

BOOK REVIEW

Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto

Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser Brooklyn, N.Y.: Verso, 2019 (ISBN 978-1-78873-442-4)

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Feminism in the twenty-first century is at a crossroads: one path is represented by the corporate, neoliberal feminism espoused by the likes of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, which emphasizes the continuation of capitalism but with a few more women allowed in the ruling class. The other path is represented by the *huelga feminista*,¹ which “insist[s] on *ending capitalism*: the system that generates the boss, produces national borders, and manufactures the drones that guard them” (2–3; emphasis in original). The authors of *Feminism for the 99%* argue that the monumental stakes of this pressing choice preclude any middle option. For them, neoliberalism has stamped out any viable third option, to wit: “this iteration of capitalism has raised the stakes for every social struggle, transforming sober efforts to win modest reforms into pitched battles for survival. Under such conditions, the time for fence-sitting is past . . .” (3–4). In what follows, the authors endeavor to defend the path of *huelga feminista*, that is, “[w]e aim to explain why feminists should choose the road of feminist strikes, why we must unite with anticapitalist and antisystemic movements, and why our movement must become a *feminism for the ninety-nine percent*” (5; emphasis in original).

The core ideas of *Feminism for the 99%* are presented through eleven theses that seek to provide support for the central tenet of rejecting capitalism. The first two theses focus on explicating the binary choice of feminist strikes versus liberal feminism. Exploring the recent (2016) feminist strikes throughout (primarily) Europe and South America, which ultimately coalesced into the March 8, 2017 International Women’s Day, the authors contend that “the strikers have revived the day’s all-but-forgotten historical roots in working-class and socialist feminism” (7). This historical connection is not the only significant aspect of this new movement; instead, the authors argue that this new movement is also creating new ways of striking,² but this movement has also “infused the strike form itself with a *new kind of politics*” (8). By expanding what is meant by the term *labor* beyond mere waged work, the authors find optimism in the potential of this “new feminist wave . . . to overcome the stubborn and divisive opposition between ‘identity politics’ and ‘class politics’” (8). Contrasted with this new movement is liberal feminism, which is situated primarily in the global North and centers the experience of the “professional-managerial stratum” (11). Within this framework, equality and diversity are market-centered, and the ultimate goal is to allow a few worthy women to ascend the ranks. One of the hallmarks of liberal feminism is the outsourcing of oppression, whereby women in the managerial class are enabled to “lean in” precisely because they have “leaned on” other women (who tend to be migrants)

for the caregiving and housework that had previously been under their purview. Liberal feminism certainly draws the ire of the authors, but this anger is not unaccompanied. As an alternative to “lean-in” feminism, “kick-back” feminism is proffered. “Far from celebrating women CEOs who occupy corner offices, we want to get rid of CEOs and corner offices” (13).

Thesis three and thesis four are explicit examinations of capitalism and the need for feminism to be anticapitalist. Looking beyond traditional “women’s issues,” feminism for the ninety-nine percent aspires to represent all the exploited victims of capitalism. Rather than fighting for individual rights (for example, reproductive justice) detached from the greater economic backdrop (for example, free, universal health care), feminism for the ninety-nine percent sees the need to join other extant movements that advocate on the behalf of the ninety-nine percent, for example, environmental justice, labor rights, antiracist causes, and so on. The authors contend that the specific form of capitalism that we inhabit today has brought about “*a crisis of society as a whole*” (16; emphasis in original). This crisis is not the first of its kind, but rather it is just the most recent societal crisis manifested by capitalism. The authors note that “capitalism periodically destabilizes the very conditions that it—and the rest of us—rely upon to survive. Crisis is hardwired into its DNA” (17). Despite this periodic upheaval, the particular crisis we face today is especially grievous due to the nearly four-decades-long assault on the working class and the spread of “the tentacles of finance across the social fabric” (17). Seeing a failure of leadership, feminism for the ninety-nine percent sees itself as standing between right-wing populism and progressive resistance, both of which claim to solve the ills wrought by capitalism.

The middle three theses (five through seven) focus on the relationship between capitalism and gender and sexuality. It is in this middle section that the concept of *social reproduction* is elucidated. Capitalism’s “*key move was to separate the making of people from the making of profit, to assign the first job to women, and to subordinate it to the second*” (21; emphasis in original). When examining the interplay between people-making work and profit-making work, the authors highlight the necessary role that people-making work provides. Specifically, waged work is not possible without people-making work, for the latter “supplies some fundamental preconditions . . . for human society in general and for capitalist production in particular” (21). Social reproduction is *ipso facto* a feminist issue precisely because it hinges on gender roles and oppression. The division between people-making work and profit-making work is also linked to the shift from extended, kin-based households to the heterosexual nuclear family under the command of capitalism. This shift in kin-based gender violence can be thought of as private, public, or a hybrid of the two. The authors are keenly aware that gender violence is endemic to the capitalist structure, but they are quick to highlight that “it becomes especially virulent and pervasive in times of crisis” (26).

Feminism for the ninety-nine percent recognizes that the traditional feminist responses to gender violence have been inadequate, whether it is “carceral feminism” that falsely believes that more laws are the key to combating gender violence, or the “market-based solutions” that see microlending as the panacea to women’s experience of gender violence. In order to eradicate all forms of gender violence, “feminists for the ninety-nine percent aim to connect the struggle against gender violence to the fight against all forms of violence in capitalist society—and against the social system that undergirds them” (33).

With respect to sexual struggles, feminism for the ninety-nine percent sees another binary choice, though the sides in this choice are not as they first appear. On the one

side, we have the sexual reactionaries who “seek to outlaw sexual practices that they claim violate enduring family values or divine law” (33). On the other side, we have the sexual liberals whose focus centers on the advancement of formal rights for sexual minorities and rebels. Although the choice may seem obvious to most, the authors caution that neither side is as it appears. Despite claims of tradition and antediluvian origins, the former is more “neotraditional” than “traditional” with regard to the prohibitions it seeks to bring forth. Condemning the latter choice may require a more indirect approach, however. The authors’ main criticism of the liberal approach is that the sexual rights sought “are conceived in terms that presuppose capitalist forms of modernity; far from enabling real liberation, they are normalizing, statist, and consumerist” (34). Highlighting the ongoing, if not increasing, violence against LGBTQ+ individuals in spite of increasing formal rights, as well as the increase in formal protections for trans people, all while failing to address the financial costs of transitioning—which stand in the way of many trans individuals’ ability to transition—the authors put forth a robust criticism of the liberal advancement of rights for LGBTQ+ individuals under the capitalism system. As an alternative to both the neotraditional and neoliberal approaches, feminism for the ninety-nine percent desires “to revive the radical spirit of the 1969 Stonewall uprising in New York of ‘sex-positive’ currents of feminism from Alexandra Kollontai to Gayle Rubin, and of the historic lesbian and gay support campaign for the 1984 British miner’s strike” (39).

The next triplet of theses pivot to the connections between large social justice movements (for example, antiracist movements and environmental movements) and capitalism. Specifically, these theses seek to connect feminism for the ninety-nine percent with these other movements. Noting that the historical handling of race and racism by feminists has been a mixed bag, the authors proclaim unequivocally that “[w]e understand that *nothing that deserves the name of ‘women’s liberation’ can be achieved in a racist, imperialist society*” (42; emphasis in original). Highlighting both the mechanisms by which capitalism has historically created classes of racialized beings and the racial component of waged exploitation globally, the authors provide an intersectional analysis of this oppression by spotlighting an argument made earlier, that is, that those who are employed in caregiving roles are often black and migrant women (45). The oppression of these women is what enables, in large part, more privileged women to advance in their managerial roles by outsourcing their domestic work.

To say that capitalism has had deleterious consequences on our natural environment is to undersell the reality of the crisis we face. Climate change is a women’s issue because “[w]omen occupy the front lines of the present ecological crisis, making up 80 percent of climate refugees. In the global South, they constitute the vast majority of the rural workforce, even as they also bear responsibility for the lion’s share of social-reproductive labor” (47). Women are not only the victims of climate change, but they are also part of the solution, leading the charge of many of the world’s environmental organizations and movements (48). Addressing climate change requires an international approach, and this dovetails with the penultimate thesis. Democratic states have often failed to adequately address the most pressing issues in our time, and “governments are increasingly seen by their subjects as handmaidens of capital, which dance to the tune of central banks and international investors, IT mammoths, energy magnates, and war profiteers” (50). The authors contend that because the capitalist system has divided the political and the economic, there are vast swaths of our social life that are viewed as being “off limits to democratic control” (50), and thus they proclaim the incompatibility of capitalism and

democracy. This state of affairs simultaneously engenders a geopolitical arrangement whereby the more powerful states of the global North are permitted to exploit the weaker states of the global South. Similar to the rejection of “lean-in” feminism discussed in the first thesis, the authors affirm that the answer to this situation is not to include more women in the ruling class, that is, those “who do the dirty work of bombing; of backing neocolonial interventions in the name of humanitarianism, while remaining silent about the genocides perpetrated by their own governments; of expropriating defenseless populations through structural adjustment, imposed debt and forced austerity” (53).

Finally, thesis eleven is an explicit call for all radical movements to join forces in opposing the neoliberal capitalist system. Proclaiming that “[w]e must ally, above all, with left-wing, anticapitalist currents of those movements that also champion the 99 percent” (54; emphasis in original). This thesis is a declaration of the goal of separating the working class from both progressive neoliberalist and reactionary populist alliances so as to create a new movement, an anticapitalist movement, that “is large and powerful enough to transform society” (55). The authors hold that the anticapitalist constitution of this movement would be the best means of overcoming the very divisions fashioned by capitalism, for example, those of race, sexuality, and gender. Feminism for the ninety-nine percent pledges its unyielding fealty to shaping the future of the world by unifying extant and potential movements into one all-encompassing insurgent movement that “is at once feminist, anti-racist, and anticapitalist” (57).

The scope and magnitude of *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* is impressive, and is certainly veiled by the length of the text itself. Although the ambition of the text is praiseworthy, at times the reader’s emotional reaction gives way to the desire for a more concrete explication of the means by which feminism for the ninety-nine percent can achieve its stated goals. The stated reason for writing the text is “to effect a rescue operation and course correction—to reorient feminist struggles in a time of political confusion” (63); yet many times throughout the text the reader is left asking, “how?” The stated goals, characteristics, and nuances of feminism for the ninety-nine percent are crystal clear, but the practical steps are more opaque. Aside from the feminist-led and feminist-oriented strikes mentioned early in the text, it is often difficult to discern what pragmatic steps one would take to declare oneself a feminist of the ninety-nine percent. At many points, it feels as though feminism for the ninety-nine percent is defined by what it is not, rather than what it is. This is not necessarily a drawback, but it does make it difficult to delineate what ultimately solidifies feminism for the ninety-nine percent. Although the authors reject “lean-in” feminism, the reader is left wondering what more they can do beyond proclaiming their anticapitalism, antiracism, and feminism for the ninety-nine percent. How should one demonstrate their commitment to, or allyship with, the “broad-based global insurgency” (57) called “feminism for the ninety-nine percent”?

While being somewhat light on practicalities, the text does a commendable job (especially considering its brevity) of linking the exceedingly large system of capitalism with equally large movements, such as the antiracist, anti-imperialist, and eco-socialist movements. Identifying each of these movements *as also* the concern of feminists is one of the most promising elements of the text. Capitalism presents numerous challenges to our social existence, and feminism for the ninety-nine percent attempts not only to “call out” capitalism, but also to unify all the movements against those very divisions.

Notes

1 A militant feminist strike in Spain during the spring of 2018.

2 Specifically, the authors note that the traditional strike, that is, the withdrawal of labor, has been tethered to other actions such as marches, demonstrations, blockades, and boycotts.

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