

China: Reading “99% Feminism” - The “Bread and Roses” Manifesto of the New Era

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When it comes to feminism, there is often more debate than consensus. In recent years, the debate has become increasingly polarized: on one side, there is liberal feminism that emphasizes individual freedom and gender equality, and on the other side, there is misogynistic thinking that is aligned with patriarchal nationalism. The conflict between these two ideologies has intensified, leading to acts of violence against women. In this context, should feminists declare war against misogynistic groups? Or has feminism reached a dead end?

Nancy Fraser, a renowned political philosopher, along with other feminist scholars, offers a new perspective in their manifesto “Feminism for the 99%”. Inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement’s slogan “We are the 99%”, this philosophy argues that gender contradictions should be understood within the broader context of the capitalist “1% vs 99%” socio-economic contradiction. From this perspective, both feminism and misogyny are rooted in the neglect and perpetuation of the most fundamental unequal systems - liberal feminism promotes elitism by excluding non-elite women, while misogynistic patriarchal thinking colludes with both lower-class and ruling-class men. The conflict between these two ideologies is actually the result of capitalism co-opting both liberal feminism and patriarchal thinking. The feminism for the 99% rejects the interpretations of feminism by both sides and advocates for gender movements to be inherently anti-capitalist and collaborate with other anti-capitalist movements. However, can this anti-capitalist feminism that seeks “bread and roses”, economic and gender equality, promote true gender liberation? Before answering this question, we must first understand the challenges faced by second-wave feminism and the historical context behind the feminism for the 99%.

The Three Acts of Second-Wave Feminism Fraser’s article “Feminism’s Two Legacies: A Tale of Ambivalence” traces the three transformations of second-wave feminism: redistribution, recognition, and representation. Second-wave feminism emerged in the 1960s as a global liberation movement that criticized the male-centeredness of the welfare state under state-managed capitalism. The economic policies of the state aimed to increase aggregate demand, promote full employment, and provide social security. However, this state social security system was built on a series of corrupt features of capitalism, including materialism, consumerism, the ethics of success, bureaucratic systems, corporate culture, social control, sexual repression, gender discrimination, and heteronormativity. Second-wave feminism criticized the gender hierarchy implicit in the welfare state’s distributional justice. Therefore, feminists at the time sought to extend the agenda of gender justice beyond “socioeconomic resource distribution” to include domestic labor, sexuality, and reproductive decisions. As socialist and welfare systems declined and the forces supporting free markets gained strength, feminists faced a dilemma: to emancipate the social security system from capitalism to achieve economic equality or to pursue women’s economic advancement within the free market. History provided the answer: the latter.

The second act of feminism focused on recognition justice, emphasizing identity politics, respecting

differences, and critiquing gender stereotypes without a thorough analysis of the political economy. As a result, this form of feminism was quickly co-opted by neoliberalism, rewriting the logic of redistribution justice movements from “achieving gender equality through economic equality” to “improving gender consciousness to enhance women’s socioeconomic status.” The discourse of economic equality was marginalized, and a “fair” competition based on “difference” replaced it. Women in leadership positions who succeeded in this competition created a shiny facade of gender equality, while those who were eliminated by the competition were obscured.

However, neoliberalism could not completely co-opt feminism, and within feminism, there were voices critical of the free market. Some women began to reflect on their position of vulnerability within this system and connected with other oppressed groups to fight for bringing the runaway market economy back under democratic regulation. “Feminism for the 99%” represents this line of thought.

Liberal Feminism Co-opted by Capitalism “Feminism for the 99%” is a manifesto consisting of 11 claims, with two main parts: criticism of liberal feminism and capitalism and an exposition of the true liberation movement for women.

Liberal feminism seeks market-driven equality, aiming to enhance women’s social mobility, achieve equal pay for equal work with men in the same class, and gain recognition from men. Therefore, this feminist movement operates only within the realm of elitism and individualism, resulting in a “solitary feminism that both conspires with the policies that produce these gender oppressions and takes us away from struggles against them.” Furthermore, the oppression of women does not disappear simply because a few women ascend to the elite class; the burden of oppressing women’s work is simply outsourced to women in lower classes - women in third-world countries, the working class, or minority ethnic groups forced into migrant labor, domestic work, or sex work.

This analysis of liberal feminism also accurately points out that true gender liberation is impossible under capitalism. In order to maintain class monopoly, the ruling class and upper classes will inevitably co-opt and control gender liberation. For example, the Israeli government uses the “homosexual normativity” as an excuse to defend its conquest of the “backward and homophobic” Palestinians. Additionally, under the premise of capital accumulation and maximizing profits, capitalism, seeking to free-ride without paying costs, shifts the reproduction costs of labor to the family, especially women. Women are forced to engage in unpaid labor such as housework and caregiving to sustain the workforce. Under the capitalist system, the male-centric nuclear family and the gender division of labor and gender violence it entails cannot be eradicated. Patriarchy parasitizes on top of capitalism, establishing a new and distinct modern form of gender discrimination and creating a new institutional structure that separates procreation from profit, assigning women to the first job and subordinating them to the second job.

The Future of Feminism: Feminism for the 99% “Feminism for the 99%” opposes the “feminism” that colludes with capitalism, patriarchalism, and their inherent crises, as well as the oppression brought about by anti-democratic essences. The capitalist mode of production deprives the majority of people in society of their autonomy in production and distribution, and the 99% of us can never independently determine the kind of society we want. Therefore, true gender liberation is inseparable from the liberation of the 99%. Under the capitalist system, the 99% must endure the consequences of the destruction caused by the upper 1% to the stable environment on which we depend for survival. Women are particularly affected by the exploitation of nature, public goods, unpaid labor, and third-world countries by the 1% - women account for 80% of climate refugees and are often subjected to colonial occupation.

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