

INTRODUCTION

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Some would say socialist feminism is an artifact of the 1970s. It flowered with the women's liberation movement, as a theoretical response to what many in the movement saw as the inadequacies of Marxism, liberalism, and radical feminism, but since then it has been defunct, both theoretically and politically. I think this view is mistaken and the volume will show why.

Socialist feminism should be seen as an ongoing project. It is alive and well today and it existed before the women's liberation movement as well—though, both now and then, not necessarily in that name. It has sometimes been called Marxism, sometimes socialist feminism, sometimes womanism, sometimes materialist feminism, or feminist materialism, and sometimes is implicit in work that bears no theoretical labels. Though the term “socialist-feminist” can be used more narrowly, as I will explain, I am going to characterize as a socialist feminist anyone trying to understand women's subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation, with the aim of using this analysis to help liberate women. As Barbara Ehrenreich said in 1975 the term socialist feminism “is much too short for what is, after all, really socialist, internationalist, antiracist, antiheterosexist feminism.” The major purpose of this book is to show the strengths and resources—both theoretical and political—of this ongoing socialist-feminist project.

Today the project is more pressing than ever. “[T]he need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.... transforming the world in its own image,” was the *Communist Manifesto's* prescient description of what is now referred to as “globalization.” “The Battle of Seattle” against the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the demonstrations that have followed in Davos, Quebec City, Genoa and wherever world economic leaders meet, express peoples' growing awareness of and protest against capitalism as a global force beyond democratic control. The brutal

economic realities of globalization impact everyone across the globe—but women are affected disproportionately. Displaced by rapid economic changes, women bear a greater burden of labor throughout the world as social services are cut, whether in response to structural adjustment plans in the Third World or to so-called welfare reform in the United States. Women have been forced to migrate, are subject to trafficking, and are the proletarians of the newly industrializing countries. On top of all this they continue to be subject to sexual violence and in much of the world are not allowed to control their own processes of reproduction. How should we understand these phenomena and, more importantly, how do we go about changing them? Feminist theory that is lost in theoretical abstractions or that depreciates economic realities will be useless for this purpose. Feminism that speaks of women's oppression and its injustice but fails to address capitalism will be of little help in ending women's oppression. Marxism's analysis of history, of capitalism, and of social change is certainly relevant to understanding these economic changes, but if its categories of analysis are understood in a gender- or race-neutral way it will be unable to do justice to them. Socialist feminism is the approach with the greatest capacity to illuminate the exploitation and oppression of most of the women of the world.

The broad characterization of socialist feminism I am using allows for a range of views regarding the relationship among the many facets of our identities. Some of us would make class fundamental from an explanatory point of view, while others would refuse to give a general primacy to any one factor over others. Despite these differences in our perspectives, in the broad sense of "socialist feminism" that I am using here all socialist-feminists see class as central to women's lives, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation. And all of us see these aspects of our lives as inseparably and systematically related; in other words, class is always gendered and raced. One purpose of this volume is to promote conversation, dialogue, and debate among these different perspectives, but it is important to see that the conversation takes place within a common project that underlies the differences. The project has a long history.

What we now call feminism came to public attention in the eighteenth century, most notably in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), where she argued for equal opportunity for women based on a rational capacity common to both sexes, expressing "the wild wish to see the sex distinction confounded in society." Her feminist aspirations came together with socialistic aims in the thinking of a number of utopian socialists, whose visions of socialism included not only sexual equality in the family and society at large, but the end of the sexual division of labor—Wollstonecraft's "wild wish," which is radical even today. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels shared these aspirations, and deepened the critique of naturalistic justifications of all social hierarchies. But Marx and Engels were impatient with blueprints for a good society and focused instead on developing a theory of history, society, and social change which would be the basis for the realization of these ideals. It is worth pausing briefly

to consider what Marx and Engels said, since Marxism has had a great influence on feminism, whether it has been appropriated, rejected, or transformed.

To summarize many volumes in a paragraph: according to Marxism's historical materialist approach, history is a succession of modes of production, like feudalism and capitalism, each constituted by distinctive relations between the direct producers and the owners of the means of production who live off the labor of the producers. History, says the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto*, is "the history of class struggles ... freeman and slave ... lord and serf ... , in a word, oppressor and oppressed." But, although oppression and exploitation are common to all class societies, the relations between oppressor and oppressed have varied; in other words, exactly how each ruling class manages to live off the labor of the producers differs from one mode of production to another and each must be understood in its own terms.

The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relations of rulers and ruled.... It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers ... which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it ... the corresponding specific form of the state.¹

Not only the state, but the family, art, philosophy, and religion—even human nature—all take different forms in different modes of production. Marx goes on to say that what is basically the same economic basis can show "infinite variations and gradations in appearance," depending on specific historical conditions, which have to be studied in detail. In other words, within capitalism different forms of government and art and family are possible because capitalism is not the only influence.¹ Nevertheless, the relations of production have an explanatory primacy within Marxist theory because they constitute the framework within which other influences occur. And this is because the relations of production provide the "laws of motion" distinctive to each given mode of production. Thus capitalism, the mode of production most studied by Marx, is understood to be a unique historical form aimed at the maximization of profit in a competitive market system. This forces capitalists to strive continually to develop the productivity of labor and technology; for, according to Marx's theory, profit has its origin in wage labor. Though, unlike in slavery or serfdom, labor is legally free in capitalism, workers in capitalism are also free of any means of subsistence of their own; this forces them to work for capitalists and produce the profit that drives the system. Given these essential characteristics of all capitalist societies, while different and changing forms of government are possible, the constraints of capitalism rule out possibilities such as a true monarchy or a workers' government. Just what forms of family are possible within capitalism has been a matter of some debate.

Given the concepts' centrality in their theory, Marx and Engels focused on the oppression and exploitation inherent in the relationship between wage laborers and capitalists. They paid less attention to other forms of labor—for

example, the labor of peasants or of women in the family—and to other kinds of oppression simply because they were not as central to their project of understanding capitalism and overturning it. Marx and Engels believed that if they could understand how capitalism worked and help make workers conscious of their oppression they could contribute to workers' self-emancipation. They believed that the self-emancipation of the working class—men and women, of all nations, races, and creeds—would be the basis for the end of all other forms of oppression. With the establishment of the first real democracy, the rule of the immense majority—that is, socialism—class oppression and antagonism would be replaced by “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” As to how such a society would be organized, they pointed to the Paris Commune of 1870 as “what a workers' government would look like,” but otherwise said very little.

Tragically, the first successful socialist revolution took place in Russia—a country that lacked the large working class and the material development that Marx saw as necessary for socialism—and no successful revolutions followed in Western Europe where these necessary conditions did exist. In the early years of the revolution when Alexandra Kollontai was in the government and women were organized independently within the Communist Party, remarkable gains were made for women, from the end of legal restrictions on sexual behavior, including homosexuality and abortion, to preventing women's jobs being given to returning soldiers (they were allocated on the basis of need rather than sex), to the provision of communal restaurants, laundries, and childcare. However, most of these gains were eliminated later on and women were certainly not emancipated in the Soviet Union. But this does not show, as many commentators would have it, that “socialism failed women.” Men were not liberated either. This was far from the socialism-from-below that the classical Marxists had envisioned. Whatever the inadequacies of Marxist theories on what they called “the woman question,” there was no opportunity to correct them, for, as Marx had predicted in *The German Ideology*, without the necessary conditions for socialism “all the old crap”—exploitation and oppression—would return. And indeed it did, in the form of Stalin's dictatorship, which expropriated the name of Marxism, established a mode of production Marx had never foreseen, and destroyed the vision of socialism for millions of people.

In the mid-1970s many women within the women's liberation movement found themselves dissatisfied with the prevailing analyses of women's oppression. Liberalism was not radical enough, and radical feminism ignored economic realities. But Marxism was tainted, as Adrienne Rich describes, “by the fear that class would erase gender once again, when gender was just beginning to be understood as a political category.”² Seeking to combine the best of Marxism and radical feminism, these women developed a theory they called socialist feminism. When socialist feminism is intended in this way—as differentiated from Marxism—“Marxist feminism” is then understood as a perspective which gives primacy to class oppression as opposed to other forms of oppression, or,

going further, that reduces sex oppression to class oppression. (Radical feminism asserts the reverse relationship.) While the terms “Marxist feminism” and “socialist feminism” can be used in these narrower senses, the distinctions are to some extent verbal. As Rosemarie Tong concedes in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*,³ not everyone will agree with her classification of feminists into “Marxist” or “socialist.” For Tong, “[a]lthough it is possible to distinguish between Marxist and socialist-feminist thought, it is quite difficult to do so.” While there are theoretical differences among socialists and feminists on various issues, which in some contexts are important, *the terms* “Marxist” or “socialist” or “materialist” do not necessarily denote different perspectives. In *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*⁴ Alison Jaggar suggests that socialist feminism may be a more consistent Marxism. Which term a feminist chooses to describe herself reflects her particular understanding of Marxism and her theoretical and political milieu, and perhaps her personal experience, as much as it does the substance of her position. For example, Margaret Benston's classic 1969 article “The Political Economy of Women's Liberation”⁵ is described as a Marxist feminist analysis of household labor because she used Marxist categories and clearly saw herself as writing within a Marxist theoretical framework. In fact, Benston modified Marxist categories in ways that other feminists would say showed that Marxism was inadequate and needed a distinctive socialist-feminist theory.⁶ Her article stimulated quite a debate regarding how to understand household labor within Marxist/socialist-feminist terms—the so-called domestic labor debate.

In the 1990s the term “materialist feminism” gained currency, coined by feminists who wanted to give some grounding in social realities to postmodernist theory. However, materialist feminism is “a rather problematic and elusive concept,” in Martha Gimenez's apt characterization, in that sometimes it is used more or less as a synonym for “Marxist” or “socialist-feminist” combined with discourse analysis (as in the work of Rosemary Hennessy), while it is also used by cultural feminists who want nothing to do with Marxism.⁷ Yet another term that does not necessarily signal a distinct theoretical perspective regarding the relationship among class, sex, and race is “womanist,” a term preferred by some women of color who feel that “feminist” is too one-dimensional and who want to indicate solidarity with men of color as well as with women. Similarly, those who call themselves “multicultural” or “global” feminists would be socialist feminists in my broad sense. Feminists use a particular term to situate themselves within particular debates.

It is “socialist feminism” in the narrower sense that has declined. Developed by feminists who accepted Marxism's critique of capitalism but rejected the view that women's oppression was reducible to class oppression—which is how they understood the Marxist analysis—they argued that women's position in today's society was a function of both the economic system (capitalism) and the sex-gender system, which they called patriarchy. Some socialist feminists preferred to speak of one system they called capitalist patriarchy. But whether they

preferred one system or two, the key claim was that the mode of production had no greater primacy than sex-gender relations in explaining women's subordination. Many saw the Marxist emphasis on wage labor rather than on all kinds of labor, especially mothering, and on the relations of production rather than on the relations they called "the relations of reproduction" (sexuality and parenting), as sexist. Convinced that "the personal is political" they wanted to give theoretical and political attention to issues of sex, sexuality, and relations in the family, which some utopian socialists had addressed but which most Marxists ignored.

This distinctively anti-Marxist version of socialist feminism declined, I believe, for both internal and external reasons. Socialist feminists of the 1970s had criticized liberal and Marxist writers for using categories that were "gender-blind": "the individual" in liberalism, "the working class" in Marxism. Such categories ignore sex differences among individuals and workers, feminists argued, and hence neither liberalism nor Marxism could explain women's oppression. But women of color could and did make the same criticism of feminism, including socialist feminism, for using race-blind categories: "working class women," or simply "women." To accommodate race oppression (and heterosexism and other forms of oppression), there seemed to be two choices. If we need to posit "a system of social relations" to explain sexism, as they argued, then to explain racism (and other forms of oppression) we would have to posit systems beyond capitalism and patriarchy. This option raised a number of questions, including: What exactly constitutes a "system"? How many is enough? How are they related? How does the resulting perspective differ from simple pluralism? The other option was to go back to a theory like Marxism which aims to be all-inclusive. Since socialist feminists had distinguished themselves from Marxists because they were unclear how to integrate different forms of oppression without reducing one to the other, this did not seem an attractive option, but neither did the multiplication of systems. Hence there was and remains a lack of clarity, and disagreement as to exactly how different forms of oppression are related. Most of the writers included in this volume simply show their interconnectedness without addressing directly and theoretically the question of precisely how they are related and whether one has explanatory primacy.

Socialist feminism as a theoretical position distinct from Marxism also declined for external reasons, both intellectual and political. On the intellectual front, it would be difficult to overemphasize the influence postmodernism has had in the academic world. Starting from valid critiques of many theories' overgeneralizations and neglect of historical and political context, postmodernists ended up arguing from very anti-theoretical positions. Their emphasis on the local and particular, their attack on what they call "totalizing narratives" and on the very notion of truth and causality, were deeply discouraging to feminists trying to develop a coherent and systematic theory of women's oppression. The insight associated with postmodernism (though actually it was not new), that social and political power influence science, led many to scepticism. Also, despite

the inconsistency, it led many to claim that everything is socially constructed, thereby eliminating the distinction between sex and gender that had been so central to feminist critiques of gender relations. But if the body disappears in significations, what is the basis for arguing for reproductive rights? Given that some of postmodernism builds on insights associated with feminism and presents itself as radical, its effect was disorienting to say the least.

Turning to political causes, the decline of women's liberation and other social movements had a profound impact. The explosion of writing by feminists of all persuasions (indeed the creation of these "persuasions") was a product of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Consider the fact that a number of very influential articles of this period began as position statements for activist groups (the Redstockings' Manifesto, the Combahee River Collective's Statement) or as collective papers (Heidi Hartmann's and Gayle Rubin's—two of the most influential of this period). New movements stimulated new theorizing; for example, the gay and lesbian movements gave rise to the academic field Queer Studies. With the move of many activists into social policy and service work for women, into academia, and into families and middle age, this essential active stimulation was lost. It is not coincidental that the hottest feminist theorizing of the last decade was of a highly academic sort—postmodernism—while the dominant politics have been the most local and particularistic form of identity politics. Moreover, of course, we have to appreciate the context in which all this has taken place: namely, the general rightward political drift throughout the world during the 1980s and much of the 1990s.

My own opinion is that critiques of Marxism as sexist for focusing on relations of production and for ignoring labor in the family are misguided, given the primary aim of Marxist theory, as explained above. It was not sexism that led Marx to say that in capitalism women's household labor was unproductive, for he said the same thing about a carpenter working for the government. Although both are obviously productive in a general sense, Marx was seeking to understand what is productive from the point of view of capitalism—that only labor produces surplus value. Moreover, to understand how various aspects of society, including different forms of oppression, interrelate—and, more important, how to change them—we need a theory that addresses these questions. That is precisely what historical materialism aims to do both in its sociological aspect and in its account of historical change. Hence it remains vitally important. Though any theory developed over a century ago needs some revision, in my opinion Marxism's basic theory does not need significant revision in order to take better account of women's oppression. However, I do believe that the theory needs to be supplemented. Feminists are justified in wanting a social theory that gives a fuller picture of production and reproduction than Marx's political economic theory does, that extends questions of democracy not only to the economy but to personal relations. They are also justified in wanting to pay attention to the emotional dimensions of our lives, both to understand how oppression manifests itself in the most intimate aspects of our lives and also,

most importantly, to give a more complete vision of human emancipation. The potential is there in Marxism. Marx's subtle understanding of how economic relations penetrate into our very being make him "a great geographer of the human condition," in Adrienne Rich's characterization. But these insights were underdeveloped. Furthermore, Marx's and Engels's commitment to a genuinely democratic socialism led them to ignore questions of what socialism would look like, saying they did not want to "write recipe books for the cooks of the future." But what economic democracy would look like is an extraordinarily complicated question and explorations would have been helpful. Moreover, this omission made it easier to equate socialism with what existed in the Soviet bloc or in the social welfarist capitalism of Western Europe. Today we need these prefigurative visions of socialism more than ever and feminists have much to contribute to them.

Socialist feminist theorizing (in the broad sense) is flourishing, particularly in empirical work by historians and other social scientists, a sample of which is included in this volume. This work has been influential, showing that feminist theory is still a collective enterprise, as its practitioners always stress. What is now called "intersectionality"—that is, the recognition that a woman's position is always a function of her class, ethnicity, and so on, as well as her sex—is paid at least lip service by most feminists. Often, however, this recognition is expressed simply as a list of "isms," of which "classism" is given least attention or else is conflated with racism so that white is invariably coupled with middle class, and black with poor. It is only in the work that I am calling socialist feminist in the broad sense that these aspects are integrated coherently and systematically. A socialist-feminist perspective also informs what activism there is, including, most significantly, labor activism. While this is probably due more to the fact that the workforce of the United States is increasingly female and minority than to the influence of socialist-feminist theory, nevertheless it is significant. Even NOW (the National Organization of Women) is considerably more class and race conscious than it was in its early days when it focused on the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) and the legalization of abortion while virtually ignoring the Hyde Amendment which denied the use of Medicaid funds for abortion.

I believe the time is right for a positive reappraisal of the socialist-feminist perspective. The brutal economic realities of globalization make it impossible to ignore class, and feminists are now asking on a global level the kinds of big questions they asked on a societal level in the 1970s. A number of developments in the United States are also significant in this regard. Most important is the fact that the increasingly female and minority composition of the workforce makes it more apparent that sharp splits between class oppression and sex or race oppression, or between workplace and community issues, are untenable practically and theoretically. The commitment of the new leadership of the AFL-CIO to organizing has raised peoples' interest and their hopes. Students across the country have become active around the issue of sweatshops and have linked up with labor groups around the world. A conference was held at Harvard a few

years back on Students and Labor. This was followed by a long and successful Campaign for a Living Wage, at Harvard, in the spring of 2001. Two conferences on Academics and Labor have taken place. The academic focus on cultural issues to the exclusion of politics is beginning to seem one-sided, even self-indulgent, to more and more people. I believe the grip of postmodernism and identity politics is loosening as attacks have increased from all quarters. Even within identity politics there is some indirect attention to class, as for example in "white trash" literature. However, we must not leave these criticisms to the right (and to those on the left such as Todd Gitlin). It is essential to retain the insights of the 1960s. Socialist theory and practice that failed to give serious attention to issues of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality would have little credibility today. And so, in addition to criticism, it is important to offer positive examples of analyses that integrate class with those other aspects of identity. This volume does this. It is also important to pursue theoretical discussion within the broad socialist-feminist perspective regarding the relationship between class and other aspects of identity and the meaning of "material" and "economic." The recent internal critiques of postmodernism by feminists who have tried to take it in a more realist and materialist direction have broadened this discussion. With economic questions once again central to many feminists' agendas, and with the apparent decline of postmodernism, this is an opportune time to reconsider how Marxism can help us comprehend the global reality of women's oppression and how Marxism itself needs to be revised or supplemented.