

Socialist Feminism for the 21st Century



RADICAL
INTERVENTIONS

A Radical Interventions Pamphlet

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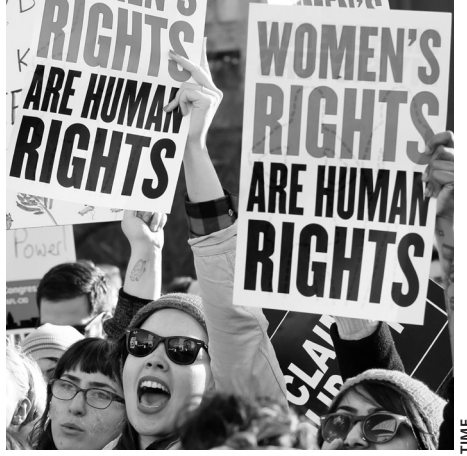
Preface

by Sue Ferguson

MANY OF US ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE SOCIALIST FEMINISM OF THE 20th century. It grew out of the New Left and civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Its core innovation was to apply Marxist concepts and theory to gender oppression in a way that would reveal the interconnections between gender oppression and class exploitation.

Despite its many provocative, radical interventions in Left politics and debates, Socialist Feminism is now largely remembered for its “dualist” legacy: the idea that patriarchy and capitalism are two distinct systems, requiring two distinct types of struggles to overcome. This legacy has been roundly criticized, and for good reason. On the one hand, such a dualism was exclusionary. It made no room to explain racism, homophobia, or other oppressive experiences (beyond adding on many intersecting “spheres” or “systems” of oppression). On the other hand, it was unsatisfactory. How could men and women be part of a collective struggle against capitalism if it was in men’s interests to maintain their patriarchal domination?

Today, socialist feminists are revisiting these ideas, but they are doing so in a way that incorporates the critique of earlier perspectives while attempting to resolve the dilemmas that produced this dualist legacy in the first place. The approach that holds out the most promise for building a challenge to capitalism based on solidarity among differently oppressed groups is Social Reproduction Theory. This New Socialists pamphlet draws together three articles that explain why that is so.



Socialist Feminism in the Era of Trump and Weinstein¹

by Sue Ferguson

IT WASN'T THAT LONG AGO WHEN NEWS OUTLETS WERE ABUZZ with the idea that feminism was dead, a relic of the past.

Young women who had reaped the benefits of the Second Wave – access to postsecondary education, non-traditional jobs, boardrooms, and more flexible household arrangements – saw, it was said, no need to fight for more equality, more freedom. It was a “post-feminist” world. (I put that word in scare quotes because, as I explain on page ??, “post-feminism” actually means something else among critically inclined feminists).

Of course, those commentators were dead wrong. But if they *could* keep their heads in the sand back then, they certainly can't today.

In 2016 Americans – well, 26 percent of eligible American voters anyway – elected a man who has yet to meet a woman he hasn't ogled, insulted, demeaned or groped.²

Soon after, high-profile, powerful men began falling like dominos because the women they work with (and generally work in positions of relative power over) had been emboldened to tell their stories of sexual harassment and assault.

And although it gets far less press, it is also the case today – as it was in the 1980s when the “post-feminist” era was first proclaimed – that millions of women living in the wealthiest nations of the world face poverty, violence and/or discrimination in their everyday lives.

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So, the post-feminist era was always a myth.

Even the pundits no longer talk much about “post-feminism”. They’ve actually found a new feminist – Justin Trudeau. And, more appropriately, *Time* magazine named the #MeToo movement its 2017 “person of the year.”

Of course, some of us have known all along that there is nothing out-moded about the need for a feminist analysis and politics. We’ve been working throughout the last few decades, advocating in various ways to improve women’s lives.

It is those “various ways” that I want to look at here. For however much one set of politics tends to dominate the public discussion, there’s a rich and diverse tradition from which feminists draw their ideas and strategies.

At the risk of over-simplification, I comment on three faces of feminist politics that have emerged over these years. The point here is not to slot activists into one “camp” or another. These are not the only three faces to emerge over time. Nor do all living, breathing feminists fall neatly into one camp or the other. Many – maybe most? – move between, and beyond, them as they grapple with the concrete, multi-layered, experiences of oppression women face every day.

But it is precisely because there is a jumble of ideas about what is needed not just to confront, but to end, oppressive gendered relations and systems of power, that it helps to isolate some of the core logics informing those ideas. Identifying the distinct premises, understandings of power and visions of freedom within these criss-crossing traditions will, I hope, help to build a socialist feminism for the 21st century – a socialist feminism that can move us toward working class solidarity among all oppressed peoples.

I’m calling the three faces:

- 1 “Fearless girl” feminism
- 2 Allyship feminism
- 3 Anti-capitalist movement-building feminism

To signal where I’m going with this: while all three “faces” of feminism have generated substantive, material changes in women’s lives, it is the third approach – anti-capitalist movement-building feminism – that orients us to thinking about how to develop a transformative politics that grapples most directly with the systemic nature of oppression.

“Fearless girl” feminism

THE TITLE HERE REFERS TO THE BRONZED STATUE OF A SMALL girl facing off against “Charging Bull,” the Wall St. icon installed two years after the 1987 market crash. The *Fearless Girl* statue (created by artist Kristen Visbel) was erected by State Street Global Advisors just as International

Women's Day was rolling around this in 2017. It symbolizes a feminism that promotes women's "empowerment" through economic independence and labour market opportunities.

State Street Global Advisors is an investment firm which manages \$2.5 trillion in assets. It unveiled the statue to launch a campaign to add more women to corporate boards of directors. (Apparently, surveys have found deep resistance to the idea that women should comprise even 50 percent of a board, with 53 percent of directors surveyed responding that women should comprise no more the 40 percent of board membership.)³

Why would State Street Global Advisors care? Well, it turns out, gender diversity has been shown "to improve company performance and increase shareholder value." Women who have the guts to "lean in" (to cite the title of Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 bestseller) are good for business.

This is, of course, the dominant face of feminism today. It is what Justin Trudeau trumpets when he fills half of his cabinet seats with women (you'll remember his hard-to-argue-with reasoning, "Because it's 2015").⁴ Or, when he sits down with Ivanka Trump for a roundtable with so-called

ADWEEK.COM



"Fearless Girl," by artist Kristen Visbel, erected by New York investment firm State Street Global Advisors, March 2017, as part of a campaign to add more women to corporate boards of directors.

Median earnings of all full-time workers (men and women) didn't change between 2001 and 2010. And the gap between high-earning women on the one hand, and middle- and low-earning women on the other, has been steadily growing.

women business leaders. Or, again, when he insists that any free trade deal with China requires both parties sign on to gender equity provisions.

And while many of us will roll our eyes at the superficiality of Trudeau's feminism, few would argue, I suspect, that he shouldn't take these positions.

In other words, it's somewhat awkward, and complicated.

Although it can be argued that it makes no difference how many women sit in corporate boardrooms or in the federal cabinet, it's hard to argue with the impulse to redress gross inequalities in wages and advancement opportunities – the impulse that has got us to this point. That is, the so-called empowerment of women achieved by widening the corporate and political corridors to accommodate them is a result of decades of feminists challenging inequality through equal pay and pay equity legislation.

Countless feminists have worked inside unions and with government policymakers to push for such change. Some have taken to the streets to demand it as part of International Women's Day marches or workplace strike actions. Many did so drawing specific attention to racialized wage and work discrimination.

Yet, while undoubtedly improving the lives of many, many women, a feminist politics grounded in calls for equity is truly a double-edged sword. The one edge improves the well-being of individual women relative to individual men. The other edge, the "fearless girl," promotes individual advancement relative to all men and women. And, as the Trudeau/Trump collaboration attests, such an approach is easily coopted by a shallow exercise in corporate diversity management.

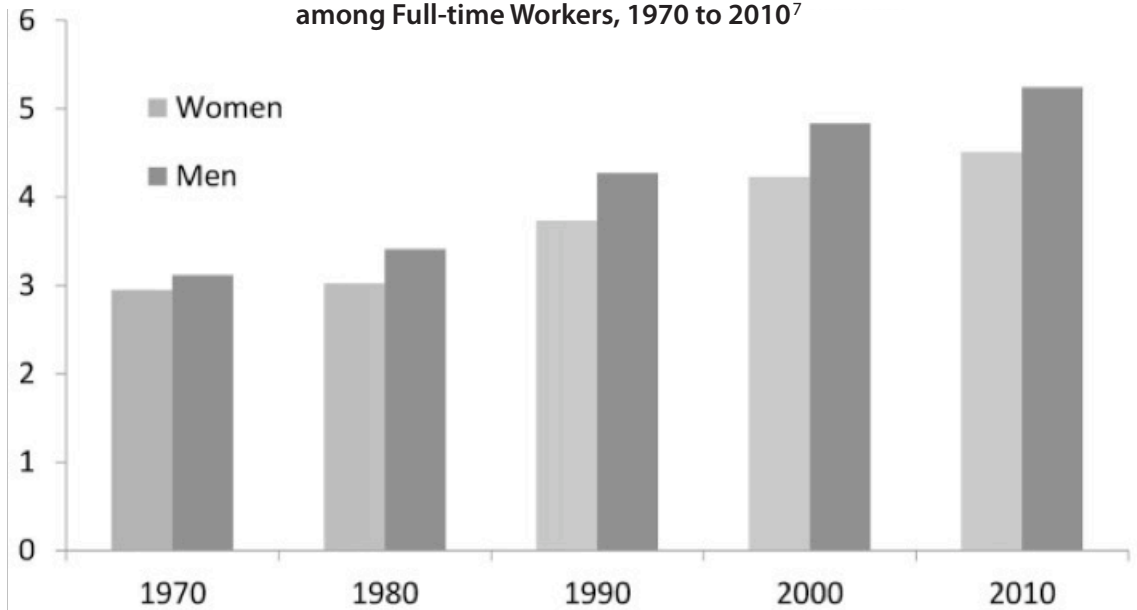
So what *is* the broad societal impact of this uptake of "fearless girl" feminism? A widening gap between wealthy and average-income earning women (and men).

Leslie McCall, a sociologist at Northwestern University, has tracked women's wages in the US since the 1970s. When she started, women with college degrees earned less than men straight out of high school. But then, the effects of equal pay legislation (introduced in 1963 in the US) kicked in.

Today, women still haven't seriously dented the ranks of the one percent.⁵ They are, however, much more often found among top salary earners. Women's earnings in the top 85th to 95th percentile (yearly incomes of about \$150,000) have grown faster than men's earnings in that category in every decade since the 1970s. For example, they've seen a 14 percent growth in the first decade of this century, compared to an 8.3 percent growth for those making average wages. According to McCall, there have been "strong absolute gains for women in this elite group."⁶

Meanwhile, median earnings of all full-time workers (men and women) *didn't change* between 2001 and 2010. *And* the gap between high-earning

**Ratio of Top to Bottom Weekly Earnings
among Full-time Workers, 1970 to 2010⁷**



From: Leslie McCall, *Men against Women: or the Top 20 percent against the Bottom 80?* 7 June 2013, Council on Contemporary Families. (<https://contemporaryfamilies.org/top-20-percent-against-bottom-80/>)

women on the one hand, and middle- and low-earning women on the other, has been steadily growing.

So, while women who make about \$150,000 a year are seeing their salaries continue to rise at robust rates, women (and men) who make about \$37,000 or less a year have, for some time now, seen their incomes stall.

To be clear, then, we are talking about a very small proportion of women who have truly been “empowered” here:

- In 2013, according to a JPMorgan Chase researcher, only 3.25 percent of American women wage-earners took home more than \$100,000 per year.⁸
- That same year, according the US Social Security Administration, more than half of US wage-earners earned \$30,000 or less. And you can bet that women, blacks, Latinos/Latinas, trans people, queers, indigenous peoples and immigrants were over-represented in that group.⁹

Yet, yet . . . I defend “fearless girl” feminism’s demand for pay equity and equal pay. One thing these figures don’t tell us – they can’t tell us in fact –

is how much lower all women's wages would have been had feminists not been fighting all along for economic parity and independence.

At the same time, it is awkward because while such policies have improved individual lives, they haven't, and never could have, challenged the conditions which produce the tendency toward unequal pay in the first place – which is precisely why Justin Trudeau, Ivanka Trump, Hillary Clinton and Wall Street investment firms have no trouble with embracing and promoting them.

“Fearless girl” feminism is entirely consistent with the capitalist world order that Trudeau & Co. represent and defend. That is the same capitalist world order which can be pushed to accommodate some gender and racial equality, but cannot give up its life-blood: a vast and growing pool of low-waged, and no-waged, labour – and the racist, sexist and otherwise oppressive relations that ensure an ongoing supply of the same.

Allyship feminism

IF WE CONSIDER WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND harassment over the same period that we looked at for changes in women's wages (from the 1970s to 2017), we find much less reliable statistical evidence. That's because changes in women's reporting levels fluctuate (recall how a couple high profile complaints at private sector companies led to the recent spike in reporting). It's also because there have been shifts in how gendered violence is defined.

Still, we learn from a recent StatsCan report the following:

- Women's reports to police of physical assault have fallen some, while reports of sexual assault are stable.
- The self-reported (on the General Social Survey) rate of violent victimization against women aged 15 years and over has remained relatively stable between 1999 and 2009.¹⁰

Most significantly, we know that gendered violence and harassment continues at unacceptable levels today. A report by the Canadian Women's Foundation finds that:

- Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16.
- Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner.
- There are upwards of 4,000 murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada.
- Young women (aged 18 to 24) are most likely to experience online harassment in its most severe forms, including stalking, sexual harassment and physical threats.¹¹

Gendered violence and harassment continues at unacceptable levels today.

By allyship feminism I mean to identify a politics that is grounded in a critique of intersecting systems of oppression.

While there have certainly been missteps, and there is still much more that needs to be done, feminists have demanded and won resources for those vulnerable to gendered violence. They have also developed policies and practices that make meaningful differences in the lives of women, trans people and queers, allowing many to leave risky, abusive situations, to better negotiate legal systems, and to feel more secure at school, on the streets, and at work.

In recent years, much of that work has been informed by what I'm calling allyship feminism (though other forms of feminism certainly deserve credit too for progress on these fronts). By allyship feminism I mean to identify a politics that is grounded in a critique of intersecting systems of oppression. Similar to anti-capitalist feminism from below, this feminist perspective sees the powerful institutions and practices in our society – schools, courts, law, corporations, healthcare – as implicated in upholding racism, sexism and heterosexism, trans and queer phobia, ableism, settler colonialism, economic exploitation, and so on.

However, even though many feminist allies hold this radical, often even anti-capitalist, understanding of society, their political work can stop short of challenging the systemic powers they critique.

The reason for this arguably has much to do with their commitment to the ethos of “privilege” that usually informs the principles and practice of allyship.

Allyship feminism begins with listening to those who are directly disempowered in this multiple and complex matrix of “interlocking” oppressions (to use Patricia Hill Collins’ term). Listening is integral to a process of building relationships of trust and accountability with those whom feminists seek to be in allyship with. Once that relationship is on solid ground, then feminist allies engage their financial, organizational or other forms of resources to help strategize ways and means to support and protect the disempowered.

This approach is counter-posed to mainstream feminism, which tends to treat the marginalized as victims or clients, who can be helped by integrating them into existing institutions and systems. By contrast, the goal of allyship feminism is not to “save” or “integrate” people, but to work with them, on terms defined by the marginalized, to “challenge larger oppressive power structures.”¹²

It is also counter-posed to the (presumed masculinist) socialist left. Rather than “impose” their systemic critique on the oppressed, and

The feminist “post-feminism” that I referred to earlier (not to be confused with the media popularization of that term) takes its lead from intersectionality theory. Feminism is considered outmoded not because it is no longer needed or relevant, but because it is too narrow. That is, the implied privileging of gender relations is too narrow to adequately address the multiple, complex interaction of oppressions that more accurately describes people’s experiences.

prioritize political confrontation and social change over meeting the self-defined needs of marginalized communities (as certain – though, significantly, not all – left traditions can be rightly singled out for doing), allyship feminists stress that their own political goals are secondary to those they seek to be allies with.

Alongside offering resources, feminist allies actively work to recalibrate interpersonal relationships between themselves and marginalized people. This means, in the first instance, identifying and taking responsibility for one’s complicity in the wider social dynamics of oppression – for one’s “privilege,” say, as a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered student who is working with Indigenous women living in poverty.

“Checking one’s privilege” is not an optional or one-time feature of allyship feminism. According to the Anti-Oppression Network, allyship is “an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group.”¹³

Self-consciousness, care and respect when working with vulnerable people is incredibly important. And feminist allies have proceeded carefully and consciously to make university campuses, workplaces, homes and streets safer for many women, queers, and trans people vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment. They have helped to establish and increase funding for community centres, safe spaces and educational materials about gendered violence. They have improved policies and procedures for those reporting sexual assault, and defended the use of nongendered language.

But, again, I find assessing allyship feminism to be a bit awkward and complicated. As with struggles for pay equity and equal pay legislation, this approach hasn’t been – and can’t ever be – enough. Allyship feminism comes up against the limits of its own premises.

First, the focus on using resources to support the goals of more marginalized people is laudable of course. But it can – and often does – work to bind feminist allies to the very power structures that perpetuate the inequality of resources that have made them “allies” and not members of the “more marginalized” communities in the first place.

Instead of confronting power, feminist allies tend to define their political work in terms of getting those in positions of authority onside with their agenda. This strategy risks cultivating a naïve trust in their bosses or political elites (who they believe they can influence), and/or a fear of alienating the support of their higher-ups by pushing for more radical demands.

Second, the politics of individual privilege risks diverting attention away from the broader forces sustaining the conditions of inequality and oppression. Feminist allies insist that “checking one’s privilege” is about taking responsibility for one’s own consciousness and behaviour, and not about

Self-consciousness, care and respect when working with vulnerable people is incredibly important.

confessing guilt for occupying a relatively advantageous social position.

But, as critics of this approach point out, the focus here is nonetheless on the individual.¹⁴ And not just any individual. Because it is their “self-changing” which becomes the centre of political work, say the critics, feminists from the dominant (usually white, academic) culture have (once again) made themselves the centre of anti-oppression politics – albeit not intentionally, nor in the same way as “second-wave” feminists did. Still, the irony is hard to miss.

In some ways, privilege politics grows out of another second wave feminist idea, the idea that the personal is political. Understood as a claim that our most intimate relations are conditioned by wider power dynamics, that maxim is, I believe, indisputable. But insofar as allyship feminism focuses on personal privilege as a site of political activism, it suggests something else. It suggests, for one thing, that power is everywhere – an idea most associated with the French political philosopher Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984).

According to this perspective, there is no essential difference between the “power” wielded by individuals caught up in systems of oppression on the one hand, and the power generated and/or sustained by broader political and economic dynamics on the other. Or, if feminist allies do consider these types of power as distinct in some ways, privilege politics tends to obscure the relationship between them. As a result, key questions about systemic change tend to go unanswered: does, for example, challenging individual interpersonal practices and language lead to wider, more systemic, change? If so, exactly how?

This is not to deny that some individuals are “privileged” in relation to others. Oppression works precisely because the limited advantages available to poor and working people are doled out unevenly between and within groups. Nor is it to say that we shouldn’t be aware of those relative (dis) advantages, and how they shape our experiences and interactions – in our personal, professional and political lives.

But if we leave things there – that membership in a –more advantaged group simply makes one “complicit” in systems of oppression – we risk losing sight of the fact that, every working class person (not just the most oppressed) is degraded and disadvantaged in capitalist society. And we fail to see that this shared degradation is a result of not only our shared economic exploitation as workers for capital, but also of our shared membership in a system that is based on generating and perpetuating racism, sexism, heterosexism and other systems of dehumanization.

It is that last point that privilege politics can too easily overlook. The advantages conferred on some groups are real, yes. But given their role in upholding the shared inequalities and dehumanizing nature of the capital-

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ist system as a whole, they are hardly an unmitigated good. Black students, for instance, are undoubtedly most oppressed by the presence of police in schools. But cops will also hassle young white queers, or white students from working-class households. So, while young people in the latter groups do not experience racial oppression, and some of them might be deeply insensitive to what their racialized fellow students endure, they are still subject to forms of harassment by police that diminish the quality of their lives. And they share an interest in getting cops out of schools and democratizing education. In addition, insofar as those in dominant groups are unable or unwilling to know, trust and respect racialized, sexualized, colonized “others,” they too are dehumanized and disempowered.

The limits of an allyship feminism based on privilege politics are thus considerable. Yet, it is hardly surprising that many of the most critically minded feminists are drawn to this set of politics today. For those limits reflect the general weakness of the wider left. They reflect a left that has largely lost the capacity to pose an alternative to the broader structures of power that allyship feminism critiques. As a result, it seems to make sense to focus on making change where one has a modicum of control – at the level of individual interactions and morality, and within existing institutions.



sott.net/article/317197-The-disturbing-history-of-police-in-schools-More-than-a-few-rogue-cops

My point is not that we need to, or should, abandon the type of work so many feminists with a radical critique of society do. While we should challenge some of their strategies, I think they advance important lessons for the wider left about working for social change within institutions, and about building relationships with disempowered communities.

The key task is to figure out how such work can be part of a broader challenge to the systemic reproduction of multiple oppressions. How can this work help build the societal capacity, confidence and solidarity required to move beyond where we find ourselves today?

Anti-capitalist movement-building feminism

OF THE THREE FACES OF FEMINISM, THIS IS CERTAINLY THE least familiar. That's also in part because of the weakness of the wider left, the wider socialist left in particular. In the last 50 years, socialist feminists have gone from being a coherent presence on the left to working within organizations dominated by other sorts of politics. Unions and labour councils have absorbed many, but so have some activist groups mobilizing around healthcare, education, racism and poverty. And you'll still find socialist feminists, like myself, lingering in small left groups like the New Socialists and, of course, in the academy.

By "coherent presence" I mean that anti-capitalist, movement-building, principles contributed to and sometimes guided feminist political action in the 1970s and 1980s. Certainly, in Toronto, the struggles to establish childcare centres at the University of Toronto, to get maternity leave provisions in contract negotiations, to demand access to abortion, and to oppose police raids on bath houses are great examples of that.

In all cases, socialist feminists argued for and won arguments about the need to call out and confront those in power through large mobilizations. The idea was not to ask for spaces and services so much as it was to collectively claim them.

I don't mean to romanticize this. To begin, these gains, like those of all feminisms, are fragile. As well, there were lots of unresolved issues, including a marked inability (and less commonly, a refusal) to seriously deal with the multiple and sometimes contradictory forms of oppression. That failing contributed to the dismantling, and discrediting, of socialist feminist organizations, and the faltering confidence that a broader vision of freedom from oppression was even possible.

In the last five years or so, though, we've seen a smouldering interest in the ideas of a renewed socialist feminism. By *renewed*, I mean a socialist feminism that doesn't simply repeat the insights of an earlier era, but learns from its shortcomings, and attempts to move beyond these – namely, to

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deal seriously with the complexity of oppression.

This renewal, however, has had only a limited political expression. Many anti-capitalist movement-building feminists working in community and labour organizations today have renewed this face of feminism in practice, by building solidarity among feminists, anti-racists, queers, trans people and others. Others can be found in organizations like Black Lives Matter and Idle No More, which have made indispensable contributions to a re-surgent radical feminism. Yet, for a variety of historical reasons, they do not always embrace a specifically socialist feminist politics. As for those of us who do, the task of articulating a coherent set of socialist feminist politics that learns from such groups is just beginning.

Renewing socialist feminism means taking the building of solidarity among all oppressed groups seriously. It means working to understand how capitalism thrives on and helps to reproduce various social oppressions (not just patriarchy), while also recognizing that oppressions exceed the logic of the capitalist system too.

It's clear by the numbers of US women who rejected Hillary Clinton and her fearless girl feminism, and flocked instead to the Bernie Sanders campaign that times are ripe for anti-capitalist movement building feminism. But, to date, in North America, its most significant political expression is the March 8, 2017, call for an International Women's Strike.

The North American organizers of that strike took their inspiration from three mass mobilizations in 2016: the Polish women's strike, which stopped legislation to ban abortions in that country; the Black Wednesday strike called by the #NiUnoMenos, (Not One Less) movement in Argentina to protest male violence; and the 300,000 Italian women and supporters who mobilized on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

The organizers also understood that the sea of people donning pussy hats in the Women's March of January 2017 were not just upset that Trump, not Clinton, was in the White House. Their chants and placards drew attention to the devastation neoliberalism has wrought on the lives of women, trans people, Indigenous peoples, blacks, queers, immigrants and migrants.

Building upon this, a group of US-based socialist feminists took up the call (issued first by the organizers of the Polish strike) for an International Women's Strike. The call for a "strike" was deliberate. It was intended, according to one of its organizers, Cinzia Arruza, "to emphasize the work that women perform not only in the workplace but outside it, in the sphere of social reproduction".¹³ That is, it highlighted the unpaid and/or low-waged work of cleaning, cooking and childminding (among other things) that produces the key thing capitalism needs in order to keep its exploitative system alive and well: the worker.

The current moment of movement-building socialist feminism takes that insight as its starting point – an insight of social reproduction feminism that is articulated particularly well by Lise Vogel. Briefly, Vogel argues that capitalism absolutely requires workers, but bosses do not directly control their production (that is, the daily and generational renewal of labour power). That renewal is organized in patriarchal, heterosexist and racialized ways primarily in households, but also in hospitals and schools, for example, and through migration regimes.

Moreover, the relentless drive to exert a downward pressure on wages (and also on taxes) means that although capitalism needs workers, it also cannot help but undermine the capacity of those workers to reproduce themselves. And it is this unresolvable contradiction between the production of value and the production of human life that haunts capitalism, making oppression a systemic feature of its very existence.

The 2017 International Women’s Strike – in recognition of the centrality of women’s work to capitalism – called on women to withdraw their labour not just from the workforce but from sites of unpaid social reproduction too. And women around the world responded. Activists in fifty countries participated. A year later, socialist feminists have reissued that call.

While mostly symbolic as one-day protests tend to be, the strike as a strategy drives home the point that feminism can have an insurgent face that calls out the systemic nature of oppression. What’s more, it identifies a crucial lever of social power – women’s (and workers’) labour – and proposes that we use that lever to create a different world, a non-capitalist world free of oppression.

Socialist feminists are not the only feminists to strike, march and occupy. They are not the only feminists to call out power rather than work with it. Some anti-racist feminists, like those in Black Lives Matter Toronto, blend a form of allyship feminism with more radical, confrontational poli-



Some anti-racist feminists, like those in Black Lives Matter Toronto, blend a form of allyship feminism with more radical, confrontational politics that often express anti-capitalist values.

tics that often express anti-capitalist values. And the Indigenous women who launched Idle No More were nothing if not insurgent. In working through the ideas of social reproduction feminism, socialist feminism seeks to build on the analyses and practices of insurgent movements by developing an analysis of how capitalist power works through social oppression.

And if we agree that it is *capitalism* that limits the possibility of meeting the very real survival needs of people, that puts profits before need not just in the workplace but in our communities and homes, then confronting that system also requires confronting the racism, sexism and all oppressions that work in concert with capitalism and *against* life.

This means working for greater economic equality between men and women, and to provide safe spaces and adequate resources for marginalized people. But we need to organize the demands for these things in ways that also build peoples' capacities to draw attention to the ways in which oppression is embedded in the capitalist mandate to put profit over the meeting of human need.

And the only way we will ever be able to challenge that is by drawing more and more people into struggle – building the confidence and capacity of everyone with a stake in a more just society – to claim back not only our workplaces, but also our communities (our hospitals, schools, streets and households).

This doesn't mean imposing ideas on marginalized groups. It does mean learning from the experiences of activists, discussing and debating the nature of social power – and then strategizing to find ways to build the collective confidence to claim back the economic, political and cultural resources needed to produce a better world.

To my mind, this is the key distinction between working in *solidarity* with groups and seeking out *allyship* with them. Building solidarity certainly involves listening to, and respecting the self-determination of, distinct groups. But it also involves moving beyond offering support and help, to articulating shared goals and strategies based on the knowledge that (i) all our lives are organized in and through a broader set of distinct, but nonetheless unified power relations; and (ii) that the capitalist system organizing those relations denies us collective control over the resources required to socially reproduce ourselves and our worlds in a ways that meet our (material, cultural, spiritual, physical – in short, human) needs.

In the words of the 1970s Queensland, Australia, Aboriginal Activist Group 6 “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”¹⁵

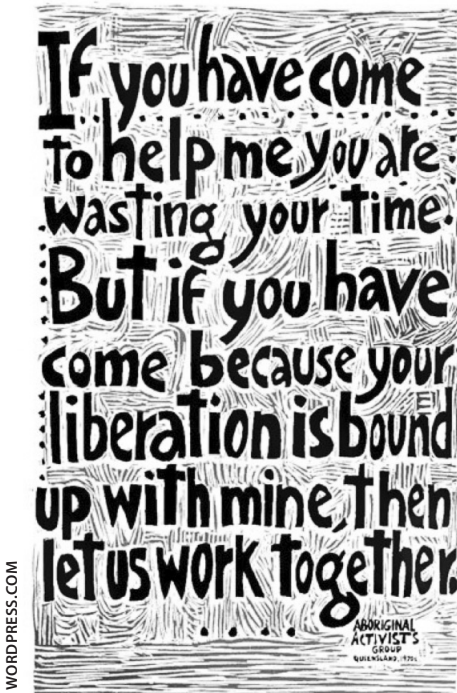
Solidarity, then, means standing with those who are willing to disrupt the usual flow of power from top to bottom. Black Lives Matter, Idle No

More, the Quebec Student Strike – these are all examples of recent efforts to reclaim social reproductive space and resources (our communities and schools) through movement building.

We can improve lives through influencing those in positions of authority to grant certain things – better services and education, higher wages and benefits. And we should continue to do that. But if we don't link those struggles with others that also challenge more directly those who hold power over us, the patterns of inequality and oppression that keep far too many women, blacks, migrants, Indigenous and disabled people disempowered, and living in poverty and fear for the last fifty years, will still be evident over the next fifty.

In the era of Trump and Weinstein, we need the face of feminism to be insurgent and transformative.

In the era of Trump and Weinstein, we need the face of feminism to be insurgent and transformative.



Poster designed by Indigenous visual artist and activist Lilla Watson, who is frequently mistaken for the author of the quote it features. Watson apparently first saw the quote in a student newsletter.

MONEY.CNN.COM



What is Social Reproduction Theory?¹⁶

by Tithi Bhattacharya

The history of organizations claiming to be “Marxist” has not always been glorious when it comes to categories of oppression such as gender and race.

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON CHARGES AGAINST MARXISM IS that, as a theory, it is preoccupied with “class” at the expense of gender.

It is important to state at the outset that the history of organizations claiming to be “Marxist” has not always been glorious when it comes to categories of oppression such as gender and race. Everyone knows someone who has been told by a “Marxist” man that “minor” annoyances like sexism or racism will be sorted out “after the revolution,” so in the meantime, we all need to buckle down and work on our class struggle. Incidents of sexual harassment by Marxist men are also unfortunately not uncommon in organizations of the left, both in the past and the present.

Short of actual harassment, women have recounted feeling dismissed, undermined and institutionally written off within organizations. Voices of women activists such as the Indian Communist women involved in the historic Telengana struggle of 1947, British Communists such as Doris Lessing, or Peggy Dennis, a leading member of the U.S. Communist Party, tell a dispiriting story of sexism and disappointment in organizations that such women had seen as their life’s work and source of hope.

This record is particularly horrifying because many of us became Marxists precisely because revolutionary Marxists are supposed to be the most intolerant of gender oppression. We joined revolutionary organizations because we think of Marxism as an insurgent theory--that fights for, but

never remains satisfied with, any piecemeal reform the system offers, and that calls for a complete demolition of capitalism--and is thus one of the best weapons to fight for women's liberation and gender justice.

This is why, if we are serious revolutionaries and not unthinking preachers of dogma, there are two--mutually contradictory--aspects of the Marxism's history that we have to reckon with. The first is the damage done to the revolutionary cause of gender justice in the name of Marxism, and the second is how the Marxist framework, despite the many historical missteps in its name, still remains the best way to understand oppression under capitalism, and hence provides clues as to how to end it.

Marxist Theory

THERE IS A TREMENDOUS *UNDERDEVELOPED* INSIGHT AT THE heart of Marx's analysis of capitalism. In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx identifies "labor power" or our capacity to labor, as the "special commodity" that the capitalist needs to set the system in motion and keep it running. Our labor power, Marx tells us, has the "peculiar property of being a source of value" because with that labor power, we create commodities and value for capitalism. The appropriation of our surplus labor by capitalists is the source of their dominance. Without our labor power, then, the system would collapse.

But Marx is frustratingly silent on the rest of the story. If labor power produces value, how is labor power itself produced? Surely workers do not spring from the ground to arrive at the marketplace, fresh and ready to sell their labor power to the capitalist.

This is where later Marxist scholars such as Lise Vogel, Martha Gimenez, Johanna Brenner and, more recently, Susan Ferguson and David



Workers labour produces profits for the bosses.



DAILY MAIL

BOSTON GLOBE

**It is s important
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McNally have seized upon Marx's transformative but incomplete insight, and developed it further. It is perhaps important for us to remember in this context, the potential and creativity inherent in the Marxist tradition, rightly referred to as a living tradition, which has allowed new generations of Marxists to examine it critically and expand upon it.

Looking closely at Marx's *Capital*, these scholars argue that the key to the system, our labor power, is actually itself produced and reproduced outside of capitalist production, in a "kin-based" site called the family. In an excellent passage, Vogel explains clearly the connection between class struggle and women's oppression:

Class struggle over conditions of production represents the central dynamic of social development in societies characterized by exploitation. In these societies, surplus labor is appropriated by a dominant class, and an essential condition for production is the... renewal of a subordinated class of direct producers committed to the labor process. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides most of the new workers needed to replenish this class, and women's capacity to bear children therefore plays a critical role in class society....In propertied classes...women's oppression flows from their role in the maintenance and inheritance of property...In subordinate classes... female oppression...derives from *women's involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production.* [Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, p. 129, emphasis mine]

This is essentially the main argument of what Vogel and these other later Marxists call "social reproduction theory." Social reproduction theory shows how the "production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process," as Meg Luxton has put it. If the formal economy is the production site for goods and services, the people who produce such things are themselves produced outside the ambit of the formal economy at very little cost for capital.

Labor power, in the main, is reproduced by three interconnected processes:

1. By activities that regenerate the worker outside the production process and allow her to return to it. These include, among a host of others, food, a bed to sleep in, but also care in psychical ways that keep a person whole.
2. By activities that maintain and regenerate non-workers outside the production process--i.e. those who are future or past workers, such as children, adults out of the workforce for whatever reason, be it old age, disability or unemployment.
3. By reproducing *fresh workers*, meaning childbirth.



CAPITALISM ALSO
DEPENDS ON
DOMESTIC LABOUR

These activities, which form the very basis of capitalism in that they reproduce the worker, are done completely free of charge for the system by women and men within the household and the community. In the United States, women still carry a disproportionate share of this domestic labor.

According to a 2012 survey, U.S. women put in 25.9 hours a week of unpaid domestic labor in 2010, while men put in 16.8, a difference of more than nine hours. The survey includes indexable tasks such as child care, cooking, shopping, housework, odd jobs, gardening and others.

According to *Forbes* magazine, if unpaid domestic work was included in the measuring the GDP, "it would have raised it by 26 percent in 2010." But, of course, we also have to add to this already formidable list the additional non-indexable tasks such as providing psychic care and support to both the employed and non-worker(s) within the household. Anyone who has had to soothe a child after a hard day at her own workplace, or figure out care for an ageing parent after a grueling shift knows how important such apparently non-material tasks can be.

The most important insight of social reproduction theory is that capitalism is a unitary system that can successfully, if unevenly, integrate the sphere of reproduction and the sphere of production. Changes in one sphere thus create ripples in another. Low wages and neoliberal cost-cutting at work can produce foreclosures and domestic violence at home.

The most important insight of social reproduction theory is that capitalism is a unitary system that can successfully, if unevenly, integrate the sphere of reproduction and the sphere of production.

Why is this the most important insight? Because it gives real historical substance to understanding: (a) who a “worker” is, and (b) in what ways the worker can fight against the system. Most importantly, this theory helps us understand that any gains for gender rights that we make in either the formal economy or outside of it can only be temporary because the material basis of women’s oppression is tied to the system as a whole. Any conversation about the end of oppression and liberation thus needs to draw on a simultaneous conversation about the end of the system itself.

The Importance of the Sphere of Production

IF WOMEN PROVIDE THE MAIN SUPPORT FOR CAPITALISM outside the workplace through their unpaid labor, does that then make workplace issues men’s issues?

Anyone who is expecting to find the 19th century stereotype of a dun-garee-clad white male worker wielding his spanner should take a close look at the real picture of the U.S. labor market.

The vast majority of women in the U.S. have to work for a living. This means they sell their labor power in the market and are workers. Women make up half--an even 47 percent--of the U.S. labor force, and the percentage of married mothers who are working has increased from 37 percent in 1968 to 65 percent in 2011. According to a Pew Research study released this year, a record 40 percent of American mothers are the primary breadwinner for their families, compared to a mere 11 percent in 1960.

While union membership is low for all workers in the U.S., the number of unionized women is not far behind the number of unionized men. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, even after the severe drop in union membership since the recession, the figures for 2012 show that union membership rate was 12 percent for men, compared to 10.5 percent for women. These findings also show that Black workers were more likely to be union members than their white, Asian or Latino counterparts.

It follows that anyone who argues that women’s issues are *only* to do with what we experience or endure in the home (sexual violence, reproductive health, child care, etc.), or outside the sphere of production is simply wrong. Any discussion about wages or the workplace, about labor organizing or about fighting for benefits is a highly gendered issue.

But there are two radically contradictory trends that mark all recent news about women. One is the unbearable immiseration of the vast majority of women and the other is the rise of an incredibly prosperous and multiethnic group of ruling-class women.

More than three-quarters of the workers in the 10 biggest low-wage job categories are women, and over one-third are women of color. I have

While union membership is low for all workers in the U.S., the number of unionized women is not far behind the number of unionized men.

written before on how the U.S. is one of only four countries in the world that lacks paid maternity leaves, making it extremely difficult for women to be working mothers. Moreover, one-third of U.S. workers don't have access to paid sick leave, and only 42 percent have paid personal leave. As union activists correctly point out:

What's the impact on public health when working people can't afford to take sick days during a flu epidemic? Who takes care of a sick child? Who's home to fix dinner and help with homework? Who can dedicate time to a sick elderly parent?

How are women supposed to balance the burden of unpaid labor in the home, with full-time paid labor in the workplace? The real answer is that they cannot.

In 1990, women's participation in the labor force was 74 percent, making the U.S. number six among 22 developed countries in this measure. Thanks to the neoliberal policies of the next two decades, women's participation rose only a fraction to 75.2 percent, while in other industrialized countries, it shot up from about 67 percent to nearly 80 percent.

Not only are women forced to work part-time, but workplace hostility to the gendered nature of domestic work is also why only 9 percent of working mothers work more than 50 hours a week.

Let's think about that for a minute. If mothers worked, say 55 hours a week, then given an average commuting time, sociologists have shown that

More than three-quarters of the workers in the 10 biggest low-wage job categories are women, and over one-third are women of color.



HUFFINGTON POST

Many women of colour work in low-wage jobs.

Policies that govern workplaces have the power to affect women both at work and at home.

they would have to leave the house at 8:30 a.m. and return at 8:30 p.m. every day of the workweek!

Despite the vast powers of the Internet, children still have to be picked up from school and fed by a live human, and the elderly parents need to be taken care of by the same. In most cases, in the U.S., this person continues to be a woman.

It seems from the above survey that any issue to do with the workplace is actually also about women and gender. Policies that govern workplaces have the power to affect women both at work and at home. But what should we fight for? Should we be fighting for equal wages with men in a low-wage economy? Should we be fighting for universal health care, which will ease our care-giving burden? Should we fight as “women” or should we fight as “workers”?

There is a particularly vocal group of women who have emerged in the media in recent times to make the case for women’s rights. Joan C. Williams is a very insightful sociologist, whose work on class and gender ought to be read widely. But she recently made the disappointing observation that “executive feminism is just what we need to jump-start the stalled gender revolution.” By “executive feminism,” she literally means the “feminism” of chief executive officers of large multinationals. She names Sheryl Sandberg and Princeton professor Anne Marie Slaughter as leaders on this “new frontier of feminism.”

Many may take delight in the storming of corporate boardrooms by a handful of women. These boardrooms and their adjoining golf courses have been the bastions of upper-class male privilege for centuries. But it brings us to a central question: What do gender rights look like if we sever them from the question of class? Will the female CEOs act in the interest of all women?

The best policies to further the interests of a majority of women are also the very same policies that cut into the profits of capitalism as a system of production.

For instance, free universal health care would ensure that every man, woman and child, whether they are in paid employment or not, have free medical care on demand. This would reduce an unemployed woman’s dependence on her employed partner and could potentially allow her control over reproductive health and choices, not to mention, support for her family’s health and care. She could choose when and whether to have children, and get home help--free of cost--for aging family members, thus drastically reducing her own labor in the home.

But the medical industry is a multibillion-dollar business that would fight this tooth and nail. Similarly, it is in the interest of women that we have a decent wage for all workers, since women are disproportionately

among the lowest-paid in the economy. There, too, we run into capitalism's profits, and it will be a hard battle to win.

The Sheryl Sandbergs of the world are clear class warriors, using the language of women's rights to bolster a system that only benefits their class. The millionaire Sandberg even refused to pay her own interns until a public outcry made her change her decision.

The central message coming from this new generation of female CEOs is that work and more hard work will liberate women.

It is certainly true that economic independence for women is a hard-fought right and needs to be constantly reinforced through struggle. This is why we find in the writings of early Marxists, such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, a strong emphasis on women's work in the sphere of production and its liberating potential.

But economic "independence" looks so much better on Sheryl Sandberg than on the mother who works at Taco Bell – because Sandberg's relationship to capitalism, as a boss, is one of control, while the working-class mother's is one of complete loss of control. In the latter's case, her job brings her limited economic independence from her male/female partner, but complete dependence on the vagaries of the market.

When Sandberg says that women need to work harder to achieve rewards, she is asking for a certain class of women--hers--to wrest more control away from the men of her class, while keeping the system intact that functions via the paid and unpaid labor of the majority of women.

Indeed, scholars such as Karen Nussbaum have argued that the system created a few spaces for ruling-class women at the top in order to stave off deeper institutional changes that would transform the relationship of the majority of women to labor:

To contain the growing demands of working women, employers created opportunities for some women, opening up professional and managerial jobs for college graduates while resisting the demands for institutional changes that would improve jobs for all women. Women at both ends of the workforce continued to share common concerns of equal pay and work-family policies, but the intensity of the issues differed as the conditions of the two groups changed. Employers had created a safety valve. College-educated women who had been bank tellers were becoming branch managers; clericals in publishing companies were becoming editors. The percentage of women who were managers or professionals doubled between 1970 and 2004, from 19 to 38 percent. (Nussbaum 2007: 165)

It is reductive to say that the battles over gender in our society are the same battles as those about class. But it is correct to say: (a) following Lise

It is certainly true that economic independence for women is a hard-fought right and needs to be constantly reinforced through struggle.

Vogel, that class struggle represents the “central dynamic” of social development, and (b) that it is in the interests of capitalism as a system to prevent any broad changes in gender relations, because real changes to gender will ultimately affect profits.

The Importance of the Sphere of Reproduction

IT STANDS TO REASON THEN THAT THE BEST WAY TO FIGHT for women’s rights in the sphere of production is through our labor organizations. There are some truly inspiring moments of labor history where trade unions have fought for abortion rights, equal wages and against homophobia.

But the working class doesn’t only work in its workplace. A woman worker also sleeps in her home, her children play in the public park and go to the local school, and sometimes she asks her retired mother to help out with the cooking. In other words, the major functions of reproducing the working class take place outside the workplace.

Who understands this process best? Capitalism. This is why capitalism attacks social reproduction viciously in order to win the battle at the point of production. This is why it attacks public services, pushes the burden of care onto individual families, cuts social care--in order to make the entire working class vulnerable and less able to resist its attacks on the workplace.

Who else understands this process best? Revolutionary Marxists. This is why we can be the link between the sphere of reproduction, the community where the school is being closed, the home where the woman is subjected to violence; and the sphere of production, where we fight for benefits and for higher wages.

We do it in two ways. We (a) provide the analytical linkage between the “two spheres” of the single system, through Marxist theory; and (b) act as a tribune of the oppressed, particularly when the fight has not generalized to the workplace. For it is not true that the working class cannot *fight* in the sphere of reproduction. It is, however, true that it can only *win* against the system in the sphere of production.

Some of the major fights in working-class history began outside the sphere of production. The two most significant revolutions of the modern world, the French and the Russian, began as bread riots, led by women.

An understanding of capitalism as an integrated system, where production is scaffolded by social reproduction, can help fighters understand the significance of political struggles in either sphere and the necessity of uniting them.

Let us take the case of reproductive rights, one of the critical fights of our times, which is not directly a workplace struggle. Are reproductive rights

The two most significant revolutions of the modern world, the French and the Russian, began as bread riots, led by women.



Students rally for choice.

simply about women's ability to have access to abortion and contraception?

In reality, reproductive rights ought to be called reproductive justice. A women's right to choose is not just about the right not to have babies but *the right also to have them*.

The history of African American women and other women of color in America is bloodied by instances of forced sterilization by the state. Throughout the 1960s, the states of Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Virginia and Tennessee considered compulsory sterilization laws for Black mothers on welfare. When the contraception drug Norplant was first released in the market, an editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer suggested that it was a solution to Black poverty. A similar fate awaited women in Puerto Rico. When U.S. industry, under the economic program of "Operation Bootstrap," went to the island in search of cheap labor in the 1930s and 1940, many factories ran on-site birth control clinics for women workers, and some refused to hire women unless they had been sterilized.

Moreover, reproductive choice cannot be just about control over our ovaries. It is about control over our lives: about whether and when to have children, how many children to have, to have time to take care of them, to have public schools to send them to, to have them and their fathers not be behind bars, and most importantly, to have a decent wage to be able to make decisions about all those things.

The *New York Times* reported this week that there was a nine percent decline in the fertility rate from 2007 to 2011, a drop that demographers believe "began after the recession took hold and Americans started feeling less secure about their economic circumstances." In other words, the Times has just figured out that most ordinary women prefer to have babies when

We need a generation of unruly women and men to make that connection in our workplaces, on our campuses and on the streets.

they feel that they have the economic means to feed and raise them!

So the question of reproduction is tied to the most fundamental questions of our society: Who labors, for whom and for how long.

For An Integrated Fight against Capitalism

AT THIS PARTICULAR MOMENT OF NEOLIBERAL CRISIS, GENDER is being used as the weapon of class struggle by capital. Repeated defense of rape by establishment figures, the severe attack on reproductive rights and growing transphobia are all results of capitalism trying in various ways to resolve the economic crisis through attacks on working-class lives, both at work and at home.

Our solution as Marxist revolutionaries is not to simply talk about the importance of class struggle, but to link the struggles of the formal economy to those outside of it. For this to happen, it is less important that we “win the argument” with oppressed identities. It is more important that we win their trust, by being the most intransigent fighters at home and at work.

This is why in the organizations where we fight for wages (e.g., our labor unions), we need to raise the question of reproductive justice; and in our organizations where we fight against sexism and racism, we need to raise the question of wages.

We need a generation of unruly women and men to make that connection in our workplaces, on our campuses and on the streets. That is the real tradition of revolutionary Marxism.

**THERE WILL BE NO
WOMENS LIBERATION
WITHOUT
REVOLUTION**



**THERE WILL BE NO
REVOLUTION
WITHOUT
WOMENS LIBERATION**



AL JAZEERA

Socializing Security, Unionizing Work *#MeToo as Our Moment to Explore Possibilities*¹⁷

by Tithi Bhattacharya

IT WAS ON OCTOBER 5 LAST YEAR THAT THE *NEW YORK TIMES* first ran the story: Actress Ashley Judd claimed that Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein had been abusing and violating women for years. For most of us, the shock was in the fact of the utterance, not in its content. Think about it – “I never knew powerful men harass women in the workplace” – said no woman, cis or trans, ever. What was shocking, then, was that a major newspaper was willing to throw open doors and expose the man within, whose power lay in his ability to keep such doors closed for decades.

A week later, Roy Price, head of Amazon studios, resigned when the *Hollywood Reporter* published a testimony from the producer, Isa Hackett, about Price’s sexual advances towards her. Three days after Price’s resignation, on October 15, the actress Alyssa Milano tweeted the following message: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply

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to this tweet.” Within 24 hours, 40,000 women had responded to Milano. And the numbers just kept growing.

While such numbers are important they can obscure an important distinctive feature of #MeToo. We have always had statistics. The alarming ubiquity of sexual violence in women’s lives have been recorded by various official and unofficial bodies, from the U.S. department of Justice, various law enforcement agencies to non-profits such as the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) and the National Alliance to End Sexual Violence. But #MeToo can be said to have de-statitized women. Women began to tell their stories in their own voice to a wide audience, access to which had been democratized through social media platforms. When flesh, blood, and pain were added to statistics they molded its empiricism, creating darkly shaped life-stories. Thousands of women’s voices, forced into silence for years, emerged in anguished synchronicity with the power to dethrone the likes of Harvey Weinstein, Louis CK, Matt Lauer, Garrison Keillor, Russell Simmons, push aside politicians from both sides of the aisle – the Republican senate candidate Roy Moore in Alabama, the Democratic Senator Al Franken from Minnesota – and finally secured the conviction of the Olympic Gymnast team’s long standing medical doctor, Lawrence Nassar. Individual stories of agony were finally told collectively.

To understand this political relationship between individual violation and collective response, we need to explore the theoretical pathways that connect particular harms to universal conditions, and whether such theorizing, instead of mirroring, can refract away from available social solutions for gender violence and gesture towards other radical forms of belonging.



ANY DISCUSSION OF #METOO MUST FIRST ACKNOWLEDGE THE fact that the deeply autobiographical testimonies of sexual violence by women actually trace the biography of something else: the workplace. Nested within the accounts of personal violations lies yet another secret, the stunningly dictatorial nature of the workplace, that is, perhaps for the first time, being discussed openly. #MeToo shows the normative nature of the boss’s control over worker’s lives, reproduced each day through the power he holds over employment and enforced each day through intimidation, bullying, and outright violence.

Consider the singular method Harvey Weinstein used to silence women who had survived his assaults: he threatened to ruin their careers. He threatened Salma Hayek that he would shut down her film *Frida*. After she refused Weinstein’s advances, Lupita Nyong’o was terrified that it marked an end for her in Hollywood:

I needed to make sure that I had not awakened a beast that would go on to ruin my name and destroy my chances in the business even before I got there.

“I just want to know that we are good,” I said.

“I don’t know about your career, but you’ll be fine,” he said. It felt like both a threat and a reassurance at the same time; of what, I couldn’t be sure.

Gretchen Carlson was fired by Roger Ailes, the co-creator of Fox News, for refusing to have sex with him. Long before the #MeToo moment, Mechelle Vinson, a bank teller, made legal history when in 1986 she won a case in the U.S. supreme court against her supervisor. Vinson had been fired from her job after putting up with four years of abuse and violence from her boss who “repeatedly sexually assaulted her – once forcing her to the floor in the bank vault...[and] threatened to fire her if she refused his demands...”

It is clear, and well known by women, that between the legal ‘freedom’ of reporting an abusive, even rapist, boss, stands the spectre of losing that very job that makes life possible.

One third of the approximately 90,000 charges received by Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in 2015 included an allegation of workplace harassment.

In 2016, the commission reported that

- 90 percent of workers experiencing harassment do not take formal action.
- The most common workplace response was to “avoid the harasser” (33 percent to 75 percent)
- Workers denied or downplayed the gravity of the situation (54 percent to 73 percent)
- Women often attempted to ignore, forget, or endure the abusive behavior (44 percent to 70 percent)

A significant number of women in America work under multiple “bosses” or authorities who have control over their ability to work, and hence, live. State Agencies, such as the office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), sometimes provide the *legal* context for the *illegal* sexual assault by the workplace boss. Study after study documents the heightened vulnerability of immigrant farm workers in the fields of California whose uncertain immigration status make them perfect quarry for predatory bosses. Again, while the statistics give us a general understanding of the enormity of the problem, it is women’s voices that actualize the reality. Human Rights Watch reported the story of an 18-year old woman from Oaxaca, Mexico working in California:

A significant number of women in America work under multiple “bosses” or authorities who have control over their ability to work, and hence, live.



Farmworkers are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

NPR

[She] spoke no English and practically no Spanish, reported her rape to a local farmworker women’s organization but left the area before the organization was able to help her seek justice. She reportedly told the young woman who tried to help her, “I would like to speak as you speak, but I can’t defend myself.”

She had the formal freedom to speak while being bound by every other un-freedom which made utterance impossible. #MeToo, then, while on the surface appears as the *personal* breakthrough of brave individuals, actually exposed not just the violent manager or boss, but the *institutions* that enable the boss, and the *system* that enforces silence.

Since sexual violence forms such an integral part of labor discipline for women then surely the solution lies in improving workplace conditions. This is a banal truism, so let us instead look at the specific methods on offer towards achieving that goal.



THE ABOVE MENTIONED 2016 REPORT OF THE EEOC *SELECT TASK Force on Harassment in the Workplace* encapsulates what we can call the “HR solution” to gender violence. The commissioners’ framing of workplace gender violence is primarily concerned with how capital is disadvantaged

by such violations. There is, the report states, “a compelling business case for stopping and preventing harassment” primarily because it entails “decreased productivity, increased turnover, and reputational harm. All of this is a drag on performance – and the bottom-line.” The solution they offer is to bestow even more authority and responsibility on managers and bosses – traditionally the caste from which the most violent harassers are recruited. “The importance of leadership cannot be overstated,” overstates the report; “effective harassment prevention efforts ... must start with and involve the highest level of management of the company.”

It is worthwhile remembering that the first personnel management department in the United States was started by a company called National Cash Register and it came into existence after a successful strike by workers, after which the company’s president organized a new department to deal with “complaints” and handle hirings, firings, and workplace safety. It should come as no surprise, then, that HR firms began to proliferate in the United States with the onset of neoliberalism from the 1980s and matched the decline of unions and their increasing inability to ensure workers’ rights. The language used by HR firms bore testimony to who had the upper hand in class struggle. For instance, according to the “Michigan Model” of HR management, proposed by Fombrun, Tichy, and Devanna in 1984, workers were to be held as “a valuable resource, to be obtained cost effectively, used sparingly, and developed and exploited to the maximum to further corporate interests.” From the old IWW slogan of “an injury to one is an injury to all” we had finally arrived at a full discursive acknowledgment that workers were de-individualized living beings, without race or gender, who existed to “further corporate interests.” The HR solution to the sexual violence engendered by capitalism was to further entrench the worker in capitalist social relations.

The language used by HR firms bore testimony to who had the upper hand in class struggle.





The near-certainty of sexual assault produces the inevitability of support networks amongst women.

RECENTLY ALEX PRESS HAS REMINDED US OF THE “UNION option” as a solution to workplace violence. In a particularly evocative formulation she asks for the “weaponization” of the “whisper network.” Through the whispered warnings of other women, women develop a shared knowledge of who to avoid in a workplace or on campus: the manager who asks you to stay back after hours; the professor who closes his office door to offer you more privacy. The near-certainty of sexual assault produces the inevitability of support networks amongst women. Beneath the whispers, the quiet support, lies the steady nervure of solidarity. Press argues for such networks to be formalized, either as a union, a hotline, or “a more formal body that compiles allegations, verifies their validity, and acts on that information.”

But is it just the fear of being fired that maintains the elaborate architecture of silence around workplace assault? If we see the workplace as the only disciplining space for women then we miss the material relations that bind the place of work to the spaces of home and life. We can thus miss the fears and resolves that arise out of that necessary and dangerous mutuality.

What women urgently need to speak out against their abuser is security, in the most expansive and socialized sense. Not just security at work against possible retaliation, but also the security of a robust infrastructure of social services that will catch her if she does get fired, tide her over, and sustain her family till the next job. While the first can be attained through unionization, the latter needs much wider, society-wide, often anti-systemic struggles. A traditional union draws its own boundaries of authority at the doors of the workplace. But what good is a union contract for a survivor of sexual assault if ICE raids her home and threatens deportation? A fighting union thus must unite the struggle at the point of production with the wider social inequality which produces such struggle. A woman does not struggle for a higher wage for the sake of the wage; she fights in order to afford a better life for herself and her family. Similarly, the union cannot simply fight for her job security in the face of harassment. Battles that ensure the reproduction of life, the struggle for universal health care, free education or public transit, need to be led by unions if they want to be trusted in the workplace, for it is these social conditions that allow women to speak out against individual harassers. It does not take too much imagination to guess whether a union that fights for DACA or reproductive justice will be more or less effective than a union that supports Trump’s wall or dithers on abortion.¹⁸

Unions that do not understand this fundamentally dictatorial nature of the wage form – that it is the sole, mediated, route to life – do not under-

stand the rich, complex, and necessarily contradictory reasons that motivate workers, especially women, to fight. Who can forget the most vivid moment in Emile Zola's *Germinal* when a food merchant who had for years forced women to have sex with him in return for food finally faces the judgment of rioting women. They castrate him, brandish his penis as a trophy and yell "that's the last time you shove that up our daughters...no more spreading our legs just so we can each have a loaf of bread." While it is the fear that the loaf be taken away that forces women to bow before the wage form and its varied abuses, it is also often bread (or water or housing) that motivate women to finally break the wage form's power.



THE SCENE IN *GERMINAL* BRINGS US TO ONE ASPECT OF THIS #MeToo moment that is the most in need of reflection and exploration as we chart a way forward.

What do we do with the abuser?

The question was most sharply posed when Rosemarie Aquilina, the sentencing judge for Olympic doctor Larry Nassar, wished him rape and torture in prison while serving out his life sentence. The issue has most commonly been posed as a struggle between carceral feminism and a feminism that upholds restorative justice. I contend that we are confronted with a more complex situation because of the very nature of bourgeois justice.

The capitalist socio-juridical logic forces us to choose between (a) the



It's a common myth that bourgeois justice is blind.

QUENA



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Scylla of imprisonment of the rapist as justice for the victim/survivor; or (b) the Charybdis of a rapist pardoned/let off due to the profoundly sexist/racist nature of the justice system as whole. The problems with both positions have been documented in both scholarship and in harrowing lived experience. But the source of the dilemma, in my opinion, does not lie in the dark consequences each choice incites, but in the nature of justice under capitalism which is formal and not actual.¹⁹ The most painful demonstration of this contradictory sense of justice is in the goals that the feminist movement often sets in distinction from the antiracist movement. While the latter rallies against the criminal justice system, the former often demands carceral justice for survivors of sexual violence. The spaces of overlap between both, while crucial, are often small, grey, and uncertain.

So, and again, what do we *do* with the abuser?

Michel Foucault's work powerfully documents the change in the discourse of justice from the premodern to the modern moment. The juridical system of premodern European societies with its emphasis on punishment/torture/execution – which had to do with a certain disregard of the body – was in harmony with a religious notion of grace, where comfort of the soul and the body was provided to the penitent by the Church. The authority of the monarch to “pardon” or stay an execution came from his divine double-body. Hence church spaces were also sanctuary spaces. Forgiveness always lay with God, and, through God, with the Prince.

The modern world with its emphasis on “discipline” formally recognizes “pardon” or “grace” but only in the bourgeois juridical sense. The socially rooted sense of God’s grace that the premodern community had has been drained of both its symbolic and actual powers because, in part, both crime and punishment are thoroughly rooted in the individual rather than the social. We have lost a socio-moral language of pardon, forgiveness and, yes, grace.

Foucault has shown how the modern juridical system borrows and mimics the language of the Christian church – the monk’s “cell” is where the prisoner is kept, and the penitent are who inhabit the “penitentiary”. The bourgeois order wants to minister to the criminal’s “soul” in a world it has rendered soul-less. Hence, we as modern citizens, lack the language and ability to truly comprehend and hence deliver grace.

Under the current justice system, perhaps capitalism will always force our approach to the individual abuser to hover between doubt and irresolution. If futures are immanent in the present, then perhaps an abolitionist feminism is still only accumulating its form from the floating heterotopias of our time.

However, till such a feminism breathes life, we can resolve this: that while the question of forgiveness for the individual abuser can be reflected upon, the system that produced him, protected him, and enabled him can never be forgiven.

Under the current justice system, perhaps capitalism will always force our approach to the individual abuser to hover between doubt and irresolution.

Endnotes

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- 17 This article originally appeared in the Verso ebook collection *Where Freedom Starts: Sex, Power, Violence, #MeToo* (2018). <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2773-where-freedom-starts-sex-power-violence-metoo>.

- 18 The New York Teamsters recently took a decision to fight ICE agents to protect their members. These sort of actions and decisions need to be generalized across the labor movement to make union relevant again to the lives of working women and men.
- 19 To explain, very briefly the Marxist idea of real and formal justice: Marx's analysis of bourgeois justice stems from his theoretical premise that injustice/inequality forms the basis of the wage labor system as a whole. The contradiction inherent in the bourgeois form of justice is generated by the fact that in the capitalist production system when the worker exchanges her labor for a wage, it is a just exchange. The capitalist purchases labor power "at its full price, so that equivalent is exchanged

for equivalent". But since the wage form conceals surplus value, the actual form of direct production involves a theft, since "there is not a single atom of" surplus value "that does not owe its existence to unpaid labor" of workers. This doubling, just exchange of wage and unjust extraction of surplus value is reproduced in social and juridical forms of the bourgeois order. The transformation of value and price of labour-power into the form of wages is, according to Marx the "phenomenal form, which makes the actual relation invisible, and, indeed, shows the direct opposite of that relation, forms the basis of all the juridical notions of both labourer and capitalist, of all the mystifications of the capitalistic mode of production, of all its illusions as to liberty..."



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“Socialist feminists are not the only feminists to strike, march and occupy. They are not the only feminists to call out power rather than work with it. Some anti-racist feminists, like those in Black Lives Matter Toronto, blend a form of allyship feminism with more radical, confrontational politics that often express anti-capitalist values. And the Indigenous women who launched Idle No More were nothing if not insurgent. In working through the ideas of social reproduction feminism, socialist feminism seeks to build on the analyses and practices of insurgent movements by developing an analysis of how capitalist power works *through* social oppression.” –Sue Ferguson

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