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A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization

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ABSTRACT: In the 1970s and early 1980s, a heated debate took place over the relationship between Marxism and feminism. In the current moment the perhaps more disturbing question arises: has feminism entered into a dangerous liaison with capitalism? The profound "restructuring" of the U. S. and world economy since the 1970s parallels the rise of the women's movement during the same period, and reveals some ideological and practical uses of this movement for capitalist interests at home and abroad. In particular, the decline of the family wage and the abolition of welfare "as we know it" in the United States, and the use of microcredit and female labor in export processing zones in the "developing" world, both can draw upon feminist ideas, as can the U. S. government as it pursues its "war on terrorism." There is a kernel of truth in U. S. propaganda: feminism acts as a cultural solvent, as globalization erodes the traditions of patriarchy. The left must take on board the crucial contribution of feminist ideas and activism, as we contemplate a world where alternatives to capitalism have become devalued and de-legitimized.

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1. *From the "Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism" to a Dangerous Flirtation of Feminism with Capitalism*

IN THE 1970S AND EARLY 1980S, a heated debate took place over the relationship between Marxism and feminism. In the wake of the "second wave" of the women's movement in the late 1960s, feminist intellectuals and activists within the socialist tradition challenged Marxism for its inadequacies regarding the "woman question." Investigating "the unhappy marriage" of Marxism and feminism, this debate called on the left to resolve the questions of how women and gender issues related to a Marxist analysis, and how capitalism was linked to patriarchy. Much ink was spilled debating whether capitalism and patriarchy were separate systems, "dual systems," or some other configuration, and attempts were made to recover and develop the theme of attention to women's issues and needs within the revolutionary Marxist tradition (see Z. Eisenstein, 1979; Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978; Vogel, 1983; Sargent, 1981).

In the current historical moment an essay on gender might want to ask a related, but perhaps more disturbing question: has feminism entered into a dangerous liaison with capitalism? More specifically, in what ways has the contemporary women's movement facilitated the growth and spread of corporate globalization? This question may seem like a provocation. Most writers assume that the women's movement is part of the larger family of movements that seeks progressive change, broadly defined as the left. While I make the same assumption, I want to point in this essay to some ways in which contemporary feminist ideas and actions have been extremely useful to the powers that be. I do this in a spirit of sisterly self-criticism and analysis. I hope to contribute to a revival of the socialist feminist tradition that has such a major role to play, as progressive forces encounter the dangerous realities of the current world situation (see Holmstrom, 2002b, arguing for the contemporary relevance of the socialist–feminist project).

To make this argument, I begin with a review of the profound changes to the U. S. and world economy brought about by the "restructuring" of the 1970s. I then discuss the rise of the women's movement during the same period, and point to the ideological and practical uses of this movement for capitalist interests at home and abroad. In particular, I focus on the decline of the family wage

and the abolition of welfare "as we know it" in the United States, and on the use of microcredit and female labor in export processing zones in the "developing" world. I point to the incorporation of feminist ideas by the U. S. government as it pursues its "war on terrorism," and to the kernel of truth in U. S. propaganda: feminism acts as a cultural solvent, as globalization erodes the traditions of patriarchy. I conclude with a call to the left to take on board the crucial contribution of feminist ideas and activism, as we contemplate a world where alternatives to capitalism have become devalued and de-legitimized.

2. Setting the Scene: "Globalization" and Restoration of Profitability After the End of the "Long Boom"

Much has been written about the transformation of the international economy since the end of the "long boom" of the post–World War II period, when economic growth began to slow down worldwide from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. The U. S. economy, threatened by the economic recovery of Europe and Japan, faced with a strengthened challenge from third-world nationalism (symbolized by the OPEC price "shocks" of 1973 and 1979), and weakened by the prolonged war in Vietnam, was losing its competitive advantage. In response, U. S. corporations and the U. S. government adopted a number of strategies to counter this decline (see Amott, 1993, 24–48; Pollin, 2003, 17–18; Tabb, 2001).

First, the U. S. economy began a process of what Barry Bluestone and others have termed de-industrialization, or the growth of the rust belt. Manufacturers replaced the domestic strategy of moving industry from the unionized North to the non-union South with an international strategy of moving some elements of production overseas, taking advantage of cheaper labor, anti-union policies, and the establishment of export processing or free trade zones (see Froebel, *et al.*, 1980; Mies, 1998, 112–120; Freeman, 2000, 24–30). This strategy was particularly dramatic in the case of the electronics and textiles industries, where female labor was preferred. Around the world, from Taiwan and China to Malaysia and Indonesia and from Mexico and the Caribbean to South America, women's "nimble [and cheap] fingers" made them the workforce of choice for these labor-intensive industries, which increased the profits of the multinational corporations as it brought in much-needed foreign currency to local

governments (Wichterich, 2000, 1–33). Simultaneously, other areas of production were retained within the continental United States by reducing costs through the use of automation and by using immigrant labor, primarily female (Fernandez-Kelly, 1989). At this writing, much concern is being expressed over a second wave of job transfers overseas in the white-collar service sector (*e.g.*, Glater, 2004). Here, too, female labor is crucial, and companies go out of their way to make the work attractive to local women. (See Freeman, 2000, on "pink collar" data entry processing in Barbados, for example.)

Second, there was very rapid growth in the service sector of the economy, defined as transportation and public utilities; wholesale and retail trade; finance, insurance and real estate; government; and business and personal services. From 1970 to 2000, service sector jobs more than doubled, from 49 million to 102 million, while employment in goods-producing industries increased by only 15% (from 26 million to 30 million).

With the growth of the service sector came a rapid increase in women's employment. From 1970 to 2000, of the 53 million new jobs created, 60% went to women. This shift reflected "both the increase in women's labor force participation and the disproportionate increase in service industries and in occupations where significant numbers of women [were] employed" (Kuhn and Bluestone, 1987, 9).

The process of drawing women into the service sector was an interactive one, as Heidi Hartmann noted:

> The service sector grows because the availability of cheap female labor provides the supply and because the use of women in the labor market rather than at home also provides the demand for replacement services (fast-food replacing home cooking, for example). . . . And the shift toward the commercialization of personal services is required by women's increased labor force participation. (Hartmann, 1987, 55.)

Particularly significant for the growth of women's employment was a dramatic increase in the financial component of the service sector. As Kevin Phillips wrote:

> In the last few decades, the United States economy has been transformed through what I call financialization. The processes of money management, securities management, corporate reorganization, securitization of assets, derivatives trading and other forms of securities packaging are steadily re-

placing the act of making, growing and transporting things. (Cited in Editors, 2002, 53.)

As a measure of the decisive shift in investment flows from goods production to finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE), we can examine the increase over time in investment in private fixed (non-residential) assets by industry sector. From the end of World War II through the 1970s, goods production (mining, construction and manufacturing) accounted for about 32% of the total increase in such investment, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s the share was only 18%. In contrast, in the FIRE sector, the share of investment flows went from 16% in the first period to 30% in the second period. (The crucial role that FIRE plays in the overall service sector can be seen from the fact that non-FIRE services increased their share only marginally, from 45% in the first period to 50% in the second period.)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the share of FIRE in GDP remained virtually constant, at between 13 and 14%. However, the percentage of employees in FIRE who were women increased sharply, from 46% in 1960 to 58% in 1980. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, while the percentage of employees in FIRE who were women leveled off, the total FIRE sector grew rapidly, reaching 20% of GDP currently.

Capital's strategies for increasing profitability, then, have involved de-industrialization, expansion of the service sector, and a relative shift of investment from goods production to finance. All of these developments have involved the expanded use of women's labor. As a result, the percentage of the U. S. adult female population employed outside the home rose from 34% in 1960 to over 60% today.

Despite the attempts after World War II to return women to domesticity, married women increasingly stayed in paid employment. For employers this was crucial, since particularly with the growth of the service sector married women constituted a major untapped pool of labor. Thus, between 1970 and 2001, when there was an increase of 27 million women in the labor force, 63% of these (16 million) were married women.[1] As we will see, the powerful taboo against married women in the workforce was overcome by a combination of the economic need for a dual-worker household and the ideology of

1 In 1970, almost four-fifths (78%) of all adult women were married, and the labor force participation rate of married women (41%) was significantly lower than that of single women (57%).

1970s feminism. The pattern of white women's employment came closer to that of Black women, who had traditionally been more likely to work after marriage.

The structural changes produced by the search for greater profitability were accompanied by a sea change in political and economic ideology, usually characterized as a shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism: an all-out assault on the liberal consensus symbolized by the New Deal. Both a philosophy of limited government and a set of prescriptions for economic growth, neoliberalism was born in Chicago.

> Starting from a tiny embryo at the University of Chicago with the philosopher–economist Friedrich von Hayek and followers like economist Milton Friedman at its nucleus, the neoliberals and their funders have created a huge international network of foundations, institutes, research centers, publications, scholars, writers and public relations experts to develop, package, and push their doctrine. (George, 2002, 4.)

As Paul Nasser pointed out, what is conventionally termed neoliberalism is really a return to the pre–New Deal consensus about allowing the business cycle to proceed untrammeled by government intervention. The ascendancy of this set of ideas is linked to the regimes of Margaret Thatcher in England and Ronald Reagan in the United States (and it is being given renewed vigor at this writing by the administration of Bush II). Its political effectiveness can be dated from the successful passage of Proposition 13 in California in 1978, setting limits on the growth of property taxes, and the firing of the striking Professional Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO) by President Reagan in 1981 (Nasser, 2003; Amott, 1993, 34).

The elements of the neoliberal offensive, driven by an increasingly effective coalition of rightwing and right-leaning politicians, included attacks on labor and the right to organize; de-legitimizing of the welfare state and the concept of progressive taxation; devaluing the role of government in stimulating economic growth and full employment; a preference for privatizing public functions and organizations; and an emphasis on deregulation, seeking to roll back the constraints on corporations imposed by government policies in such areas as environmental regulation, affirmative action, banking, utilities and the media.

Internationally, neoliberal doctrine was first tried out under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile. It was subsequently im-

posed by the international financial institutions (IFIs), particularly the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), which used the debt crisis of the 1980s to restructure the economies of those countries that had come under their sway. Through the imposition of "conditionalities" under a program of "structural adjustment policies" (SAPs), the IFIs virtually forced indebted governments to accede to a radical series of changes. In the name of macroeconomic stabilization and structural reform, governments were induced to devalue their currencies, cut the public sector, end food and fuel subsidies to "realign" domestic prices to the world market, liberalize trade, privatize state enterprises, and regularize titles to land, often resulting in the forfeiture of customary land rights to large landlords (Chossudovsky, 2003, 35–64).

The fall of the Soviet Union and of its satellite Eastern European regimes after 1989–1991 gave this set of policies new vigor, as formerly state-run enterprises were privatized, and national economies were forced to abandon state-led development. It is true that some countries were able to retain their state-led development policies and experienced rapid economic growth: the Tigers of Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea, and the Newly Industrializing Countries such as Malaysia, and Indonesia, not to mention China. But others in South Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa, under the impact of SAPs over the period since the 1980s, suffered low growth and devastating increases in poverty, malnourishment, and disease.

The widespread criticism of the impact of SAPs during the 1990s led the World Bank to modify its policies, acknowledging the burdens on "highly indebted" countries and placing a new emphasis on the need for "poverty reduction" (see Petchesky, 2003, 142–151). While this shift was a response to the intensified poverty produced by SAPs, particularly in Africa, governments were still required to follow the basic macroeconomic policies that produced the intensified poverty in the first place.

The privatization of essential services, like water and electricity, and the deterioration or privatization of public services, such as health and education, have never been in the interests of the poor. For instance, the imposition of user fees on health care or education has led to a sharp drop in hospital attendance and school enrolment from poor or low-income families; it has also

increased the gender gap, since girls and women are the main victims of those policies. (Dembele, 2003.)

In extreme cases SAPs helped to produce "failed states," where the fundamental elements of governance no longer function, and "ethnic" violence and civil war are the norm (Federici, 2000).

From the point of view of the U. S. elite, this ensemble of changes has been necessary to maintain the dominance of the United States, both as the premier economy in the world, and as its overwhelmingly pre-eminent military power. Corporate globalization, then, has a military as well as an economic component. In a revealing policy document produced by the Office of Force Transformation in the Pentagon, Thomas Barnett and Henry Gaffney, Jr. describe the world as divided into two parts: the globalizing countries and countries in the "gap":

> As globalization deepens and spreads, two groups of states are essentially pitted against one another: countries seeking to align themselves internally to the emerging global rule (*e.g.* advanced Western democracies, Vladimir Putin's Russia, Asia's emerging economies) and countries that either refuse such internal realignment or cannot achieve it due to political/cultural rigidity or continuing abject poverty (most of Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Central America). We dub the former countries the Functioning Core of globalization and the latter countries the Non-Integrating Gap. (Barnett and Gaffney, 2002, 1–2.)

In this analysis, the gap is where terrorism comes from, and it is the duty of the U. S. military to keep these new barbarians at bay. The authors argue that the United States pays in kind for its enormous balance of payments deficit by providing "security" to the rest of the world. Thus the War on Terror fits readily into a strategy of corporate globalization. At this writing, these policies have come together in the occupation of Iraq and the proposed privatization of much of its economy (see Klein, 2004).

3. *The Second Wave of the Women's Movement: A Bourgeois Revolution for Women*

The period of radical economic restructuring since the mid-1960s also saw the remarkable growth of what is now an international women's movement. It is impossible to understand the resilience and

reach of this movement without relating it to the economic changes I have been describing, most notably, the expansion of the service sector and the influx of women, especially married women, into the paid work force. I am pointing to a complex interaction between a set of corporate and government strategies to maximize profitability, and a social movement that sought to maximize options for women, most centrally, their economic opportunities. As Lourdes Benería noted, there was a "supply" factor in the changed consciousness of women, and a "demand" factor in the preference for female labor in many sectors of the economy (see Benería, 2003, 77; this is a global phenomenon).

As most readers know, the women's movement is one of the most lasting and influential of the "new social movements" arising from the stormy decade of the 1960s. In the U. S. context, conventional histories present two strands of the movement: the radical women's liberation activists who saw themselves as social revolutionaries; and the liberal activists, who merely sought a piece of the pie for women. These two categories were first identified by Jo Freeman (Freeman, 1975), and are still used by most historians, although recent research has shown that the "liberal" wing of U. S. feminism had its roots in trade union and Communist Party activism during the 1940s and 1950s (Weigand, 2001; MacLean, 2002a).

While other activist movements — against the Vietnam War, for student rights and for Black nationalism such as the Panthers — either faded or were crushed during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the U. S. women's movement continued to grow and to influence U. S. society profoundly. Recent histories celebrate this widespread influence, using expressions like "tidal wave" (Evans, 2003), "the world split open" (Rosen, 2000), and "no turning back" (Freedman, 2002) to indicate the breadth, depth and permanency of the changes wrought by feminist activism over the more than three decades since 1970.

Although the women's movement raised many issues — from reproductive rights to battering in marriage to childcare; from freedom of sexual choice to health issues to pornography — overwhelmingly the energy of the organized movement was focused on women in paid employment. As Sara Evans noted,

> By far, the single greatest impact of the women's movement was in the American workforce. Beyond housing, beyond day care, beyond issues of

housework between husbands and wives, it was issues of career and work opportunities that allowed women to remake the nation. Whether they worked in factories, in offices, or as professionals, the politics of work was an abiding concern for feminists. . . . (Evans, 2003, 81–2.)

Equal pay; sexual harassment; access to training and promotion; access to traditionally male jobs through affirmative action; comparable worth campaigns to align the salaries of female workers in traditionally women's jobs like nursing to those of men in traditionally male jobs like truck driving: women activists followed the example of the Black civil rights movement in seeking government support for equity in the workplace.

At the ideological level, the U. S. women's movement set its sights on the dismantling of the gender rules that had governed the 1950s. Both radical and liberal feminists were united in their vociferous rebellion against the rigid sex roles of the white suburbs, with father as breadwinner and mother as housewife, which undergirded the expansion of consumption for the home in the postwar era. Betty Friedan, who had been an activist for the rights of blue-collar women workers in the 1940s, aimed her famous polemic of 1963 at the woes of the middle-class housewife, whose nameless problem was boredom with domesticity (Friedan, 1963; cf. Horowitz, 1998; Schrecker, 1998, 388–389, on Friedan's concealment of her earlier activism, probably for fear of redbaiting).

The attack on sex roles was linked to the desire of feminists to overcome the traditional notion that married women should not be in the paid workforce. While such a stigma never prevented some married women — especially working-class and immigrant women — from working, it did radically restrict them to jobs that were seen as suitable for women. (Of course, African–American women, from slavery on, never had the luxury of such protections, being subjected to the harshest and most punitive labor conditions alongside their menfolk; see Davis, 1981.) Now women fought for and won the right to enter the most stereotypically male occupations, from firefighting to policing, and from mining and construction to piloting airplanes (MacLean, 2002b).

The insistence on a changed language — firefighter instead of fireman — reflected this push to eliminate the barriers that had kept women out of the most highly paid jobs. Unions that had fought in the 19th century for protective legislation for women now shifted their

views under pressure from women activists, and agreed that laws and regulations restricting the amount of weight women could lift, or their access to night shifts, were discriminatory. Alice Kessler-Harris noted the swift erosion of protective legislation:

> In five short years [1964–1969] the capacity of the law to treat women primarily as family members, valuable for their reproductive roles, had been transformed. Formally, at least, women of all races had become individuals under employment law. (Kessler-Harris, 2001, 267.)

While the push to open jobs to women was most successful in the areas of professional work such as medicine, law, architecture, and the academy, most job categories were at least officially opened to women, although the struggle to make these legal openings real involved many lawsuits and much emotional staying power (MacLean, 2002b).

The women's movement was equally successful in establishing the idea, if not the reality, that women were full citizens, with rights equal to those of their male counterparts. At the height of feminist influence in the 1970s, victories came rapidly, including the landmark Roe v. Wade decision in 1973 acknowledging women's right to reproductive self-determination; the right to equal access in education, including Title IX of the 1972 Education Act which sought to equalize funding for women's sports; and the right to equal credit (Brenner, 2000, 242). Women's political participation increased rapidly, creating successful women candidates for local, state, and federal office (*ibid.*, 243).

Obviously many struggles of the women's movement were incomplete. The backlash against feminism and Black civil rights orchestrated by the newly powerful evangelical-cum-corporate right wing accelerated in the 1980s (Faludi, 1991). But most analysts nonetheless agree that the women's movement succeeded in changing the attitudes of most Americans toward the role of women. The (predominantly white) wives and mothers of public understanding in the 1950s had become workers, wives and mothers in the 1990s.

In short, the women's movement created a successful "bourgeois revolution" for women in the United States. While the English, French and American revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries replaced feudal relations with the rule of the white bourgeoisie, these revolutions notoriously did not extend to the rights of women, people of color, and those without property. While bourgeois men freed

themselves from the rule of kings, women remained subject to the rule of men within the family. It took the 19th- and 20th-century women's movements to claim the rights of women as full citizens (Pateman, 1988; Brenner, 2000, 222ff.).

This unfinished revolution now seemed complete: women, especially women in the middle class, could escape from the category of "only" wife and mother into the world of the competitive, individualistic market. While the U. S. women's movement produced myriad strands of thought and activism, including a strong tradition of socialist feminism and many varieties of third-world and women-of-color feminisms (see Mohanty, *et al.*, 1991; Holmstrom, 2002a), the dominant, mainstream version emphasized women as self-sufficient individuals. This feminism came to be identified with liberation from patriarchal constraints. The right to earn a living so as not to be dependent financially on a husband; the right to develop one's skills and abilities to the fullest; the right to control fertility so as not to be shackled by endless years of childbearing: in short, feminism U. S. style came to mean individualism and the right to participate in the market economy as a worker or entrepreneur in one's own name, separated from one's role as a wife and/or mother.

Corporations adjusted their marketing to address the women who embraced this set of ideas, from Nike's images of the powerful woman engaged in athletic competition to *Business Week*'s presentation of a correct corporate wardrobe for women. The changed social expectations made traditional homemakers into a dwindling class of women who apologetically introduced themselves as "only a housewife." (Married women with children under 6, who were not working for wages outside the home, dropped from 12% of all adult women in 1970 to 4% in 2000.) From a powerful taboo on having married women in the workforce, the idea that women, married or single, would spend most of their lifetime working outside the home had become normative.

In a telling illustration of the change, Ruth Milkman compared the reactions to women working in the Great Depression of the 1930s with the reactions to the recession of the 1980s under President Reagan. During the Depression, although women and men were not interchangeable workers, it was common practice to blame working women for high rates of unemployment. But when Reagan tried to scapegoat women in the 1980s, this idea did not fly, and he was actually rebuked publicly by the AFL-CIO. "The ideological assault on

female employment [lacked] the popular legitimacy it enjoyed in the earlier period" (Milkman, 1987, 112).

4. *Useful to Capitalism? The Decline of the Family Wage and the Dismantling of the Federal Welfare Entitlement*

As we have seen, the widespread use of women's labor was accompanied by a major restructuring in which the proportion of traditional "smokestack" jobs for men was reduced. The older smokestack industries (auto, steel, tires, household appliances, petrochemicals) were characterized from 1930 to 1980 by a small high-wage segment at one end, a small low-wage segment at the other, and a large "semiskilled and skilled blue-collar and white-collar 'middle'" (Kuhn and Bluestone, 1987, 11). But the newly expanding industries — high-tech, business and personal services, and retail — have a "dual" market structure, with a well-paid bureaucracy at the top and a large pool of poorly paid workers at the bottom. Thus there is no equivalent to the old "middle-wage" blue-collar jobs.

Dramatic evidence of this change comes from the transformation of the department store industry. Traditional department stores benefitted from a consumer boom, peaking in the 1960s and 1970s, but discount stores began to undersell them with reduced levels of service and automated checkout counters. The discount stores doubled the size of their (mainly male) managerial hierarchy, but also multiplied the number of "low-wage, high turnover, part-time jobs" — going primarily to women (Kuhn and Bluestone, 1987, 17).

This analysis in 1987 presaged the rise of Wal-Mart, now the largest U. S. company in terms of revenue and employment, with annual sales in 2002 of $244 billion and 1.4 million employees, 72% of them women. Wal-Mart is now the target of the largest ever class action sex discrimination lawsuit ("Wal-Mart's War on Women," 2004). The "Wal-Martization of America" is illustrated in a *Business Week* article on the decline of social mobility in the United States:

> For years, even during the 1990s boom, much of Corporate America had already embraced Wal-Mart–like stratagems to control labor costs, such as hiring temps and part-timers, fighting unions, dismantling internal career ladders, and outsourcing to lower-paying contractors at home and abroad. While these tactics have the admirable outcome of holding down consumer

prices, they're costly in other ways. More than a quarter of the labor force, about 34 million workers, is trapped in low-wage, often dead-end jobs. . . . Many middle-income and high-skilled employees face fewer opportunities, too, as companies shift work to subcontractors and temp agencies and move white-collar jobs to China and India. (Bernstein, 2003, 54.)

In an illustration of the lack of generational mobility, the article cites the case of Michael A. McLimans, who works as a delivery driver for Domino's and Pizza Hut. His wife is a hotel receptionist. Together they "pull down about $40,000 a year — far from the $60,000 Michael's father, David I. McLimans, earns as a veteran steelworker" (*ibid.*, 58).

Comparing 1973 to 1998, Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch argued that working families responded to the changed structure of the workforce by incorporating the work of "more family members" (discreetly ungendered in their account). "In addition to the increase in debt . . . working-class families have restructured their own lives to maintain and increase their consumption by having more family members work (spouses, students) and by increasing the average hours worked per person" (Gindin and Panitch, 2002, 38). In other words, the stagnation of wages was compensated for by the growth of dual–income-earner families.

There is no doubt that on one level the legitimization of paid work for women represented a major advance. Heidi Hartmann argued that the rise of the service economy was a boon for women, despite the fact that it was accompanied by an influx of low-paying jobs. She cited the rising divorce rate and the rise of single parenthood as evidence that women were voting with their feet for economic independence (Hartmann, 1987). This was particularly true for Black women, for whom the changes of the 1970s meant an end to the neo-enslavement of domestic service.

Immediately after World War II, black women's earnings were about half those of white women. By 1981, black women's wages had risen to 92–95 percent of those of white women . . . largely due to the fact that black women workers are today no longer confined chiefly to domestic service jobs, but have moved into a wider range of occupations. . . . (Kuhn & Bluestone, 1987, 23.)[2]

2 Since that time, the inequality between Black and white women's wages has increased again, with the ratio declining to 85% in 1998. (For Hispanic women in 1998 the ratio was only 72% of white women's earnings.)

Despite these undeniable gains, the inclusion of married women in the workforce, including the mothers of young children, was of assistance to capital in keeping wages stagnant, and in abandoning the concept of a wage that would cover the expenses of wife and children, a goal that was struggled for during the 19th century by patriarchal unions. Feminists in the 1970s were vociferous in their demand for women's economic independence, and indeed many feminist scholars and activists attacked the family wage of the 19th century as a trap for women. But Johanna Brenner argued that this was a misreading of the historical evidence. The family wage, for those workers who achieved it, represented a victory for the working class (Brenner, 2000, 11–58).

While I certainly am not arguing for a return to dependence on men and marriage as the only options for women, it seems necessary to acknowledge that the independence won in the 1970s and 1980s came at a high price: the abolition of the family wage, and an extended period of wage stagnation for all workers. (On this point, see MacLean, 2002a, who argues that the abolition of the family wage, rather than the rise of feminism, should be the central framework for the women's history of the post–World War II era.)

Meanwhile, the widespread acceptance of waged work for women did not go unnoticed by policy-makers. The idea that women should be in the paid labor force was so hegemonic in the 1990s that the welfare "reform" legislation of 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, made this its centerpiece. Carrying out a key element in the neoliberal agenda of undoing the social policies of the New Deal, welfare reform devolved responsibility to the states; removed the idea of welfare as an entitlement to any poor single mother needing assistance with taking care of her children; and most importantly, instituted workfare as a requirement. No longer would single mothers have the safety net of a government subsidy, no matter how inadequate, for raising their children.

In the period when Aid to Families with Dependent Children (as welfare was first termed) was introduced, as part of the Social Security legislation of 1935, it was still unthinkable to expect single mothers to enter the workforce while also caring for their children (Gordon, 1994). But after the major expansion of the welfare rolls following the activism of the welfare rights movement in the 1970s, welfare had become identified primarily with Black women, and was a major target

of rightwing ideological critique. The issue of welfare was seen as an entering wedge in the ideological de-legitimization of government intervention in the market.

While some feminists fought the welfare "reform" signed off on by President Bill Clinton to steal an issue from the Republicans, many women activists regarded this as an unwinnable fight (Eleanor Smeal, informal comments, appearance at Queens College, 1996). When the welfare legislation of 1996 was being voted on,

> one hundred fifty-nine House Democrats voted for this baleful assault on the rights of poor mothers including Democrats who call themselves feminists: the Democratic co-chair of the Congressional Women's Caucus (Nita Lowey, D-New York), the former Democratic co-chair of the Caucus (Patricia Schroeder, D- Colorado), the only woman in the Democratic leadership (Barbara Kennelly, D-Connecticut), twenty-three of twenty-eight other Democratic women, and two past presidents of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action (Barney Frank, D-Massachusetts, and John Lewis, D-Georgia). As one congressional feminist admitted of her colleagues, when it comes to welfare "nobody cares about women." (Mink, 1998, 3.)

More broadly, it is arguable that the idea that women should be working made workfare acceptable to the broad American public. As Gwendolyn Mink noted,

> If racism has permitted policymakers to negate poor single mothers as citizens and mothers, white middle-class feminism has provided those policymakers with an excuse. White middle-class feminists' emphasis on women's right to work outside the home — accompanied by women's increased presence in the labor force — gave cover to conservatives eager to require wage work of single mothers even as they championed the traditional family. (Mink, 1998, 23–34; cf. the following pages for further elaboration of this point.)

The abandonment of the New Deal entitlement to a safety net for poor women, and the devolution of welfare — now renamed Temporary Assistance for Needy Families — to the states, where a five-year limit was applied, was also a boon to employers. Women forced off welfare were pitted against illegal immigrants, whose claims to better working conditions were silenced by their uncertain status as non-citizens. This ensured greater competition, and therefore lower wages, for these jobs (Chang, 2000).

5. *Export Production and Microcredit: Integrating Third World Women into the Market Economy*

I have been arguing that the central idea of U. S. feminism, that paid work represents liberation for women, was deeply useful to capital. We have seen two examples of this within the United States, with the elimination of the family wage and the gutting of the welfare safety net. But women's work has been crucial, too, to capital internationally. In their review of the effects of globalization on women, Jean I. Pyle and Kathryn B. Ward identify four areas where women are the majority of workers:

> Over the past three decades, increasing numbers of women have become sex workers, maids, workers in export production, or microfinance recipients to earn incomes in the restructured global economy. Many must migrate domestically or internationally to obtain this work. . . . These "industries" now span the globe, occurring in most areas of the developing world as well as throughout industrialized countries. (Pyle and Ward, 2003, 470.)

Here I want to focus on two of these areas: women in export production, and the use of microcredit.

The use of cheap female labor was pioneered by South Korea during its economic miracle, as women were drawn from farm to factory work, allowing South Korea to industrialize with "unlimited labor reserves." Indeed, Alice Amsden argues that the male–female gender wage gap was one of the keys to the success of South Korea's industrialization:

> Korea's outstanding real wage increases and unrivaled gender wage disparities are related to one another insofar as an unlimited supply of women workers has allowed Korea's bifurcated wage structure to achieve dual ends. One end is the maintenance of international competitiveness in labor-intensive industries, which employ primarily females. The other is the entry into more skill-intensive pursuits on the basis of a relatively well-paid, highly motivated, male labor aristocracy. (Amsden, 1989, 204.)

Under pressure from IFIs to abandon state-led development, and to reorient their economies toward exports, indebted third-world countries welcomed multinational corporations (MNCs) into "free trade zones," where tariffs and taxes were reduced or eliminated, and

where legislation and government practices combine to prevent the formation of trade unions. In the electronics industry, this tactic began in the 1960s: shortly after the invention of the silicon chip in 1958–59, Fairchild opened the first off-shore semi-conductor plant in Hong Kong, moving into South Korea in 1966. General Instruments moved its microelectronics production to Taiwan in 1964. In 1965 many high-tech firms moved their production to the U. S.–Mexico border, opening the first *maquiladoras.* In the next decade, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines followed suit, and in the late 1970s they were joined by countries in the Caribbean and South America (Fernandez-Kelly, 1989). Multinationals shifted production in a wide range of goods, from shoes and garments to toys, lured by government advertisements for the "nimble fingers" of their women workers, although in at least one case — Ireland — a patriarchal government initially resisted this trend with a policy promoting only male workers (Froebel, *et al.*, 1980, 322ff.; Pyle, 1990).

As information about the inhumane conditions experienced by women in these factories became widely known, there was widespread publicity about the return of sweatshop conditions around the world. Indeed Naomi Klein argued that the global justice movement owed its origins in part to indignation over the conditions imposed by well-known brand name multinational corporations such as Nike on their workers (Klein, 1999, 326ff; Pollin, 2003, 153–163). Some feminist scholars condemned the exploitation of female workers in *maquiladoras* and other export production sites. But others exhibited ambivalence toward this phenomenon. Thus in her work on Japanese electronic companies in 1970s Malaysia, Aihwa Ong pointed out that the village girls they hired might be exploited workers, fired as soon as their keen young eyesight began to require the use of eyeglasses. But they were also being modernized, abandoning the peasant sarongs of their villages for blue jeans, and winning the right to choose their own husbands (Ong, 1987; Benería, 2003, 77–8).

In a dialog on women and globalization, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly and Diane Wolf explored this ambivalence. As Wolf noted,

> Globalization is a double-edged process as far as women are concerned. On the one hand, employment opportunities derived from transformations in the global economy produce new kinds of patriarchal and capitalist controls over women.

Low-wage jobs, "often below subsistence standards," nonetheless

> gave women tools with which they resisted patriarchy. . . . Women I interviewed [in Java, Indonesia] preferred work in "global sweatshops" to the village rice fields. (Fernandez-Kelly and Wolf, 2001, 1246.)

Perhaps the extreme end on this spectrum of opinion was the view of Shelley Feldman, who studied export-processing factories in Bangladesh, and criticized other scholars for failing to acknowledge the power of women to make their own choices. Some analysts explained women leaving their homes for factories as caused by widespread rural poverty and the establishment by government of export processing enclaves. But this was simple-minded "economic determinism." The women were influenced, not by external factors such as structural adjustment programs, privatization, and the liberalization of the economy, but by their own choices, as "constituted through, and enabled by, the complex and contradictory histories of women's lives . . ." (Feldman, 2001, 1122).

Looking through the lens of a 21st-century feminism that sees work as the path to liberation, international feminist scholars perhaps equated the newly proletarianized women workers of the third world with the "Lowell girls" of 19th-century Massachusetts, drawn from their farms into the first American textile factories. Under fairly mild working conditions (compared to their counterparts in Manchester, England) they developed both a worker and a feminist consciousness from their work experience. But as Ellen Rosen pointed out, the 19th-century American pattern of industrialization was not being followed in the countries subject to structural adjustment. Women received a "women's wage," while men did not receive a "man's wage":

> Today's export-processing economy does not . . . transplant older forms of industrialization to the developing world. . . . Unlike in Western nations, where capital-intensive manufacture was central to economic growth, in many developing countries these low-wage industries have become central to the economic growth that is expected to occur. And unlike in the West, where the higher-paid men's industrial jobs were central to the economic welfare of families, in export-processing economies the low-paid women workers make up about 80 percent — the vast majority — of the workforce. (Rosen, 2002, 245.)

If women have been crucial in export industries, they are also targeted for microcredit, widely promoted by international donor agencies as a way out of poverty for rural women. Proponents of microcredit wax eloquent about the possibility of drawing women into the mainstream economy by lending them small amounts, bundling the women into small groups who watch over each other, and charging them 3% monthly interest. This follows microcredit's "cardinal rule" that while borrowers may not have collateral, they nonetheless should be considered as serious business people, "not charitable cases."

"Sixty dollars may not sound like much to us, but in a place like the Philippines it can be enough to get a family going, allowing them to buy a cow or goods to sell in the marketplace," said Nancy Barry, president of Women's World Banking, a New York–based network and resource center for micro financing organizations around the world. "The hope over time is that the $60 becomes $100, then $500, and before you know it, these clients are integrated into the mainstream economy" (Martinez, 2003).

The origins of this idea lie, in part, with policies established in Washington. As early as 1973, USAID responded to critiques by feminist activists who saw development policies as directed only to men and not to women, by introducing an Office of Women and Development, and by amending the Foreign Assistance Act "to include the incorporation of women into national economies as part of the foreign aid policy" (Poster and Salime, 2002, 184). Before long, microcredit lending became a major strategy of USAID, and women were specifically targeted for this form of credit.

Overseas the idea of microcredit is widely attributed to an experiment in the village of Grameen in Bangladesh, in 1977, by Grameen Bank founder Mohammed Yunus, an economist. (The following account draws heavily from Isserles, 2002.) After watching the process of how women villagers borrowed from middlemen to make bamboo stools and mats, selling the products back to the middlemen at the end of each day, he initially distributed micro loans to 42 people in one village, borrowing the initial sum of $300 from a Bangladeshi bank. From this he developed the Grameen model, in which groups of six non-related people, from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, are granted individual loans, and expected to produce good performance, defined as attending weekly meetings and making weekly

payments on time. If at the end of the loan cycle everyone has repaid their loans consistently, the group can then seek a larger amount of money. The Grameen Bank he founded in 1983 became the largest micro-lending institution in Bangladesh, lending primarily to women. By 1999 Grameen had 1,000 rural branches, covering 45,000 villages, and was lending more than $1 billion to more than two million members, 94% of them women (Isserles, 2002, 210).

By 1997, the first international Microcredit Summit was held in New York City, setting a goal of reaching 100 million of the world's poorest families by 2005. As of 2002, more than 2,500 institutions offering microcredit have reached 42.6 million poor families worldwide. The Microcredit Summit Campaign, the network emerging from the 1997 summit, involves "donor agencies, banks, nongovernmental organizations and educational institutions," and focuses on "empowering women . . ." (Semple, 2003).

The background to this development is the rapid growth of what economists term the informal sector. Contrary to the predictions of most economists in the 1970s, the informal sector — which was expected to shrink internationally as economies grew — has instead been growing steadily (Benería, 2003, 109–110). In countries transformed by SAPs, the harsh policies dictated by the IFIs placed particular burdens on women's shoulders. As the public sector shrank, many hundreds of thousands of public servants lost their jobs. Charging fees for health care and for education, and ending food subsidies, forced families to rely on their own resources. It was assumed that women would pick up the slack (Tickner, 1999, 54). In addition, the deregulation of land acquisition forced many peasant families off their land, so that they were no longer self-sufficient (Chang, 2000, 127).

Strategies adopted by women included finding work in the informal sector: selling handicrafts in local markets or, more drastically, selling themselves and/or their children into prostitution, or emigrating to the richer countries to sell their labor. Highly educated women found jobs as nurses, or took care of other people's children, while leaving their own to grow up with relatives. (On this tradeoff of third-world women's caring skills for first-world women's career paths, see Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002.)

According to Julia Elyachar, the microcredit schemes under the sponsorship of the World Bank began when SAPS failed to yield the

results claimed for them by neoliberal theorists. Reformers within the World Bank, encouraged by the appointment of James Wolfensohn as President in 1995, expressed reservations about the overall impact of neoliberal policies.

> Large-scale unemployment among public sector workers and state employees — as well as increasing levels of poverty among the poor due to the end of state subsidies — were supposed to have been a matter of "temporary suffering" until the private sector kicked in to take up the slack. But when the temporary suffering started to look permanent, new development programs were devised to relieve the suffering of groups negatively affected by structural adjustment. In a number of countries where SAPS were being enforced, the World Bank established Social Funds as the "social safety net" of choice. (Elyachar, 2002, 501.)

Located in the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, the Social Funds contribute to microenterprise, granting funds to individual microenterpreneurs through local non-government organizations (NGOs), who distribute microloans farmed out by international organizations and development agencies while additionally supervising the collection of interest payments for banks (Elyachar, 2002, 498). In effect, Elyachar argued, the adoption of microcredit signals an acceptance of the permanency of the informal sector and the abandonment of any notion of genuine economic development.

Meanwhile, the women driven out of their home economies were a major source of remittances to their families back home. In the Philippines, remittances (from both men and women) amount to about $7 billion annually and are the "largest source of foreign exchange — surpassing income from either sugar or minerals" (Chang, 2002, 130). Worldwide, this flow of remittances is "fast becoming the cherished 'El Dorado' for microfinancing promoters . . ."; the amount sent home in 2002 amounted to $80 billion, exceeding "for the first time the amount of total aid and credit (both private and public) extended to poor countries" (Martinez, 2003).

Women, forced out of their country by the absence of well-paying jobs, working long years away from their children and husbands, send home money to make up for their absence. The influx of funds from these remittances into the local banking system allows the microcreditors to draw poor local village women into entrepreneurship, overseeing their transformation into microentrepreneurs and respon-

sible, interest-paying borrowers. This circuit of capital assists the government and the elite in continuing the policies that have created the poverty in the first place. And the costs are borne almost entirely by women.

6. *United States Champions Feminism as Part of Neo-Imperialism*

Even more sinister is the employment of feminist ideology in the service of the U. S. imperial project. Very much as the success of the U. S. civil rights movement in the Cold War period was trumpeted by the U. S. government in the struggle for influence in the third world, so too the success of the U. S. women's rights movement has become central in the selling of capitalism to the third world.

What could be more convenient than the hostility toward women's rights of extreme Islamicist tendencies, such as the version of Islam cultivated by the Saudi regime? Never mind that the modern international movement of political Islam is largely the product of Western funding and encouragement, intended as a weapon against secular and left nationalist regimes and movements. (On this point, see Amin, 2001.) Now that Muslim extremism has become the international straw man for the war on terrorism, the rights of women, linked inextricably to modern industrial capitalism, are a made-to-order part of the propaganda machine of the Bush administration.

The liberation of women is self-evidently part of the project of modernization and democratization, the goals claimed by the Bush administration as it brutally reshapes the landscape of Afghanistan and Iraq. The conventional wisdom links democracy, the free market, and the emancipation of women. Indeed, the equation is that "modern" equals women's rights, the Judeo- Christian heritage, and democracy, while "traditional" equals patriarchal suppression of women's rights, the Islamic heritage, and terrorism. The rights of women, for example, are being given center stage in the Bush administration's war on terrorism. The war in Afghanistan was justified in part as an effort to save Afghani women from the Taliban. The same direction is evident in the attempt to reconstruct the Middle East by the neoconservative cabal around President Bush, starting with the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2002. Indeed, Cheney's daughter Liz was tasked in the State Department with a project called the Middle East Partnership Initiative, with a brief to "modernize" the Middle East by,

among other things, encouraging the full participation of women in public life (Bumiller, 2003).

Similarly, in Afghanistan, in December 2003, a dispute over the representation of women in the leadership of the constitutional convention was interpreted as a struggle between the ancient and the modern. According to this account, the chairman, Sebaghatullah Mojadeddi, told the women not to put themselves on a level with men. "Even God has not given you equal rights . . . because under his decision two women are counted as equal to one man." In saying this, the reporter commented, the chairman "managed to expose the tensions that underlay not just this assembly but also this nation, over the role of women and the role of Islam, the fealty to tradition and the push for modernity" (Waldman, 2003).

It is easy to dismiss the feminist sentiments of the Bush administration as a cynical exercise. But there is an important kernel of truth in this propaganda. If a central goal of globalization is to dissolve the bonds that hold a traditional society together, then feminist ideas constitute a powerful solvent. One could, perhaps, make an analogy to the functions of Christianity in the centuries of European exploration. Christian missionaries accompanied Western traders, and their evangelism helped to transform the traditional cultures they encountered, whether in Africa, Asia, or the Americas. Consciously or unconsciously, the effect of missionary preaching was to weaken and to de-legitimize the assumptions underlying the ancient ways of doing and being that had held these cultures together (Wolf, 1997, 145ff).

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, for better or worse, feminism functions in a similar way. As Martha Gimenez has noted,

> The rise of the abstract individual, the bearer of economic, political, civil and human rights, is both a precondition for the development of capitalism, and a continuing capitalist structural effect that contributes to its ongoing reproduction. Feminism is one of the important expressions of Western individualism. (Gimenez, 2004.)

Ideologically, feminism encourages women to be individuals, rather than members of families or communities. At the same time, the proletarianization of peasant women modernizes their consciousness and their sense of identity. As William Greider observed, the managers for Motorola in Kuala-Lumpur have to "change the culture" of the Islamic women it hires to make silicon chips. The company

teaches them to speak up for themselves, and to use ATMs, instead of handing their wages over to their families (Greider, 1997, 82–84).

That the incorporation of women into the market economy is a requirement for effective economic development has now become part of the conventional wisdom of globalization. Ironically it was the concerted efforts of feminist economists since the 1970s, starting with the work of Ester Boserup, that informed the world of the crucial significance of women's labor to economic development (see Benería, 2003, 47–48). But now that gender is on their screen, officials of the World Bank and other IFIs insist on the education and the labor market work of women as a necessary part of economic development. A World Bank official noted that "women remain a 'huge, untapped' resource in the Middle East and North Africa, where more women workers are needed to transform economies that must depend increasingly on private-sector exports to compete worldwide."[3] This, however, goes in tandem with the other orthodoxies of neoliberalism, which require the state to withdraw funds and institutional support from the services most required by women.

The workings of international capital, then, systematically dismantle the structures, however inadequate, that protect women and their children — ranging from health care, education, housing, to affordable food and fuel — thus creating intensified poverty, disease, and unprecedented levels of wealth polarization. But they simultaneously invite women into the market economy, arguing that this is the path to liberation and equality (Chossudovsky, 2003, 67–8). The legitimization of feminism masks the radical restructuring of the world economy, and the glitter of economic liberation disguises the intensification of poverty for the vast majority of women.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that, in its 21st-century incarnation, feminism has been a useful handmaiden of capitalism. In saying this, I am of course leaving out of the picture the many aspects of feminist organizing that represent a potential challenge to globalization, and the many

3 Women make up half of the 325 million people in the region and up to 63% of university students in some countries, but only 32% of the labor force. "'No country can raise the standard of living and improve the well-being of its people,' said Christiaan Portman, World Bank vice president for the Middle East and North America, 'without the participation of half of its population. Experience in other countries has shown over and over again that women are important actors in development'" (Olson, 2002).

organizations around the world that are engaged in just this activity. (For an excellent discussion of the range of feminist organizing in the global context, see Barton, 2004.) My focus here has been on the aspects of feminism that have been co-opted into the enterprise of expanding the global reach of corporate capitalism, rather than on those that point to an alternative vision of economics and politics. But it is just such an alternative vision that is now desperately needed.

In the current crisis, the left in the United States and around the world is divided as to strategy and goals, and uncertain about a path to the future. While acknowledging the brave achievements of the Cuban revolution, most left writers see the blueprint of Soviet-model economic development as discredited, and argue that the only possible socialism for the future is one that is deeply democratic in character.

But how to build this new socialism? James Petras and Henry Weltmeyer make a case for a return to state-led development, with nations redirecting resources toward food sufficiency and a vibrant local economy (Petras and Weltmeyer, 2001). But Rosalind Petchesky places her faith in a new international civil society, mediating between nation–states and international institutions (Petchesky, 2003). Arturo Escobar sees the possibility of creating some kind of a hybrid culture and economy that would restore the autonomy and health of indigenous peoples (Escobar, 1995). Maria Mies goes further, calling for a rollback of industrialization and a return to a subsistence economy (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999). But Doug Henwood is scathing about calls for a return to a presumed precapitalist Golden Age, which disregard the complexity of modern production and distribution, and overlook the achievements of industrialization:

> the lengthening of lives, the reduction in infant and maternal mortality, the far-from-complete liberation of women (accomplished in part by the availability of factory jobs, which offer them a way out of rural patriarchy), the spread of literacy — in the First and Third Worlds over the long sweep of things. (Henwood, 2003, 165–66.)

Thus there is no consensus either as to means or ends among those who are seeking an alternative to the current system.

The task for the left is to develop radical new ideas and methods for the creation of a social and economic alternative. In this work, the left must do a better job than in the past of taking women's issues

seriously. Citing Margaret Randall, John Foran notes that "the relationship of Marxism to feminism, and of class struggle to women's movements, has been a particularly vexed arena of contention and frustration on all sides" (Foran, 2003, 1; Randall, 1993).

Even among revolutionaries who explicitly take women's issues into account, the record is spotty:

> Marisa Belausteguigoitia finds that even among the Zapatistas, women's "issues" tend to come behind national issues, and demands for greater equality in the community behind demands placed on the state; patriarchy, in other words, will once again be dealt with only after capitalism and racism. And the "solutions" therefore do not go far enough: child care centers, hospitals, facilities to make food — all essential demands — do not add up to what indigenous women have eloquently called "the right to rest," and beyond that, to think and to do, to feel and to love. (Foran, 2003, 5; on this point see also Disney, 2004.)

Foran's injunction to the left is to take the ideas and the critique by feminist activists on board.

> The feminist revolution, along with the anti-racist revolution, may thus well prove to be the longest revolutions, but a new Marxism attuned to feminism and anti-racism at its core, linking with women's and other movements with an irreducible global and class edge, may help us get there in the end. (*ibid.*)

Up to now, the energies, the brilliance, and the hard political work of many dedicated feminists have been steadily co-opted and cleverly used to strengthen and to legitimize the expansion of corporate capitalism. It is time for the left to acknowledge and enlist the insights and the loyalties of women, without which no serious alternative to the present world system can ever be successfully constructed. I close, then, with a challenge to the male left: read feminist work; absorb the idea that "women hold up half the sky"; and above all, understand that any attempted social transformation that does not take account of women's needs, experience, and wisdom will be doomed to failure.

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