

JACOBIN

Why Feminism and Capitalism Can't Coexist

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The question of whether capitalism is good for women is one that both feminists and nonfeminists have debated for a long time. But each upsurge of interest in the question is embedded in a particular context. So, what are the conditions of the present moment that encourage an exercise like this?

For one thing, capitalism is in crisis. Not necessarily an economic crisis in the sense of a full-blown recession. But we have seen more than a decade of stimulus that includes a multitrillion-dollar bailout by central banks, years of quantitative easing, and a new normal of government-engineered low interest rates to keep investors from collectively hurtling themselves off a cliff.

Despite these inducements, wages and economic growth remain stagnant. Companies seem more interested in rolling the dice on the stock market than brick-and-mortar investment. Meanwhile, neoliberal capitalism — the norms, ideas, and policies that undergird the status quo of the past four decades — is experiencing a deep crisis of legitimacy. There is a widespread loss of trust in government, a waning faith in capitalism, and a resurgence of populism on both the Left and the Right.

A second point of reference is the resurgence of feminism in the past decade, both in the United States and globally. This resurgence has taken a variety of forms and has encompassed a range of perspectives on how best to pursue a feminist program, but it is a persistent feature of public discourse, most recently with the #MeToo movement.

The defeat of Hillary Clinton, against the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism's crisis of legitimacy, has thrown the dominant model of neoliberal feminism — the idea that feminist goals are best achieved by each woman striving to reach a position of power and success within capitalism — into question. Increasingly women, particularly younger women, are calling for a different kind of feminism that often has anticapitalist undertones or overtones. Polls find that roughly half of young adults prefer socialism over capitalism, and according to Pew, 53 percent of Bernie Sanders supporters are women.

It is in this context of crisis, which we can view as a moment of change rather than a breakdown per se, that we look forward and ask how feminists should be orienting their positions and their struggles.

I say look forward deliberately. Now is the time to both assess hard-won victories and strategize about how to make it possible for all women to actually enjoy them, and to push forward with new, concrete demands that fulfill the broad aims of feminism.

But first, in the service of clarity, a couple caveats. I don't speak for all women, obviously, but nor do I speak for all women on the Left, or all feminists, or all socialists, or all socialist-feminists. Also, there are many feminist critiques of capitalism. Given the restrictions of time and my own base of knowledge I'll only speak to a few of them.

Chelsea Follett — our moderator, a policy analyst at Cato, and managing editor of Human Progress — was kind enough to provide some orienting questions for the discussion.

1

Has the spread of capitalism been a net positive or a net negative for women?

This is a difficult question to answer, not least because I find it odd to formulate an equation of human costs that spans centuries of capitalism. Do more recent improvements in life expectancy, literacy, and women's autonomy outweigh the mass slaughter of indigenous women and children, the desperate lives of women trapped and tortured in chattel slavery, and the disfigurement and early deaths of women who spent their life toiling in sweatshops, their bodies destroyed by factory work?

A difficult calculation to be sure. But if we were to attempt it, we would certainly have to temper the sunny claims of global capitalism's recent successes with the stark reality that more than two billion people suffer from malnutrition, that the bottom 60 percent of people worldwide miss out on 95 percent of new income from global growth, and the absolute number of people living in poverty has risen by a billion people over the past few decades.

I'm willing to say, in agreement with Marx, that capitalism is better than feudalism. We can also point to data that suggests aggregate progress, for example, toward the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals on life expectancy, mortality, and education. Middle- and upper-class women in much of the world enjoy access and rights that would have been the envy of their sisters a century and a half ago.

But in celebrating these gains, and we should celebrate them, we must be cautious about the causal arrows we draw. While some of these gains can be attributed to development and rationalization — which are correlated with capitalism — many of these gains are the result of dogged political struggle, not capitalism itself.

Laws and norms against discrimination, the right to not be our husbands' property, the right to vote, the right to be able to protect ourselves and our children from domestic violence — these and so many other rights weren't handed down from on high by the Chamber of Commerce.

They were won by social movements, many of which were led by socialists and feminists, who fought tooth and nail and suffered many defeats on the way to getting them.

In this moment, however, I think it is important to look forward. Even if we were to concede that capitalism has been a net gain for women — which I don't — it is much more important to ask whether capitalism will lead to gains in the future.

Feminism is not just about eliminating gender-based discrimination. It's about fighting for and creating equality and a good life for everyone, regardless of their sex, gender, race, ethnicity, education, income, religion, or where they live. This is what's great about feminism — it's why I'm a feminist.

Simply put, we can't achieve these goals in capitalism.

This week is the climate strike, so let's consider the example of climate change. Nothing demonstrates the failure of the so-called free market better than the looming climate catastrophe. While capitalism may be rational for individuals, on a systemic level it is highly irrational. The reckless pursuit of profits by individual capitalists, who have been empowered by elites and governments, has created the massive collective problem of global warming, not to mention resource depletion and habitat destruction.

But instead of addressing this problem head on — a problem we roughly understood decades ago — for the past forty years elites and business owners have insisted on the healing power of free markets. They have argued that markets are natural and part of a spontaneous order, that rational individuals operating with perfect information create optimal outcomes, that externalities are trivial.

We know what needs to be done, yet the imperatives of profit-making and the entrenched prerogatives of elites have prevented countries from adopting projects and programs to free ourselves from our destructive fossil-fuel based economies, from developing and instituting sustainable solutions to meeting our needs.

Only a collective project, rooted in solidarity and cooperation, and organized around the principle of taking back our planet from rapacious corporations, will offer us a fighting chance of altering our current trajectory.

2

Is capitalism an inherently exploitative, oppressive, and patriarchal economic system entwined with the subjugation of women?

Let's parse this out a bit. Is capitalism exploitative? In political economy exploitation describes a relationship whereby someone sells her labor power to someone else who owns the means of production and makes a profit by paying her, the worker, less than the value of what she produces. So yes, most people, including women, are exploited in the sense that they work for a wage, and that they wouldn't be able to buy food or pay their rent without working for a wage.

Is this exploitation oppressive, meaning does it constitute cruel or unjust treatment? Well, that depends. In the United States, for example, not all women are oppressed. There are feminists and socialists who would balk at this assessment. Nonetheless, I don't think highly paid white women who have respect, security, and autonomy in organizing their work lives are oppressed — or at least not oppressed enough to get me into the street to fight for them.

The problem is that this happy scenario does not describe the situation for the vast majority of women, either in the United States or globally. A woman working full time for minimum wage who can't afford to go to the doctor, or buy vegetables, or pay her rent is oppressed. A college graduate drowning in student loan debt, working a sixty-plus-hour contract gig for a tech start-up that tops up a lousy paycheck with free beer and a foosball table in the break room is oppressed.

A good chunk of this oppression is linked to patriarchy, or more precisely sexism, since we don't live in a formally patriarchal society. The jury is out on whether capitalism is inherently sexist, and sexism certainly exists outside capitalism. One could imagine a model of capitalism that wasn't sexist or racist. But capitalism is a real-life way of organizing the norms, priorities, structures, and activities of society that evolves over time and space.

As a historical system sexism and racism have been a core part of strategies of accumulation in capitalism. Sexism makes women's unpaid labor in the home, which is essential to society, appear natural, a labor of love. Sexism and racism also continue to be extremely handy tools in the business owners' tool kit to divide and oppress workers, to discourage demands for better pay and benefits, or to block efforts to form a union.

3

Or has capitalism helped to empower women, enhancing their material well-being and fostering gender parity?

Rather than posing our questions and answers as either/or, we should opt for a more nuanced both/and discussion. As I said earlier, women have been empowered in capitalism. While we should be cautious not to confuse correlation with causation — keeping in mind those lurking variables such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the environmental movement — it is still the case that markets can empower women.

Money equals power. If American women today are lucky enough to have rich parents, or be born with fantastic abilities or intelligence that land them in a well-paid, fulfilling job, they will be empowered. More than that, they will be able to empower others in their social networks, such as their own children.

But observing that some women are quite empowered in capitalism does not imply that the path has been laid and that if we just follow it the goals of feminism will be reached. The fabulous wealth of the relative few at the top is not an accident, or a harmless peak over a healthy floor of people living a good life. The market-friendly reforms of the past few decades have made a handful of people (mostly men) unimaginably wealthy while the vast majority of people have seen their livelihoods stagnate and their opportunities narrow.

The incredible technological and scientific advances of the past forty years could have been channeled toward dramatically reducing poverty, improving health care outcomes and the ecological sustainability of our production processes, and ensuring security in the supply and distribution of clean water, nutritious food, and adequate housing. These are things that all people value. These are also things that would greatly empower women who suffer disproportionately from the lack of these things.

We have the tools to vastly improve the lives of the world's women, and all people for that matter. Yet we haven't directed our resources, knowledge, and energy toward achieving this goal. Why? Because the goal of capitalism is not to better the world — it's to make a profit.