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The fortunes of socialist feminism

Jo Littler interviews Nancy Fraser

Your new book Fortunes of Feminism -- a selection of writing you've produced over the past 30 years -- includes the 1994 essay 'After the Family Wage', written in 1994, in which you argued that neither the 'universal breadwinner' model (in which working mothers strive to emulate male employment patterns) nor the care-giver parity model (in which women are remunerated for being full-time stay-at-home mothers) is very satisfactory.¹ Instead, you proposed the universal care-giver model - in which both men and women are structurally enabled to share the load - as a fairer solution. (As someone who campaigned in 1990s London for paid paternity leave, I'm extremely on board with that project). What progress do you think has been made towards that model of sharing the pleasures and pains of childcare?

In the United States, very little progress, if any. Instead we're moving towards a model that is bifurcated along class lines. There's a class of highly-educated, professional, middle/upper-class women who are in effect living the universal breadwinner model. That is, they're out there trying to compete with men, on male terms, in highly competitive professions. To the degree they manage to do it, it is because they've sloughed off their care work responsibilities onto another class of much poorer women - either in private homes, for-profit child care centres or for-profit nursing homes. We've never had any social welfare system in the US that's treated care-giving on a par with wage earning, in terms of how pensions are calculated or entitlements to unemployment and social insurance. And in fact the universal care-giver model is part of a socialist feminist approach that would require a rethinking of the whole split between production and reproduction, which in my view is absolutely definitive of capitalist societies. So it would take a very profound structural change to begin that. Instead we have the hegemony of a liberal feminist model, which doesn't grapple with this issue at all: it simply seeks to allow privileged women to lead lives that are socially male, while abandoning other women. Historically, the best countries on these issues have been the Scandinavian social democracies, but they are also rapidly changing politically and becoming much more liberal and neoliberal.

In your work you've often warned against trading in a truncated economism for a truncated culturalism, and stressed the importance of combining both approaches. How would you locate yourself in relation to that paradigm? How have you yourself been shaped by the politics of recognition and redistribution?

That's a terrific question. I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland in the days when it was a Jim Crow segregated city. The formative experience of my life, in my early teenage years, was the struggle for racial desegregation - to dismantle Jim Crow. This was a struggle for recognition of the most compelling and obviously just kind. And like many people of my generation, I moved in quick sequence from there to anti-Vietnam War struggles. I encountered Marxism in unorthodox, democratic, New Left form. That gave me a way to try and think conceptually about the various battles against different forms of domination that were so intense in that period. And soon second-wave feminism erupted and came in to the mix. Now, all of this was going on in a time of relative prosperity. I don't think we in the New Left and the early second-wave feminist movement worried very much about how we would support ourselves.

Of course we were young, and we often didn't have children; but there was very much a sense - which proved to be an illusion, but was a felt sense nonetheless - that the first-world model of Keynesian capitalist prosperity would continue. We certainly had a perspective about class, and we understood very well that racism correlated with poverty and exploitation. But we thought, looking through a quasi-Marxian socialist-feminist analytical lens, that what seemed to be a secure social-democratic drift meant that redistribution was relatively unproblematic, and that what we had to do was to fight to introduce the importance of recognition into the forms of traditional Marxism and economistic thinking that dominated even social democracy at the time. That proved to be wrong. I soon found myself getting more and more nervous, as the 1980s wore on into the 1990s, that the critique of political economy was being lost amongst the new social movements, the successor movements to the New Left - including feminism. I felt we were getting a one-sided development of the politics of recognition. To me, recognition always only made sense when it was connected to the political economic dimension of society. Otherwise - as with feminism - you get women put on a pedestal and lots of lip service about how important care work is, but it's a sentimentalised, almost Victorian ethos unless you connect it to political economy. That's when I started saying 'We had a great critique of economism of a vulgar sort - let's not make the same mistake and end up ourselves with some kind of a vulgar culturalism'.

Above all in the US, but also elsewhere throughout the world, there was a paradigm shift towards the dimension of recognition, and it arose exactly at the moment - it's quite ironic - when the Keynesian social-democratic formation was beginning to unravel. We got the astonishing resurrection of liberal free-market ideas that everyone had assumed were in the dustbin of history forever. The rise of neoliberalism at the same time as left movements for emancipation that were focused on culture and recognition is a very dangerous mix: it means that the critique of political economy is dropping out at exactly the moment where it's most necessary. But the situation today is quite different. The 2008 crisis was a huge wake-up call. Today there are many examples you could cite to suggest that the critique of political economy is very much on people's minds, as in the astonishing reception of Thomas Piketty in the US, where he has become a media darling. So certainly things are changing, and that's good.

You have made a very powerful diagnosis of how second-wave feminism became co-opted by neoliberalism. But exactly which feminism are you talking about? Is it activist/movement feminism, academic feminism or a more hegemonic mainstream media feminism?

I mean a hegemonic form of liberal feminism, and this formation includes dominant elements of all three of those streams that you mentioned. Certainly it includes media feminism, and icons from popular culture (such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg). And it also includes a strand within movement feminism (if we can still speak about 'movement' feminism? that's another question, because I'd say that mainstream feminism has become something more like an interest group than a movement): if activists who work on issues such as reproductive rights or violence against women don't situate these issues in relation to a broader social critique that *includes* a critique of political economy, then they too are inadvertently feeding into liberal feminism, whether they intend to or not.

Academic feminism is complicated because it takes many different forms. There are important strands of straightforward liberal feminism in the academy: certainly in the US. But then you also have culturalist strands that think of themselves as quite radical, that certainly wouldn't claim to be liberal, but also often unwittingly feed into this stream of emphasising the 'recognition' dimension at the expense of the 'redistributive' dimension. I appreciate that there are alternative currents around, including in academia and in various social movements. But I don't think these have so far *accumulated* in such a way as to present a counter-project.

So this is a Gramscian reading?

Yes. No domination is ever complete - there is always dissent, dissensus, opposition and so on. But in so far as this remains dispersed and marginalised and isn't able to force itself onto the agenda - into public discussion - then you don't have anything like a counter-hegemonic bloc, or project. I think there was a radical socialist feminism in an earlier period that *did* have a counter-hegemonic status. But that has been greatly weakened over the preceding twenty-five years or so. Elements of it persist. New generations come into being and pick up and develop variants of a radical or socialist tradition, but these remain so dispersed. I don't mean to single out feminism here. I think one could make a parallel argument for many progressive elements and emancipatory social movements - LGBT struggles are also increasingly taking on a liberal, consumerist guise. Of course I completely support marriage equality and even LGBT equality in the US military, but, you know, these are not necessarily struggles at the cutting edge of socialist politics.

But do you ever worry about minimising the impact of those who identified and practised as socialist feminists throughout that period and have continued to hold the flame? In Britain, for example, you might think of Sheila Rowbotham, Elizabeth Wilson, Lynne Segal or Beatrix Campbell ... do you worry about minimising the impact of people who have continued not-being-neoliberal?

Yes, although I'm in the same group myself - you know, these are my friends and sisters and comrades. But I think, frankly, that we have to admit that we are not particularly influential. I certainly don't feel that I am. I could give you the names of other US feminists who would also line up in that category. Britain may be slightly different: you certainly have a more continuous and weighty tradition of marxism, trade union politics and you have a *Labour* party (which of course we've never had). In the US, we have a political culture that is deeply individualising, voluntarist, where any attempt to introduce structural thinking and criticism is pushing uphill, going against the grain. We in the US are the more extreme case, but I don't believe that we are an exception. Our extremity clarifies what is going on elsewhere in a somewhat less extreme way.

Which feminism in particular inspired or shaped your thinking? What feminist theorists inspired you?

I have to say that we thought of ourselves at that time as somehow having to work from ground zero. It was an astonishing time of great boldness. We had thinkers like Shulamith Firestone, Catherine McKinnon and Kate Millet, among others, and we had a sense of inventing something very new. I didn't agree with any of them fully - I

often disagreed quite significantly. But nevertheless, there was something about this *boldness* - the idea that you could really change the world, you could introduce a whole new analytical perspective. And it wasn't really until later that I started studying the history of feminist thought - because it had been erased. We didn't have access to it. I went to a women's college, Bryn Mawr, with a historic legacy of 'blue-stocking feminism', where the ethos was 'we can do anything that men can do', and we were studying classics and philosophy, but we were never asked to read Simone de Beauvoir. It was not until later that I discovered de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft and feminists within the marxist tradition such Alexandra Kollontai. I have to say that my main experience was being part of this extraordinary generation that imagined - rightly or wrongly - that we were inventing feminist theory from scratch. Of course we made a lot of mistakes by trying to reinvent the wheel, when there were resources available that we didn't know about.

De Beauvoir still inspires me today. I've just finished teaching a seminar in feminist philosophy and rereading the new translation of *The Second Sex*, which is marvellous. I've just been impressed all over again by the power of her thinking (which is not to endorse the existentialist framework *per se*). I also read Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. These are great, towering, inspiring works, even though they bear the marks of their own time and are not exactly what we need today. But our experience in the early days of the second wave was simply that there was *nothing* and that we had to just make it all up ourselves.

Could you say something about your involvement in activism and that trajectory as well?

Well as I said, I went through the sequence of struggles that is very common to the radicals of my generation: desegregation, SNCC, the civil rights movement. The John Waters film *Hairspray* is set in Baltimore, and though it is of course a highly fantasised narrative, it touches on some points of my own history, including the desegregation of the amusement park that you see near the end of the film. I was there, we were 'sitting in' - those were real events that the director is riffing on. And that TV show that had 'Negro Day' - where the kids went on to dance to the new rock music - that was *real!* We had 'Negro Day' once a week on this show, because you couldn't imagine interracial dancing. Anyway, that was for me the beginning. I became very active in draft resistance to the Vietnam War and worked in Philadelphia (by that time I was already in college) organising rallies where men turned in and burned their draft cards and other things like that. Then I became active in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and encountered marxism for the first time in my life.

In the US, because of McCarthyism (which was such a traumatic interruption of the radical tradition within the country), people like me, who did not come from a left-wing family, had experienced a kind of social amnesia. So it was like an illumination, suddenly you discover there is this whole other possible way of thinking, that was never part of your education or informally transmitted. The discovery of marxism, and anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist critique, was very important to me. When I graduated from college, I really wanted to be a full-time revolutionary. I moved to New York City and worked with the Metropolitan Council on Housing, which organised tenants' rent strikes over issues like inadequate heating and rats and all kinds of very bad housing conditions. I also belonged to a small socialist, quasi-

sectarian group that had come out of SDS. Then, in the early 1970s I encountered feminism. It was not until several years later that I went on to graduate school. Having at first felt a sense shared by a lot of us in those days that we actually expected some kind of real socialist revolution within a short space of time, it then became clear that that was not going to happen. You burn out, and I realised that I needed a longer-range plan for my life. It was at that point that I said 'ok, I used to love philosophy, let me see if I can stomach a PhD programme'. But I brought to my graduate studies this formation that I had from my ten years of activism. I have to say that I learned a lot in college and in graduate school, but if I had to single out one thing, my most important education was in my years of activism. And I think it's there, really, where I learned what 'critical theory' was, even if I didn't really know what that phrase meant exactly. And since then, the best I can say for myself is that I am a kind of armchair activist. I'm basically an academic and I try to be a public intellectual to a certain extent.

What did you think about Occupy?

What was most striking to me about Occupy was the rapidity with which it emerged, grew and won in so many cities across the US, as with its cognate movements in Europe and elsewhere. There were polls in the US showing that, around three weeks after it began, close to 70 per cent of Americans supported the aims of the Occupy movement - higher poll results than the Tea Party! This was remarkable. But after the evictions, how quickly the air went out of the balloon, and how little has remained. In fact, what was left of the New York Occupy movement soon converted itself into a Hurricane Sandy relief operation. It almost ceased to be political. That is another striking thing - how could something so promising disappear so fast? But I believe that the sentiment remains: it's available, and could be re-activated at the proper moment in the proper way.

The story of Occupy Wall Street I know a bit from the inside, though I can't say the same for anywhere else. But I know well many of the key figures who were the backbone of that, and they are the stratum of young people who really don't have (and this, in a way, goes back to what we were talking about earlier) any experience of marxism at all, who were educated through one phase or another of the cultural turn - who understand the inadequacy of that and want a deep structural critique, who talk about capitalism and the 1%, but who actually don't have that intellectual formation; and for them anarchism - and it is partly a kind of anti-communism - represents the perspective of a genuine radicalism. So these youthful activists take a principled stand against enduring forms of organisation and structure and so on. It's a familiar idea from the history of the New Left. From my point of view, an over-emphasis on 'process' and consensus and direct democracy and direct action, and the distrust of institutions, of mediation, and so on, has been a problem. I agree that existing institutional forms are problematic and carry a lot of baggage. But the question is how to invent new ways of institutionalising these energies so that they don't just dissipate: so it's not just blowing off steam.

Let's return to 'culturalism'. There's one zone which yokes together the cultural and the political into a socialist political critique, and that's cultural studies. Work by, for example, Stuart Hall and Angela McRobbie, has very powerfully critiqued neoliberal culture. I wondered about your relationship to cultural studies, as there's not very much traffic in your work with that area. You said in your 2014 talk in London that

you want to 'relaunch critical theory for the twenty-first century';ⁱⁱ but, as Ali Rattansi pointed out to me, early critical theory was extremely concerned with the cultural, whereas your work is far less so - it's more concerned with the abstract socio-political. So how does your work relate to 'the cultural' and cultural studies?

There are a couple of different dimensions here. First of all I think we have to distinguish between cultural studies in Britain and in the US. The work of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson (in a certain respect) and of course Stuart Hall, the Birmingham Centre, all of that is a remarkable tradition. I'm sure Angela McRobbie is a worthy continuer of that and I'm sure there are others who I may not know. But cultural studies in the US, although it took the same name, was really different: it was *culturalist* in a way I don't think this British tradition ever was. I think UK cultural studies was absolutely exemplary in linking the cultural, the social, the political, the political economic. That is the sort of thing I would very much have liked to have seen developing in the US, but alas it never did. Maybe now, again, things are changing because of the new salience of economic crisis, of financial crisis, the problem of capitalism. We may be at a moment where this kind of more integrated cultural studies will develop and expand. In the US I'm happy to see that people like Wendy Brown, who I think of as part of the cultural side of things, are developing serious critiques of neoliberalism and interesting readings of how that works on a cultural plane. So this is to me a very propitious moment for a kind of reintegration.

In terms of the early critical theory of the Frankfurt School, that's a somewhat complicated story. There was a moment in the 1930s when you had a genuinely interdisciplinary mix of stuff, including law, Pollock on monopoly capitalism - you had all kinds of things going on. But what really stamped the history of critical theory, especially Horkheimer and Adorno's work on fascism and its aftermath, was a sense of *despair*, basically. (The interesting exception is Marcuse - I'll get to him in a second.) This is a sense of despair that in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* goes all the way back to the Greeks, the pre-Socratics and Homer. It sees the seeds of domination planted so early, and a kind of unstoppable historical train leading to total domination, the administrative society, one-dimensional man, no possibility of critique, etc. It has *absolutised culture*. That is a very problematic kind of culturalism. Habermas represents an attempt at a correction, but that too is a complicated story. A great deal of the post-Habermasian currents of critical theory have entered into a kind of disciplinary specialisation: people doing moral philosophy, philosophy of law, political theory disconnected from social theory. This is not culturalism; it's a kind of politicism, or moralism or legalism - a single-minded focus on constitutional theory. I appreciate that no-one can do everything, and that there is academic specialisation, but I think this is a sad outcome for critical theory: it has lost the attempt to think about the social totality, which Habermas, at an early stage, did try to do, for better or for worse. Honneth may be an exception, but I don't think what he does is adequate. But most other people are doing much narrower work. So I don't think we can find in critical theory today (taking critical theory in the narrow sense of work in the tradition of the Frankfurt School) a paradigm that has the kind of interdisciplinary ambition of the very early Frankfurt school. I think that Adorno/Horkheimer led to a dead end.

But when I was putting together readings for the feminist philosophy seminar that I mentioned earlier, I stumbled upon this incredible early article by Marcuse, on 'Feminism and Marxism', which was published in the first issue of a journal called

Women's Studies in the early 1970s. It's an extraordinary essay, in which he talks about how his women students have pushed him, and he starts exploring what he thinks is the relationship between feminism and socialism. It's so exciting: you'd never find anything like that from Horkheimer, Adorno or even Habermas. Marcuse was an amazing guy who was very responsive to the currents of his time in the US.

I'm very interested in the way you continue to argue for socialist feminism - at your London lecture that sentiment got the biggest cheer of the night. Sometimes it seems that one of the few 'safe' places where it's OK to say that you're a socialist - even in academia - is in relation to feminism. In the UK mainstream over the past few decades socialism has become marginalised as a very dirty word (although I think there are signs this is changing). Could you say something about what kinds of terminology you think have the most generative or emancipatory potential?

In the US, the word socialism has been so marginalised and off the agenda for so many decades that it might have actually lost some of its stigma. I'm open to other terminology - I don't feel that, for whatever reason, the word socialism absolutely *must* be at the centre of things. If we can find another term that has more capacity to mobilise people, I'm interested. I'm open. I might want to press a little bit to make sure that it's not turning out to be some kind of a whitewash. But I don't have any other term at this point.

My real interest is in connecting two strands. First, the traditional labour-centred problematic of exploitation that has always been at the centre of socialism - what I call Marx's 'front story'. I want to connect that to the ecological side of capitalism, that 'back story' which is becoming so dire and so pressing that it's forcing its way into the front story. Second, the story of social reproduction. Whilst feminists historically have made such an important contribution to social reproduction, I don't think of it as only a feminist issue. It's the whole complex of community, of education; it's not just what goes on within the private household, but the attempt to develop a social, solidarity economy - in housing, in education, in social service delivery - in the face of crisis. It's building cooperatives, it's community-based efforts. These may not in the end be the answer, but it's where a huge amount of energy and organising is.

Then we have the issue of re-making political institutions. I think all of this has to somehow come together in ... and we are looking for a word - 'in' what? In an anti-capitalist struggle? In a socialist struggle? It would have to be not just 'socialist-feminist', but 'eco-socialist-feminist-democratic'! It'd be great to have a label for this that suggests not just the traditional labour-centred idea of socialism, which can sound somewhat parochial even though those issues remain absolutely pressing; and not just 'socialist feminism', which also has, I appreciate, a somewhat dated sound to it - it was a moment. I do think now that we're looking for something even broader but we don't know what to call it yet.

The commons ...?

That's a term that's certainly seeing a resurgence.

Yoking together feminism and socialism has always been a concern of yours. Environmentalism seems to have surfaced in your work more recently ...

Yes, it's actually something that has been in the back of my mind for quite a while but it's only quite recently become a genuine systematic concern. And this has to do with my current project, now several years old but still very much in process, which is to do with *crisis theory*. This is a kind of critique that has been very out of fashion: dismissed as deterministic, mechanistic, economic, teleological - all those 'bad' words. And some of those words might be accurate for certain received versions of crisis theory/crisis critique. But nevertheless, we do find ourselves in a very dire and complex crisis situation. And I believe that we need to develop, to reconstruct, some form of crisis critique that does not fall prey to such objections. And clearly, the ecological dimension has to be front and centre. It is not reducible to, but it is deeply intertwined with, the dynamics of the economic, financialisation and social reproduction crises. It was when I took this objective of a crisis critique that I found that I could not any longer keep the ecological dimension in the margins. I had to bring it front and centre. So I've been doing quite a lot of reading: above all in the eco-socialist tradition, including the eco-feminist-socialist tradition. And I have to say it's a very exciting experience to try - in a systematic way - to get to grips with a discipline, in order to see what, if anything, I can contribute to this body of thought. I'm teaching it in my seminars and finding it quite a thrilling experience. I'll be writing more about this.

My final question is: you write very clearly and your work is very influential. How has your sense of your audience has changed over the years? Who are you writing for?

Because of the personal history I spoke about earlier, having one foot in academia and one foot in social movements is always an aspiration. And I don't want to be discipline-bound. There certainly are pieces where I am trying to work something out that's complicated, and academic - I am thinking here of some early articles that I wrote about Habermas, where I was really struggling to work out what a feminist response to his thought would be. It's quite a complex body of thought and probably not a very accessible article. But even in the same period I was writing other things that *were* more accessible. My biggest regret, though, is that I don't have enough time to do much journalistic-type writing. I did publish a piece in *The Guardian* last year, and it was astonishing to me how much uptake it got, and I thought 'I really ought to do more of this!'.ⁱⁱⁱ But the fact of the matter is I am still teaching full time, with a very heavy load of thesis supervision; and maybe my primary commitment remains to my philosophical and theoretical writing, which I feel is my strength, where I can contribute the most.

In the past I've depended on a process that was once perhaps more reliable, of flow between academic writing and extra-academic publics. Second-wave feminism, in the early period of my career, was a fantastic transmission relay. Ideas from the university flowed very easily into the movement and vice-versa: inspiration and ideas that developed outside the academy were taken up quickly and elaborated within it. I think that was a wonderful moment, where the ideas would come out - and these ideas were powerful - one way or another. Things changed. When feminism became more academicised, it was harder to make these links. Maybe now we're at another moment where this is changing again: where there's intense hunger in all arenas for new

thinking. But my own situation now is one of extreme ‘time poverty’, and I feel I have a certain amount of time that I have to be jealously guarding for the theoretical work that I want to do.

Well, thank you for spending some time here.

This is a good way to spend time!

Thanks to Gabriel Bristow for transcribing the interview, City University London for paying for the transcription, and to Ali Rattansi.

ⁱⁱ This was the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust Annual Lecture. See <http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/trustinfo/conferences.htm>. A podcast of the 2013 Birkbeck talk can be found at

<http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2013/06/the-future-of-feminism/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Nancy Fraser, ‘How feminism became capitalism’s handmaiden - and how to reclaim it’, *Guardian*, 13.10.13:

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal.