



# Feminism for the 99%? Social reproduction and the socialist revolution

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Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto

By Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, & Nancy Fraser

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WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AROUND the world are on the march. Since 2017, women's strikes have brought millions onto the streets to demand a more equal society and highlight the gendered effects of neoliberalism and austerity.

As conservative and populist regimes from India to the United States attack hard-won social and reproductive freedoms as part of a global shift towards conservative nationalism, feminist movements are increasingly grasping for systemic explanations for women's oppression.

This is the historical conjuncture for which *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, has been written. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, three US-based academics influential in the women's strike movement and well established as feminist theorists, set themselves the task of 'reimagining gender justice in an anticapitalist form' one that leads beyond the present crisis to a new society?.

### Anti-capitalism and internationalism

*Feminism for the 99%* has been published in over 20 languages and widely read internationally, so before proceeding to an interrogation of the perspectives set out in the manifesto, it is worth evaluating the significance of the pamphlet's popularity.

The authors open by dismissing liberal or 'corporate' feminism 'described as the desire for a better gender balance within the exploitative structures of society' as wholly insufficient for solving the urgent social problems facing the world today. In the first few pages, they name capitalism, 'the system that generates the boss, produces national borders, and manufactures the drones that guard them' as the enemy which must be defeated to achieve women's liberation.

The authors describe women's oppression as essential to the functioning of capitalism and emphasise that women's liberation is a struggle between conflicting forces in society rather than the slow growth of equal opportunities. The pamphlet frequently returns to the idea of 'transforming the underlying social system' which dictates gender oppression. Acknowledging that capitalism is a global system, they assert the centrality of the women's strikes to a new global resistance and recognise the necessity of international action, declaring that 'feminism for the 99 percent is staunchly internationalist?.

There is much to agree with here. The pamphlet's rhetorical emphasis on anti-capitalism and internationalism, however vaguely or incorrectly defined, indicates a growing consciousness in the women's movement of the relationship between capitalist social relations and women's oppression. At the same time, the flaws in the authors' approach reveal the continued influence of identity politics and the postmodern academy on the women's strike movement.

For a worldwide anti-capitalist movement to succeed, a recognition of the destructive and oppressive tendencies of capitalism won't be enough – the correct strategy for its overthrow and replacement with a new system must be advanced.

## Social reproduction

In the post-face of the pamphlet, the authors identify themselves as social reproduction theorists, and the content they give to this identification defines their method and conclusions. Like other social reproduction theorists, they argue that the Marxist tradition is flawed because its explanation of the role of child-bearing, child-raising, and other unpaid social labour in the overall cycle of production is incomplete. The central proposition of their particular variant of social reproduction theory is that ‘capitalist society is composed of two inextricably braided but mutually opposed imperatives’ – the need to create profit (production) versus the need for human beings to sustain themselves (social reproduction), and that this division ‘points to a deep-seated tension at the heart of capitalist society’.

The practical meaning of this approach is advanced primarily through a contrast with ‘traditional’ Marxist thinking, which the authors accuse of imagining capitalism as ‘just an economic system’, and failing to recognise that capitalism is a ‘social order that also encompasses the apparently ‘non-economic’ relations and practices that sustain the official economy’. This statement, taken on its own, is simply a self-serving vulgarisation of Marxism, which has in fact always recognised that the relations of production give rise to the superstructure of ideology, the state, and a myriad of other social institutions, among them the family. Similarly, no Marxist would disagree with the statement that ‘the waged work of profit-making could not exist without the (mostly) unpaid labour of people-making’.

The authors further argue that Marxists wrongly conceive of the sphere of production as dominant over the sphere of reproduction, leading the ‘traditional labour movement’ to privilege the economic struggle for better wages over social struggles, at the expense of women’s interests. Here there is a real disagreement. For Marxists, as Engels explains, ‘the materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure.’[i]

In this sense, it is the sphere of production which dominates and shapes the sphere of reproduction. Marxists see the extraction of profit and the accumulation of capital as the driving force and defining feature of the capitalist system. It was the development of class society which led to the emergence of the family as an institution essential to ruling class; the transition to capitalism consolidated the nuclear family as the most efficient way of managing social reproduction.

This does not mean that the family is not a site of oppression, or that social and political demands are secondary. Revolutionary Marxism seeks to lead the struggle of the working class not only for better employment conditions, but for the abolition of the entire social system which oppresses and exploits the workers. The political struggle over every manifestation of the iniquities arising from the capitalist system, including women’s social oppression and the appropriation of their unpaid labour by capital, is essential to building class consciousness and cohering a socialist movement.

Indeed, Lenin’s key work *What is to Be Done?* is almost exclusively concerned with advancing this argument: ‘Social-democrats must not confine themselves entirely to the economic struggle? agitation must be conducted over every concrete example of [political] oppression? inasmuch as it manifests itself in the most varied spheres of life and activity, vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific, etc.’[ii]

Where the authors criticise ‘old-school understandings’ of capitalism for imagining the working class as ‘comprised exclusively of those who work for wages in factories or mines’, they are responding not to the Marxist tradition, but rather to Stalinist and reformist corruptions of Marxism. The tendency towards economism is a feature not of revolutionary politics but of essentially bourgeois politics which limits itself to seeking better terms for workers within the confines of capitalism. Substituting the struggle over social reproduction for the economic struggle, without advancing a revolutionary strategy, cannot overcome this error but merely relocates it to a different terrain of partial reforms.

## Capitalism and crisis

Feminism for the 99%'s rejection of what it mischaracterises as the economic determinism of the Marxist tradition leads it to re-theorise the concept of capitalist crisis and leaves the authors bereft of a meaningful definition of capitalism. They assert that general crisis has historically provided potent opportunities for societal transformation and the existence of crisis conditions create the imperative for feminists and radicals to respond and 'guide the process'. The authors present their manifesto as the strategy for 'resolving' the general crisis we are living through today.

Though the authors say they are responding to a 'crisis of capitalism?', they insist that they 'do not understand those terms in the usual way?', pointing the finger at the Marxist conception of the internal contradictions of capital. Instead, 'as feminists?', they 'recognize that capitalism also harbours other, 'noneconomic' contradictions and crisis tendencies?', meaning that capitalist crisis is 'not only economic but also ecological, political, and social-reproductive?'. For them, the root of all these crises is capital's drive to extract free resources from various sources (women, the environment, poorer countries) and appropriate them into the process of accumulation, which is unsustainable in the long run and causes crises in each of these parallel social spheres.

Marxists would agree that the tendency towards crisis is embedded in the very nature of the capitalist system and that the over-exploitation of 'free' labour and resources is a feature of capitalism. But Marx's theory has a much more specific definition of crisis - it asserts that the source of crisis is the inner contradiction of capital itself, defined by the exploitation of living labour. In their constant search for surplus value, capitalists are driven to increase labour productivity by raising the level of technology used in production.

As they do this, the proportion of capital going into labour costs falls in comparison with the proportion going into machinery and raw materials. But because it is only real workers that add value, over time this means a decline in the profitability of capital - the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. As the profit rate falls, capital is unable to sustain a sufficient level of profitability and a crisis erupts. The symptoms of this economic crisis - withdrawal of capital, hikes in interest rates and prices - are a result of capital desperately seeking to maintain its profitability, bringing devastating effects for workers in the form of unemployment and falling standards of living, and spilling over into social and political strife.

For Marxists, what Feminism for the 99% describes as the 'crisis of social reproduction' - 'when a society simultaneously withdraws public support for social reproduction and conscripts its chief providers into long and gruelling hours of low-paid work' - is an inextricable part of the crisis of capital. Capital seeks to offset falling rates of profit by clawing back surplus value at workers' expense, through cuts to both actual wages and the social wage (including free or subsidised childcare, state provision of social care, etc.). This has the effect described of increasing the burden of unpaid social reproductive labour, falling overwhelmingly on women. Therefore, the struggles against the closure of public services, for the socialisation of childcare, etc. are not some separate feminist imperative but part of the class struggle as a whole.

By contrast, in Feminism for the 99%, the need for an anti-capitalist approach is rooted not in a response to the laws of capitalism, but a general social crisis made up of a multiplicity of crises in different spheres of society, adding up to a 'crisis of society as a whole'. Though they argue that feminists need to fight in each of these arenas and that it is essential for all of these struggles to link up with each other, they see each of these as taking place in a distinct and separate sphere. As feminists, they are most concerned with providing leadership in the crisis of social reproduction, leaving the leadership of struggles in parallel spheres, like antiracism or environmentalism, to others.

But if each struggle can take place in a separate sphere in an attempt to resolve a distinct crisis, then every social struggle is equally important to 'overcoming' capitalism and the success of 'social transformation' demands only better coordination between the different movements, rather than any conscious strategy for depriving the ruling class of power. The question of what the movements will really need to do to arrive at a 'noncapitalist society' is further obfuscated by the fact that the pamphlet never really defines capitalism. Though the labour theory of value is summarised, throughout the book capitalism appears primarily in the guise of its symptoms, a collection of terrible

social consequences which various movements are encouraged to align themselves against.

Where the pamphlet speaks of capitalism as a system, it is as a system made up of interconnected, constitutive parts, rather than a system operating as one under the laws of capitalist political economy. At times, when elaborating their explanation of why capitalism is in such a deep crisis, they refer to neoliberalism, finance capital, or imperialism. But these terms are not given clear definition or political content ? neoliberalism is defined only as a particularly predatory form of capitalism and imperialism as economically exploitative relations between countries conditioned by racism.

This shows that ? despite the constant emphasis on their ?anti-capitalist? orientation ? the authors? starting point is a rejection of historical materialism and Marx?s critique of capital. Because these concepts conclude by outlining the revolutionary character and tasks of the working class subject within capitalism, it follows naturally that the authors reject the working class as the historical agent of social change. No passage better summarises this than when, after acknowledging that their manifesto stands on the shoulders of Marx and Engels, the authors immediately qualify their acknowledgement: ?Faced as we are with a more fractured and heterogeneous political landscape, it is not so easy for us to imagine a globally unified revolutionary force.?

## Populism

Having thus disposed of the centrality of class in the struggle against capitalism, Feminism for the 99% replaces it with ?a universalism that acquires its form and content from the multiplicity of struggles from below?. Concretely, this will be embodied in an aggregate mass of social movements representing the ?99%?. The authors sketch the contours of their alliance by saying: ?We reject not only reactionary populism but also progressive neoliberalism. In fact, it is by splitting both those alliances that we intend to build our movement?. The authors are invoking a progressive, or ?anticapitalist? populism, the political ideology of the liberal middle classes.

Their stated goal is to grow the women?s strikes and to build links of sympathy and support between the women?s movement and other social struggles, to ?join with every movement that fights for the 99%?. Having defined their anticapitalist strategy as an alliance of social movements fighting in distinct spheres, the authors are free to extol the virtues of various movements in turn, evading the question of how the movements should relate to each other, focusing instead on the tasks of feminists in the struggle over social reproduction.

There is a tension throughout the pamphlet between the authors? desire to posit feminists as the leaders of this anticapitalist alliance and their inclination towards a diffuse horizontalism. At times, ?will feminists be at the forefront?? is posed as a deciding question for the success of their anticapitalist uprising. Yet throughout the pamphlet, the question of who will determine or lead the collective tasks of their so-called ?anticapitalist insurgency? is left unanswered, and there is no discussion of the forms of organisation necessary to sustain an alliance of such diverse movements. The coming together of the multitude of movements is imagined as a spontaneous convergence of subjects: ?Only through conscious efforts to build solidarity, by struggling in and through our diversity, can we achieve the combined power we need to transform society?.

Though we agree with Feminism for the 99% that it is essential to build solidarity between different movements, our ultimate goal is not just to celebrate diversity and learn from each other, but to transcend our differences and unite the wide variety of spontaneous and issue-specific movements into a single, multifaceted movement which becomes conscious of its common goal. The goal must be the overthrow of capitalism, which will be necessary to achieve permanent liberation for all the exploited and oppressed, including those oppressed on the basis of sex, gender, and sexuality. It is precisely only political leadership, which, by cohering the disparate elements under a common programme, can elevate the political aims of the various movements and point them towards socialism.

Here the question of agency is paramount. Which group can unite and lead a global anticapitalist movement? The answer Marxism gives is the working class ? women as well as men, drawn from all nationalities and races. Its revolutionary potential arises from its role in production, through which the class acquires the collective skills and ethos to combine against their exploiters. The family home divides and atomises rather than unites the class if it is

divorced from the workplace and the community of working class people.

But the necessity of unpaid as well as paid work to the capitalists gives workers and their families ? as a class not just a workforce ? the power to fight back. The working class has shown that it can build its own organisations of struggle as no other class can, and is the only social grouping to have successfully led a socialist revolution. No heterogeneous ?people?, no ?movement of movements? riven by class differences and antagonisms, can replace this and be the agency of any truly anticapitalist project.

By rejecting the working class as the universal subject within the class struggle, the authors reject the goal of socialism, i.e. the seizure of state power by the working class and the democratic planning of the economy. Since they reject both bourgeois feminism and Marxism, their ideology in the final instance is one of petit bourgeois feminism, which sees class as only one of many identities with overlapping and competing interests, and is thus incapable of forging unity in struggle. Their pitch for power can only be a general ?anti-systemic? left populism in which the 99% ? i.e. all classes of the people excepting only the billionaires, represented by the social movements ? are accorded the central role, but necessarily without a common objective, let alone strategy for achieving it. And it is here, on the question of tactics and strategy, that the book?s most glaring weakness emerges.

### Women?s strikes

Feminism for the 99% posits the women?s strikes as an essential tactic for building a ?new, noncapitalist form of society?, arguing that they can revitalise people?s conception of strikes around the world. Consistent with the authors? eclectic method, the pamphlet is unclear about whether the women?s strikes should be built as a protest movement to advance the semi-autonomous struggle for reforms in the sphere of social reproduction, or whether they are a conscious attempt to weaken capitalism.

For Marxists, a strike has a specific function as a direct confrontation between workers and capital. By striking, workers deprive bosses of their profits, and through the threat of continued disruption, aim to win some concessions from the capitalists. If a strike is generalised into a mass strike movement, it poses the question of who holds power in society and, given the right conditions and leadership, can be the catalyst for a revolutionary insurrection. Workplace strikes have this disruptive capacity because the withdrawal of productive labour impedes the production of surplus value, which is the essence of the cycle of capital. By definition, unpaid labour in the home does not produce profit, therefore its stoppage does not strike a direct blow against capital.

Feminism for the 99% appears to accept this premise when it says that the role of the women?s strikes is ?making visible the indispensable role played by gendered, unpaid work in capitalist society?. In reality the women?s strikes are presented as a protest movement rather than a conscious attempt to build capacity to disrupt the capitalist economy. But since Feminism for the 99% has no concept of the laws and limits of capital, only ?ambitious projects of social transformation?, it posits that such a protest can still be a transformative act, ?above all, by broadening the very idea of what counts as ?labour??.

Despite accusing Marxism of perpetuating an artificial division of the movement into the economic and social struggle as separate spheres, Feminism for the 99% in fact commits the same error in reverse, attempting to give social reproductive struggles primacy. While exaggerating the capacity of the withdrawal of social reproductive labour to disrupt capitalism, the authorssimultaneously undermine the real political potential of the women?s strikes by artificially limiting their function to that of a protest movement designed to raise feminist consciousness. Even the most basic political demands aimed at improving women?s material position in society, like universal free childcare and equal pay, are conspicuously absent, except in their negative form, as examples listed in passing of things that society currently lacks.

In fact using women?s role in the capitalist economy as workers to organise the women?s strikes can be the basis of a strategy to broaden the movement, drawing greater numbers of workers ? including men ? into the strikes. Some of the most successful women?s strikes have taken place in countries where they have been backed by major trade unions,

like Spain and Switzerland. Women didn't just stop doing the housework, they walked out of their jobs on the basis of both social and economic demands: equal pay, social provision of childcare, an end to workplace harassment and domestic violence.

Linking social and economic demands gives the movement a political character, putting women at the forefront of a struggle which poses questions about what kind of social system could simultaneously meet all these demands and make the gains permanent. If the workplace strikes spread, the support of unemployed women who work in the home will accelerate the transformation of the movement into a generalised political conflict.

If such a movement were successful, it would undoubtedly meet resistance from the bourgeois state. This point would be a crucial one. The movement would either need to prepare to take power or prepare for defeat. On the nature of the state Feminism for the 99% is silent too ? the best one can infer is that the state will somehow be rendered obsolete when assorted social movements cross a certain threshold of radicalism and cooperation.

## Conclusions

Feminism for the 99% opens by asserting: ?the organizers of the huelga feminista [women's strike] insist on ending capitalism?. Yet despite their rhetoric, the authors' anti-capitalism is a utopian aspiration rather than a revolutionary strategy.

How is capitalism to be ended? No strike ? neither one which halts production nor one which is primarily a mass demonstration ? can do so on its own. Mass demonstrations of women as homeworkers as well as waged workers are immensely valuable as proof of our potential power. But if these are to really ?insist? on ending capitalism, they must first transform themselves into political strikes, which consciously intend to force a government and the state to surrender, and then into an uprising, a revolution.

If the strike is ? as indeed it is ? a vital element of preparation and potential catalyst for an anticapitalist revolution, then the working class must be the central or leading force within it. To be sure, it will need allies from other oppressed and exploited classes, but the working class must be the hegemonic class because of the historic fact that capitalism cannot do without it whereas it can do without capitalism.

The working class alone can socialise large-scale production and distribution and, with it, socialise reproduction too, liberating women from domestic labour in the individual family household and ending women's age-old oppression. Since the days of Marx and Engels, revolutionaries have acknowledged that these goals are inextricably linked: ?With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children alike, whether they are legitimate or not.?[iii]

If all this is true then revolutionary objectives need to be recognised from the outset, not hidden in confusing populist rhetoric or talk of alliances of oppressed sections or ?identities?, each with their own unconnected ideologies, agendas and pre-existing leaderships and organisations. For anticapitalist women, the starting point must be the working class women's movement in which women participate both as workers and as homeworkers. As the principal organisers in the sphere of consumption, childcare and education, women feel the effects of capitalist crisis most immediately. It is no accident that in every major class battle that overflows the narrow bounds of a trade dispute, women have organised.

The purpose of a working class, as opposed to a petit bourgeois women's movement, is to draw women into the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism, based on a strategy for the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class. Its task is to draw up political demands for eliminating the material basis of women's oppression which should feature in every social struggle on the principle: no socialism without women's liberation, no women's liberation without socialism!

[i] F Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, Chapter 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm> [1]

[ii] VI Lenin, What is to Be Done?, Chapter 3, Part 1, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/> [2]

[iii] F Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, Ch 4,  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm> [3]

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