikes were not only for higher wages — they were also for increased funding for education, to make the schools better. So, they've gotten a tremendous amount of support.

That's an example of the sphere of social reproduction as a major site of struggle. And I understand that the huge March 8 marches and strikes in Spain were also protests against the cutting of social spending in all of these areas. Today struggles over social reproduction are at the cutting edge of left-wing, anti-systemic, anticapitalist struggle, and women are at the forefront. This fact needs to be at the center of a new way of thinking about what feminist politics is.

RM: How would you say this struggle over social reproduction interacts with class struggle and with antiracist and LGBTQ movements?

NF: First of all, I think we need to rethink what we mean by class struggle. Again, our image of the class struggle is still rooted in the 1930s — the white, male industrial worker with a union. But I would say that these struggles over social reproduction are also class struggles. For you can't have production and industrial work if you don't have somebody doing the work of producing and replenishing the workers and caring for the next generation that will

replace them. Social reproduction is essential to capitalist production.

The work that produces those people and forms of sociality is every bit as much work as the work that goes on in factories. What makes class is not just the relationship of work in the factory but also the relations of social reproduction that produce the workers. So, this is all part of class struggle.

Our idea of class struggle in the past was too narrow. I don't think that feminism for the 99 percent is an alternative to class struggle. It's another front in the class struggle, so it should be allied with more familiar labor movements as well as the other things you mentioned — antiracist struggles, the struggle for migrant rights, and the struggle for LGBTQ rights.

This also matters because of the new class and racial division among women. The educated, upper-middle-class women that beat discrimination and rise to the top in corporations are working sixty hours a week in very demanding jobs. They're hiring women of color, often migrant women, to pick up the slack of care work, childcare, cleaning their houses, cooking for their children, caring in nursing homes for their parents, and so on. These liberal-feminist women are thus leaning on the labor of racialized women. These latter are vulnerable: they don't have labor rights, they are paid very little, and they are vulnerable to assault and abuse.

All of this class-race dimension within feminism needs to be put front and center. Feminism for the 99 percent has to be an antiracist movement. It has to take the situation of poor, working-class, and racialized women — the majority of women — and put their needs at the front, not the needs of corporate-climbers who want to crack the glass ceiling.

Similarly, within the LGBTQ movement there is a liberal wing which has been hegemonic and then a broader mass of people whose needs and issues have been marginalized. So, I think there's a comparable struggle going on within LGBTQ movements over whose issues are going to be front and center. I'd like to see our feminism for the 99 percent speak for trans, queer, and lesbian women, and I'd like to see an LGBTQ movement for the 99 percent, which would be its natural ally.

RM: It's clear that the struggle over social reproduction could build a bloc against neoliberalism and capitalism. But what about patriarchal relationships — can we fight male violence within the terms of the fight over reproduction? Can we use this front to change our relationships with other women and, above all, with men?

NF: Let me start by mentioning the #MeToo movement. The public image of this movement is focused on Hollywood, highly paid actresses, entertainers, the media, and so on. But the broad mass of much less privileged women is even more vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment at work. I'm talking about agricultural workers, some of whom don't even have papers, and whose lack of power and resources makes them very vulnerable to the demands of bosses and foremen. The same is true of hotel workers — for example, the case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn — or workers who clean offices. People who work in private homes as domestic workers are notoriously subject to rape and sexual assault.

The #MeToo movement, if you think about it more broadly, is a labor struggle. It's a struggle for a safe workplace where you are not subject to abuse. That the media focuses only on the top tier is unfortunate, for it makes it look like it's not a class struggle. But the social reproduction issue also has to do, at bottom, with changing the relations between production and reproduction and, therefore, changing the balance of power within households.

Social reproduction should not be gendered as women's work only. It's important work in society, some aspects of

which are very pleasurable and creative. Men should have access to that and should feel responsibility to do their share and pull their full weight. This, too, is about changing dynamics within households. And of course, a feminism for the 99 percent is against all violence against women, against trans people, against non-cis people, against racialized people, and so on.

Patriarchy is a word, I should say, that I don't myself like to use, for it suggests an image of power that is dyadic — you have a master and then a servant who is their subject. Some of that still exists, there is no question. But the really central forms of power in our society exist in a more impersonal and structural way, constraining the options of working-class and poor people.

So, I think it's important to have a different image of power. It works through the banks and the IMF, through the organization of finance and industry, and through the construction of gendered and racialized labor markets. This is what determines who has access to resources, who can vindicate their claims and function as equals even within families and personal relationships.

RM:When you talk about social justice you distinguish among three levels. There is distribution (the economy) but also recognition (culture) and representation (politics). To what extent are these three levels present in the new cycle of feminism?

NF: I think we're concerned with all these things, and they're sort of interrelated. You can't change the economic sphere and distributive relations if you don't change these other things, too.

What counts as a political issue is often defined in terms of what counts as an economic issue. The forces of capital insist that issues concerning the workplace should be decided by the markets, by the bosses, that these are not issues for democratic, political, collective self-determination. There's a line between what the private owners of capital decide and what we as democratic majorities decide.

A lot of this has to do with questions of culture — with the languages available to us to understand our situation. Do we have concepts like sexual harassment and date-rape, the terminology with which to talk about what the wrongs in society are, to talk about our experience and to make our claims?

Feminism has done a great deal to create new language and, in that sense, to change culture, to change people's understanding of what they are entitled to and don't have to put up with. So, it's broadened the sphere of political discourse and what is potentially a question for democratic decision-making and not the private decision for the family or the firm.

At present, we've made more progress at this cultural level than we have at the level of institutional change and transformation, both in the political sphere and in the economic sphere. But it's always about the interrelations among these three things.

RM:You've pointed out that neoliberalism has appropriated some of the critiques developed and demands raised by second-wave feminism and other 1970s movements, incorporating them to its own benefit. Could this happen again with the emerging forms of feminism — and what can we do to avoid this?

NF: Liberal feminism along with liberal antiracism and liberal LGBTQ movements and what has been called “green capitalism” were hegemonized — incorporated into — a hegemonic ruling bloc which in the United States took the form of what I call “progressive neoliberalism.”

These movements lent their charisma, their ideology, to give these horrible policies “financialization, the precarization of work, and the driving down of wages” the veneer of being pro-gay, pro-women, and so on. That definitely happened, and this is why it is so important that the new wave of feminism should break with that kind of feminism and chart a new path.

It’s always possible to be hegemonized and recuperated by more powerful forces whose ultimate aims are deeply at odds with one’s own. It is always important for emancipatory and left-wing movement to be wary of this.

Today, we are told that we really have only two options “either right-wing authoritarian populisms, which are racist and xenophobic, or else go back to our liberal protectors and progressive neoliberalism. But this is a false choice” we need to refuse both options.

This is a moment of huge crisis in which we have the chance to chart a different path, building a truly anti-systemic movement for the 99 percent in which feminism for the 99 percent is one current along with labor movements, environmentalism for the 99 percent, the fight for migrant rights for the 99 percent, and so on.

RM: You have written that the nation state (in what you call the Westphalian-Keynesian framework) has entered into crisis with neoliberalism and that its borders are now more diffuse. You call this the “deframing” policy. But what is the role of the nation state today. Can we say that it has disappeared?

NF: No, it hasn’t disappeared. Historically the main force that has provided any level of protection and security to working people from capital has been the nation state. And it’s still the case that the nation state remains the principal addressee of claims. When we want protection, when we want social support, who do we ask? We demand that our government respond to us.

This is understandable when politics is still largely organized on a national basis, that national election campaigns are the principal activities for national-level politics. But it remains the case that this is ultimately inadequate.

We can see this when we look at migration, which is a huge point of conflict, indeed a crisis. We have people from all over the world who don’t have states that can protect them or give them anything like what we in the wealthy countries are asking our states to give us. They are living in failed states, in refugee camps, they are forced to leave by political violence, by religious persecution, by the fact that the United States has invaded and destroyed their countries, by climate crisis, by many features of the global crisis that we live in.

When these people come, the right-wing populist movements double down on their politics of nationalism and exclusion. What’s Trump’s slogan? “Make America Great Again” like it was before all these dark people started showing up and ruining our country. That’s the ideology of this populist movement. So, we need to think in a transnational and global way about how we can ensure social rights for all people in the world. They need those rights, so that they don’t have to get into a boat and risk their lives just to find a decent place to live, somewhere halfway around the planet.

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