

Johanna Brenner's Women and the Politics of Class

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Review: *Women and the Politics of Class* by Johanna Brenner, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2000, 330 pages, \$19.95 paperback.

Johanna Brenner's new *Women and the Politics of Class*, containing essays written over a sixteen year period, comes at critical period in American feminism. As Brenner writes, feminism has reached a "political impasse." Despite enormous political, economic, and social changes over the past one hundred years, resulting in what she calls "the best of times" for some women, for others it is the worst of times: deteriorating conditions in women's lives; enduring male domination in the home and outside it. Violence against women persists, perhaps is even increasing; sado-masochistic representations of heterosexuality are more widespread than ever; increasing numbers of women are impoverished; occupational sex-segregation continues; previous gains, like abortion rights and affirmative action, are under attack. Even the U.S. government recognizes the contradictions, noting that the increase in poverty among women has come at a time when "the national poverty rate has decreased."

While many feminist activists and academics are aware of this situation, what is so valuable about *Women and the Politics of Class* is its thoroughgoing analysis of the reasons for this impasse and strategies for moving feminism forward. Brenner situates the gains made by the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s within "the context of an expanding capitalist economy and a liberal welfare state" which enabled significant "gains for women without substantially changing the distribution of wealth." The strategy of the second wave women's movement, says Brenner, has been a gender-only one that focused on completing the project begun by the first wave activists (the suffragists): eliminating discrimination. Yet, says Brenner, the current situation facing women demands new solutions: "significant redistribution of wealth, reordered priorities in and expansion of government spending and increased regulation of employer practices." Because this requires challenging capitalist interest, feminism cannot win these battles alone and must become part of a new "rainbow movement" that will include "new, more social and political forms of trade union struggle and national political organization independent of the Democratic Party."

Just as Brenner situates the limitations and possibilities for contemporary female political agency within the current economic situation, her analysis of women's political activism historically is also situated within "the dynamic of the capitalist mode of production." However, Brenner expands upon this Marxist analytic strategy to include the "structures of social reproduction-the socially necessary labor necessary to renew life." These investigations are included in three essays, two of them coauthored (one with Maria Ramas and another with Barbara Laslett) in a section titled "Toward a Historical Sociology of Gender." These essays develop a structural, materialist, and historically specific understanding of gender as part "of a 'single-system' rather than 'dual systems' model." While a dual systems approach sees patriarchy and capitalism as separate and autonomous systems, a single-system approach must, according to Iris Young, be a "total social theory" that understands "the concrete social relations of gender and the relations in which these stand to other types of

interaction and domination.” Brenner’s and Ramas’ detailed, empirical analysis of the historical development of the family household system from the nineteenth century into the present does this, in an important advance over dual systems analyses that fail to adequately acknowledge the role of material relations, such as that of Michele Barrett, which they critique. While Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today* (1980) sees gender ideology as crucially significant in the development and perpetuation of the family household system, Brenner and Ramas persuasively argue that the “biological facts of reproduction conditioned the sexual division of labor.” The fact that, for example, of women born in 1890, “43.5 percent had four or more children, 60 percent had three or more” combined with “exploitative sweatshop conditions” to make “combining wage work and motherhood extremely difficult.”

The newest essay in the book, the groundbreaking “Intersections, Locations, and Capitalist Class Relations: Intersectionality from a Marxist Perspective,” extends this argument. While Brenner begins with feminist theory, in this essay as in others she consistently grounds her theoretical investigations in political needs, demonstrating the necessity and possibility for coalition between the feminist and civil rights movements. Here, Brenner builds on work on the intersectionality of race and sex by scholars Kimberle Crenshaw, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, and others, and calls for the integration of class into intersectional analysis. While intersectional analysis can highlight divisions among women—“the division between white middle class (especially upper professional and managerial) women and poor and working-class women of color”—the addition of class “can open up new fields for cross-race coalition building and feminist theorizing.” Brenner notes that like feminism, the civil rights movement has also reached a standstill, and must also win a significant redistribution of “income and wealth” to end black poverty, “through expansion of public investment in communities and housing, in schooling and access to higher education, and by the creation of living-wage jobs.”

These are among the strategies that Brenner recommends for feminism in an essay on “The Feminization of Poverty, Comparable Worth, and Feminist Political Discourse” and two essays on welfare reform. In these essays, as in two essays in a section titled “New Politics of the Family,” (one of these is coauthored by Nancy Holmstrom) Brenner calls for supporting mothers (and fathers) with subsidized services including “free before-and after-school programs, quality childcare including a living wage for childcare providers, and state-mandated employment policies (such as paid parental leave for men and women, flexible hours and paid leave for family responsibilities).” Brenner argues in favor of such policies, which would “provide working mothers with support,” rather than welfare strategies that demand that poor women have the right to stay home with their children. Brenner usefully distinguishes socialist from liberal demands for such public services, childcare, for example, in that socialism demands that they be “worker- and client-controlled, democratic, and integrated into the communities they serve.”

Although Brenner favors the pragmatic and strategic use of demands for supporting families in responding to changes in welfare policy, she also argues that the family functions as a privatizing and individualizing force. Brenner cites alternatives to the traditional family designed to counteract these tendencies in 70s leftist feminist utopian fiction by Marge Piercy and Ursula K. LeGuin, and in the kibbutzim. Indeed, there is a long history of such critiques within socialist feminism, but they have been much less popular than economic ones. Owenite socialist Fanny Wright, for example, called for state run boarding schools for children ages two and older in the 1820s U.S., that like the models above, separate the dwellings of children and adults, including their parents. While her calls for public education were popular, this policy was not. On the topic of deconstructing the family, Brenner has, even with socialists, a tough row to hoe.

Presenting family and community as opposed principles, Brenner suggests that rather than emphasizing family in our political struggle, we should “argue for expanding, supporting, and

reviving communities.” She says that a critique of capitalism focused on “working families is terribly limited and ultimately conservative.” She argues, for example, that lumping gay/lesbian families in with heterosexual ones “leaves little room for the liberatory demands of sexual politics.” By this, Brenner means not just freedom of sexual expression, but “appreciation of our unruly desires. . . opening up more possibility for empathic connection and thus solidarity.” Yet, here as in her critique of the nuclear family, Brenner could go farther in sketching details. How can a political strategy that, as she persuasively argues, must challenge capitalist economic interests, do this? Can’t we expand the definition of families, regardless of whether they contain same-sex partners, or a single parent and child, or some other combination of people, and demand that they get more than lip service from politicians, as does family historian Stephanie Coontz, at the same time that we stress community, as Brenner wants us to do? Concern for family has often been the avenue by which women enter into the public, political realm, calling into question Brenner’s generalization that family ties tend “away from building political organization and collective struggle.” If this is true, couldn’t we in part understand this in terms of capitalism’s erosion of leisure time, and thus time we are able to devote to community and political struggles, rather than the structure of family life?

Despite these reservations, in these essays and throughout the book, Brenner makes a compelling and detailed case for the need for feminism to be transformed by socialist politics, and for socialism to confront issues that tradition has historically neglected: “sexuality, intimacy, raising children, the care and nurture of adults.” Her book offers a model instance of the best in Marxist-feminist thinking today.

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Notes

1. U.S. State Department. “America’s Commitment: Women 2000-Women and Poverty.” <http://secretary.state.gov/www.picw/2000comitment/women-poverty.html>.

2. Iris Marion Young. “Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory.” *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives*. Ed. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 104, 105.

P.S.

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