Materialism and Feminism: An Interview with Johanna Brenner

March 31, 2017

George Souvlis: By way of introduction, could you explain what personal experiences strongly influenced you, both politically and academically?

Johanna Brenner: I grew up in a staunchly liberal family and remained politically liberal until I joined the movement against the Vietnam war, where I was introduced to anti-imperialist politics and then Marxism and "third-camp" socialism. In the late 60's I was part of the student left that turned toward organizing the working-class. I was a student at UCLA. We organized student support for a teamster wildcat strike and we had a group called the Student Worker Action Committee that published a newspaper, Picket Line, where we covered different worker and community struggles in Los Angeles. I was rather slow to embrace feminism, but in the 1970's I got involved with a socialist-feminist group called CARASA (Coalition for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse) which began in New York City. Some friends and comrades formed a Los Angeles branch of CARASA and we were able to connect to radical women of color doing community organizing around sterilization abuse in LA. From that point on, I have been deeply immersed in Marxist-feminist theory and politics.

Since 1973 I have been part of one or another organized revolutionary socialist group, which I think has been really important for keeping me politically grounded while working in academia. Most of my formative intellectual experiences have come through the theoretical/political debates that I have encountered as a socialist feminist activist/thinker. Feminism opened up many questions for me in terms of the taken-for-granted ideas and organizational practices in my corner of the revolutionary left. I feel very fortunate to have been an academic in Women's Studies.

In my first years teaching Women's Studies, I benefitted tremendously from the kindly critiques of my students and from their excitement about new feminisms focused on racism, colonialism, queer sexuality. Because of this experience, I have always been hostile to the counterposition of "class politics" and "identity politics." Not that a reductionist class politics or a liberal identity politics are unproblematic—of course they are quite destructive. But I am so encouraged to see in the recent revival of revolutionary/radical activism and thinking a clear rejection of both those poles and a willingness on the part of younger radicals to struggle toward inclusive frameworks for political action.

George Souvlis: In your writings of the 1980s you developed a materialist approach to explain the oppression of the women by emphasizing the biological factor and the sexual division of labour as a consequence of childbirth. Do you still share this analytical approach? Could you elaborate some

more on this materialist approach? What does it imply?

Johanna Brenner: I still work from a Marxist materialist theoretical framework. Marxist feminists begin, where Marx does, with collective labor. Human beings must organize labor socially in order to produce what we need to survive; how socially necessary labor is organized, in turn, shapes the organization of all of social life. Whereas Marx was thinking mainly about the production of goods, Marxist feminists add to this socially necessary labor the reproduction of human beings—not only inter-generationally, but on an everyday basis–what we've come to call "social reproduction." This is not just a matter of "including" women in the analysis, because the gender division of labor in social reproduction assigns to women responsibility for this work. It also helps us to see the "material grounding", the compelling logic, if you will, of the life choices that people make—what I like to call their survival projects. So a feminist materialist analysis considers not only the compulsion of wage work in capitalism, but also the limits placed on our personal lives by structures of social reproduction which in turn are shaped by regimes of capitalist accumulation and the demands of profit-making. This is not only or even primarily a matter of intentionality on the part of the capitalist class. It is a matter of the fundamental structures of capitalist political economy and how they open up some possibilities of struggle and also close off others. And these possibilities change over time as capitalist development changes the conditions (for better and for worse) that shape our survival projects—our individual and also our collective action.

Feminists have thoroughly analyzed discourses of gender difference and the way that they are so deeply embedded in the culture and our subjectivities. Although discourses of gender difference certainly have an effect, a Marxist feminist standpoint leads us to add that ideas do not sustain themselves without some grounding in everyday experience. This was of course one of Marx's great insights when describing the "fetishism of commodities" in capitalism where relationships between people come to be seen as relationships between things. This way of understanding the world, Marx argued, is a reflection of the wage relation in commodity production. It is not a "false consciousness" in the sense of ideas imposed by cultural and social forces; rather, it is a worldview that expresses, or is consonant with, actual experience under the relations imposed by the commodity form.

In the same way, ideas about gender difference are so powerful, because they are grounded in the gender division of labor within social reproduction. In turn, the gender division of labor is reproduced within family households in response not only to cultural assumptions and social pressures but also as a response to the privatization of responsibility for the work of social reproduction. The impossibility of socializing care in capitalism confers a logic on, makes sensible and even productive, discourses of gender difference.

That capitalism tends toward privatizing social reproduction is a large claim. But briefly, capitalist employers resist paying taxes to support public programs. Moreover, because employers, not workers, control how labor is coordinated and because employers aim to extract as much surplus labor as possible, human needs—particularly those of humans not employed by the capitalist—cannot be incorporated into how production is organized. In no capitalist society is production organized to take into account, to actively support, and to provide for, the socially necessary labor of care. Even the most 'family friendly' welfare state regimes, such as Sweden, do not intrude substantially on private firms' employment policies. Capitalist societies with much larger welfare states than in the US, still place the main burden of care work on individual households. And, of course, under the austerity regimes now in place, even there social programs are shrinking, young workers are shut out of benefits and full-time work, and more families are struggling to meet their needs.

This is, of course, not to say that "family-friendly" requirements on employers and publicly funded programs are not worth fighting for. These programs do improve working-class women's lives. On

the other hand, feminist critics have argued that family-friendly policies tended to aggravate occupational segregation along gender lines, limit women's employment in the less family-friendly private sector, and reproduce the gender division of labor in the household—and in the occupational structure. This holds true even in Sweden where the state offered additional months of paid parenting leave to households if men took it.

Now, to come back to your question: the article you are referring to was addressing a question that many feminists were asking at the time: given that capitalism destroyed the material base of patriarchal control over women and children (male property ownership in a political economy where production is organized through the household) at least for the working class, how do we explain the oppression of women in capitalism? Many feminists focused on the gender division of labor within the nuclear family household, arguing that the laws, cultural norms, and social expectations that excluded women from equal participation in economic and political life, were a consequence of women's assignment to caring labor in the home. True, but then how to explain this?

Some feminists argued that confining women to the home was advantageous to capitalism because women's labor is unpaid. Some feminists argued that it was the product of a deal between working class men and employers: men would earn a "family wage" and therefore would be able to exercise the same privileges of "household headship" as bourgeois men. Some feminists argued that ideas of gender difference, about women's "natural" connection to domesticity, embedded as they are in our subjectivities, were key to the emergence of this family form. I found all of these explanations partly true but not adequate. This is a complicated issue, so I can't make the argument fully here, but let me just say that I felt that these explanations did not sufficiently take into account what women's interests and needs might have been. Especially for working class women, how was it that men were able to impose domesticity on women.

So this brought me to the role of biology. My argument was not that childbirth and lactation were/are inherently antithetical to women's participation in wage labor. But the draconian working conditions that characterized factory production in the 19th and into the 20th century, pushed women out of wage work, once they began bearing children. Only mothers who had no choice continued to engage in wage labor. In many working class households, children were sent to wage work before mothers were. So it seemed to me important to consider that many working class women might have preferred a male family wage to the alternatives. Think about it, even today, when women are having one or two kids and nursing is a preference not a requirement, being a mother and a wage worker is not easy. And then, of course, there are all the other human needs that have to be met over the whole life cycle. Raising children requires intense social interaction. Older people become infirm. Adults become ill. Everyone needs intimacy and emotional support. Then there is just the work of reproducing ourselves from one day to the next—shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc.

The gender division of labor is historically contingent and the result of struggle—but paraphrasing Marx, while women make our own history we don't make it under conditions of our own choosing. The dynamics of the capitalist mode of production sets limits on and opens opportunities for political action. Over time, capitalist development changed the conditions of possibility and we see, shortly after the middle of the 20th century, the explosion of women's protest.

Partly as a result of the legal and cultural changes won by 20th century feminism and partly as a result of the employers' assault on the "male breadwinner" wage, the gender division of labor within the household is shifting in important ways—mothers work for wages and in some families fathers, not mothers, are primary caregivers.

Nonetheless, it is still the case that women rather than men shape their participation in waged work

around care for children. For example, in 2015, among fathers of children under the age of 6, close to 90% were full-time wage workers, whereas 44% of women with children under 6 work full time. Men have increased their share of domestic labor, but women still do more.

It is extremely difficult to equally share wage labor and caring labor/domestic work. And, indeed, In the US when couples move toward equality they do so by relying on the low-paid labor of women—not only paid labor in the home as nannies and housecleaners, home care workers and home health aides, but outside the home (in daycare centers and assisted living facilities for older people) and in the production of cheap commodities that substitute for domestic labor (e.g., fast food restaurants, prepared meals).

Most households cannot afford to hire even low paid domestic workers; so they balance childcare and wage work by part-time work, shift-work, informal arrangements with family and neighbors. Or they rely on other low-waged workers and cheap services—understaffed, low-quality, for-profit chain childcare centers and overworked family day-care providers.

Of course, thanks to the feminist struggle, our ideals with regard to family relationships have moved far from "father knows best." This is a good thing. Still, there is a gap between the ideals of shared domestic labor and the realities of most households—including the reality of single-motherhood.

George Souvlis: In your article, "The best of times the worst of times: US feminism today" (1993) you attempt to historicize the gains and limitations of US feminism through the 20th century. Your conclusions focus on the prospects and strategic orientation of the third wave of feminism. 23 years since its publication which of the prospects do you think that have been fulfilled and which are the political stakes of this wave that are still available?

Johanna Brenner: The emancipatory movements against oppression of the 1960's and 1970's evinced a wide range of politics. The dominant view, however, was neither radical or socialist feminism nor classic liberal feminism but what I call social-welfare feminism. (Outside the US where there were actual left parties and where socialist political discourses were more available, this political view would more accurately be called social-democratic feminism.)

Social-welfare feminists share liberal feminism's commitment to individual rights and equal opportunity, but go much further. They look to an expansive and activist state to address the problems of working women, to ease the burden of the double day, to improve women's and especially mothers' position in the labor market, to provide public services that socialize the labor of care, and to expand social responsibility for care (for example, through paid parenting leave and stipends for women caring for family members).

Winning these demands required a confrontation with capitalist class power. Yet, almost at the very moment when social-welfare feminism was at its strongest, in the 1970s, the tsunami of capitalist restructuring arrived bringing with it an employers' offensive against workers' wages and working conditions—an assault that has only intensified in the era of capitalist globalization. Necessary to take on this attack was a broad, militant, politically radical front—a coalition of labor unions and social movements. Instead, the existing bureaucratic and sectoralist trade unions of that era had neither interest in nor capacity for building movements of any kind, including in defense of their own members.

The failure to defend the working-class against this offensive led ultimately to the political drift to the right in the US. As people scrambled to survive in the new capitalist world order, as collective capacities and solidarities moved out of reach, as competition and insecurity ratcheted up, as individual survival projects became the order of the day, the door opened for the rise of neo-

liberalism which incorporated liberal feminism (and liberal "multiculturalism") into its increasingly hegemonic political worldview.

While many feminists have focused on the rise of the religious right, I think it is fair to say that they represent a shrinking share of the political space in the US. In the 1980's and 1990's the religious right mobilized serious and dangerous movements against LGBT people and against legal abortion. In the past decade, however, they have completely lost the battle on gay rights.

For abortion politics, the picture is more complex. At the federal level their signal achievement is annual passage of the Hyde Amendment denying the use of federal funding for abortion (which means that any low-income women dependent for their medical care on government programs have to pay for their abortions). On the other hand, the right lost the battle on the "morning after pill," which is now relatively inexpensive and available without prescription. Medical abortion (inducement of miscarriage with a prescription medication) is also widely available. They have been more successful at the state level in their attempts to limit access to the abortion procedure. These limits have been successful in part because the main victims of their policies are the most vulnerable and politically weakest groups of women—low-income women and Native American women dependent on government medical insurance, rural women, teen-age women. Women who have private health insurance, women who have enough money to pay for their own abortions, women who live in urban areas still have access to abortion when they need it.

I don't mean to imply that the closing of abortion clinics or the oppressive rules that have been enacted (like 24 hour waiting periods for the procedure), have no impact. However, the level of harm they create has not been sufficient to mobilize enough women to stop the Republican attacks. Where the religious right has tried to make abortion illegal which would seriously affect all women, they have mostly failed. I think it is telling that even in Mississippi, a bastion of the religious right, a ballot measure defining life to begin at conception was soundly defeated.

Far more effective in marginalizing social-welfare feminism has been the "modernizing right," –the Thatcherite/Reaganite attack on government regulation, the "coddling" dependency of the welfare state and promotion of the romance and freedom of individual opportunity in the market. Of course, this discourse was both covertly and sometimes quite overtly racist, focusing on the "culture of poverty" of the Black poor, supposedly enabled by the welfare state. Bill Clinton, and the Democratic Leadership Council, adapted to these discourses, for example, running against welfare programs for single mothers as "handouts" and adopting the Republican's anti-crime, law and order, politics. Caught between a demobilized working-class and a Democratic party overtaken by neo-liberalism, many mainstream feminist activists and organizations, themselves adapted to the neo-liberal order.

Even within this neo-liberal order we have seen significant changes to the gender regime that second-wave feminism challenged. Insofar as liberal feminism sought to dismantle the web of discriminatory laws and exclusionary social norms which reproduced women's subordination in family, social, economic, and political life they have been enormously successful. And indeed it is this very success that has tended to re-inforce neo-liberal visions of women's equality. Meanwhile, the marginalization of social-welfare feminism has left stranded many working-class women whose empowerment requires much more than "equal access" to a highly competitive and hierarchical social, political, and economic system. Over the past three decades, class differences among women have widened.

But if the social welfare politics that reflected working-class women's interests have not fared so well, they have also not disappeared. And the "intersectional" politics developed in the first instance by women of color activists and academics, has continued to move through various feminist spaces. Throughout the last two decades, women trade unionists, women working in immigrant rights and

environmental justice organizations, women doing community organizing with transgender youth, women campus activists, and many more have been struggling toward a more inclusive politics.

The Platform for the Movement for Black Lives, which I think can be considered one of the most advanced political visions we have ever seen in the United States, emerged from the thinking, activism, and lessons learned within these social movements.

The uprising of resistance against the inauguration of Donald Trump also indicates the distance that this intersectional feminism has travelled. The Women's March on Washington emerged from a facebook post by a Hillary Clinton supporter and as the idea gathered momentum, it showed every sign of reflecting the neo-liberal feminist politics that characterized her election campaign—focusing primarily on Trump's misogyny and fears about his appointment of an anti-abortion supreme court justice. But very quickly the originating group was displaced by an organizing committee that insisted on a much broader and inclusive agenda for the event. The vision and political platform of the Women's March on Washington is a contemporary iteration of second-wave social-welfare politics, inflected and deepened by an intersectional perspective. This is, I think, a tremendously important step forward and one that we on the left should commit ourselves to building upon.

George Souvlis: In that same article you mention "the now obligatory invocation that 'gender, race, and class intersect' is a good beginning, but does not constitute a political strategy." 27 years later, do you still share this criticism towards the theory of intersectionality? What are its limitations and what do you think it has contributed, both to the realm of theory and of practice, after almost three decades?

Johanna Brenner: I was not actually critical of intersectionality. I think it is a starting point for political strategy. But at that time, I was really frustrated by the gap between, on the one hand, the emerging acknowledgement of race/class intersections within feminist thought, especially within academia, and on the other hand, the actual political practice of feminist advocates for women who were adapting to the drift to the right in U.S. politics.

Here in particular I thought that there was a tendency away from the "class" part of "race/gender/class" intersections. In so many feminist discussions about "class differences," the emphasis was on divisions between white "middle class" (what I think more accurately we could call professional/managerial class) women and working-class women of color. The analysis and critique of feminism by feminist women of color has been really important in calling out this divide and critiquing the ways in which feminist thought and politics reproduces it. However, as a socialist-feminist, I wanted to see, in addition, attention paid to strategies for overcoming racial divisions and building class solidarity among white women and women of color within the working-class—which is where revolutionary socialist-feminism movements will be developed.

Another concern I had with "intersectionality" as a framework has to do with the Marxist meaning of class. In one sense, I see class in the same way other feminists see it–as one of many "intersecting" axes of power/privilege that define the social locations and standpoints from which we act. But as a Marxist I also want to emphasize "class relations of production." So in the concluding chapter of my book, I offered a take on intersectionality from a Marxist perspective. Starting again with the idea of survival projects (which can be individual or collective), I tried to show, using the examples of feminism and the Black civil rights struggle, the political, social, cultural processes through which the "Fordist" accumulation regime created the conditions for the rise of these social movements and the shift to "flexible accumulation," undermined them. I think it is important to understand this connection, in order to develop strategies for moving forward.

I agree with Adolph Reed who has argued that the rise of neo-liberalism created the conditions for

the rise of a Black elite based in higher professions and upper management and a Black political class, representing their interests, that pretends to speak for Black people, primarily by lecturing the Black working-class and poor on their many deficiencies. In the same way, liberal feminism, based in this same professional/managerial class, has focused its efforts on the problem of the 'glass ceiling." Additionally, echoing the carceral side of the neo-liberal state, there has emerged a very strong "law and order" tendency in mainstream feminism in which advocates against gender/sexual violence have allied politically with police departments, conservative politicians, and victim's rights groups.

Feminism and other movements against oppression will be cross-class movements and therefore pose the question, "who will have hegemony within those movements?" Whose worldviews will determine what the movement demands, how those demands are articulated and justified, and how the movement itself is organized? In the ordinary course of events, the answer to these questions is the professional/managerial class. Yet, when working-class people walk onto the political stage, the power relations within social movements can shift.

Gorge Souvlis: What is your take on Nancy Fraser's view that during the last few decades the feminist movement became entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society? Do you agree with the critique by Brenna Bhandar and Denise Ferreira Silva that defines Fraser's understanding as a Eurocentric one?

Johanna Brenner: I agree very much with their critique, as should be clear from what I've said about the fate of second wave feminism. In arguing that feminism has been a handmaiden to neo-liberalism, Fraser takes liberal feminism to stand for feminism as a whole. Bhandar and Ferreira Silva are quite right that throughout the neo-liberal period, Black and Third World Marxist feminists have offered a counter to the liberal feminism that dominated mainstream politics. There has been challenge and struggle within feminist advocacy over the decades since the end of the second wave. For example, organizing by women of color pushed mainstream pro-choice organizations, especially NARAL and Planned Parenthood, to move away from using the bourgeois liberal "privacy" argument to defend abortion and toward "reproductive rights" discourses that are less easily aligned with neoliberal ideology. Women of color challenged the law-and-order feminism that came to dominate advocacy around gender violence. They developed alternative strategies (such as open shelters and restorative justice) and analyzed how interpersonal violence is linked to the violence inflicted by the state on their communities (see, for example, the website of Incite!).

Internationally, it is true that some organizations like the Feminist Majority foundation supported U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. However, there are well-organized feminist antiwar groups (such as Code Pink and Madre) and other feminist organizations that reject and challenge neoliberal development policies (like the Women's Environment and Development Organization). The Critical Resistance movement organized many young people to protest the carceral state from a feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist perspective. Many of the activists leading the most radical social movements of recent years, such as Black Lives Matter and the Dreamers, learned their politics through these various oppositional movements and on campuses where women's studies programs were developing intersectional analysis. The rise of the internet opened up a much larger space for such challenges to liberal feminism and the promotion of more radical, anti-corporate, feminist perspectives. The same is true for many other social movements.

Another problem with Fraser's argument is her failure to actually explain the political developments she observes. Her main explanation is that liberal feminism has an "elective affinity" with neo-liberalism—that is, they are ideologically compatible. Yes, of course. But how do we account for the rise of the ideas of the "modernizing right." I try to offer a materialist analysis of this ideological/political shift away from the "welfare state liberalism" that dominated the post-world war

II period in the US, focusing on the processes through which capitalist restructuring and globalization undermined the already relatively weak instruments of working-class defense.

Clearly, the fate of social-welfare feminism is closely tied to the fate of the broader institutions of working-class struggle. While capitalist restructuring closed off the radical possibilities of the second wave, the intense disruptions of economic and social life it has caused across the globe are now creating the conditions for the emergence of feminist activism led by women of the working classes. I mean working classes in the broadest sense–whether they are women employed in the formal economy, the informal economy, in the country-side or doing unwaged labor.

George Souvlis: In one of your recent articles you analyze your strategic insights regarding the contemporary socialist feminist movement. Firstly, could you say how you define socialist feminsm in 2016? What are the basic strategic insights that you think that movement should follow, particularly in the era of global neoliberalism?

Johanna Brenner: Socialist-feminists have always engaged in a two-sided effort: to bring an anti-racist, class-based feminist perspective into social movements and left political parties and a socialist perspective into feminist politics and women's movements. Social-welfare feminism, social-democratic feminism, revolutionary socialist feminism, revolutionary women of color feminism, indigenous feminism, are some of the different currents within socialist-feminist politics. We can think of socialist feminism very broadly– to include all feminists (whether they would identify with the label or not) who see class as central but would not reduce relations of power and privilege organized around particular identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, nationality) to class oppression. Revolutionary socialist feminism is distinguished from social welfare or social-democratic feminism in that, whether implicitly or explicitly, revolutionary socialist feminists are unwilling to allow capitalism to set the horizon for what can be envisioned or struggled for.

Over the past two decades, women have entered the global political stage in an astonishing array of movements. In the Global south, sparked by the capitalist war on the working class, the enclosures sweeping peasants and farmers off the land or devastating their livelihoods upon it, and the consequent crisis in patriarchal social relations, these movements are creatively developing socialist feminist politics. In the U.S., the crash of 2008 opened the door for the Occupy movement, new political discourses challenging the neo-liberal consensus and a radicalization of young people.

We have seen both in the global north and global south new sorts of working-class women's organizing linking workplace struggle to community grass-roots organizing. This is not surprising, given women's responsibilities for caring labor.

Historically, working-class women were at the forefront of movements that addressed basic human needs—whether these were urban rebellions against the price of bread or in demand of city services. While these political mobilizations could be very radical, they tended to be based in a "maternalist" politics, through which women make claims based on their responsibilities to care for their children, families, and community.

In the 20th century, there was, especially in the global south but to a certain extent in the global north as well, a tension between feminist organizing around sexual politics and bodily rights and these working-class women's movements. In the global south, I think this tension is being overcome, partly through transnational feminist organizing that has been more sensitive to these tensions and partly because of the extreme economic dislocations that have disrupted older patriarchal forms of social and family life. While this disruption has spawned reactionary backlashes on the part of conservative movements, it has also created more space for women to challenge patriarchal power within their families and communities.

A good example of this is Via Campesina, an international coalition of peasants, farmers, farm workers and indigenous agrarian communities from a wide diversity of locations and cultures. At its founding, in 1992, Via reflected the patriarchal norms and political outlook of its member organizations—for example, all of the regional coordinators elected at the first international conference were men. The formation of a Women's Commission in 1996 created the space for women within Via Campesina to organize to challenge patriarchal practices and policies. In October 2008, La Via Campesina's 3rd International Assembly of Women approved the launch of a campaign targeting all forms of violence faced by women in society (interpersonal as well as structural). In 2013, the organization adopted the following resolution:

"We demand respect for all women' rights. In rejecting capitalism, patriarchy, zenophobia, homophobia and discrimination based on race and ethnicity, we reaffirm our commitment to the total equality of women and men. This demands the end to all forms of violence against women, domestic, social and institutional in both rural and urban areas. Our Campaign against Violence towards Women is at the heart of our struggles."

It is important to note the difference between the liberal politics of mainstream LGBT and anti-violence movements, and the statement by Via Campesina where women's equality is seen to be necessary for successful collective struggle. In contrast to "law and order" feminism, the women of Via Campesina, like radical women of color activists in the US, link interpersonal and structural violence. Their defense of LGBT rights is inserted into acollective vision of transformation that is also anti-racist and anti-capitalist.

In the global north, we see also a transformation of working-class organizing, led by women activists. In the US women trade unionists, especially teachers and nurses, have countered the assault on the public sector by organizing not only themselves but also the people who depend on their services. As militant teachers have claimed, "our working conditions are our students' learning conditions." The California nurses' association organized a broad coalition to pass legislation mandating nurse-patient ratios in hospitals. Perhaps, most unexpected, Domestic Workers United, an organization that began with women of color nannies and housecleaners organizing in New York City, won not only a domestic workers' "bill of rights" for the city and then in the New York state legislature, but encouraged the expansion and establishment of other domestic worker organizing projects. This national movement recently won a ruling from the Federal Government that, for the first time, domestic workers would be covered by federal laws regulating hours of work, health and safety, overtime pay, and the right to time off.

Across the differences among nurses, teachers, and domestic workers, these projects share two central strategies: organizing in and beyond the workplace and raising awareness of and support for the dignity and importance of caring work. They enact social solidarity, remind us of our inter-dependence, and defend social responsibility for care. In these ways, they represent a fundamental challenge to neo-liberal ideals of entrepreneurship, individualism, and "self-sufficiency."

In what ways has the current crisis affected the institution of the family? From this, could you define what you mean in your work by the term 'utopian family'? How we should understand it? What are the historical cases in which you draw upon in order to build your argument on this issue?

I wrote about "utopian" families as part of a book on "real utopias," and then I wrote a longer piece about how we would re-organize family life for a collection on imagining socialism. Historically, socialist-feminists have been quite critical of the "bourgeois nuclear family household" and proposed various collective alternatives. But living in such a non-revolutionary moment, as we are now, the horizon of political possibility is so terribly narrow that not very many people are thinking about or discussing utopian visions. We tend to focus on perfecting the couple-based family household; yet as

I point outed before, even the most democratized two-earner nuclear family household cannot meet its care responsibilities alone without over-working its own members and/or exploiting an army of low-paid workers in the service industries. Under current conditions of austerity—with no end in sight—our experience of family includes the exploitation of paid and unpaid labor, distress and overwork, fears for our old age, worry about our kids, and intimacy strained by the burdens of caregiving.

So what would we put in place of the family as we know it? I argue for the importance of building democratic caring communities. These, I think are a more progressive grounding of relational life than family households (although I'm not opposed to family households being one part of such communities). Enlarging our affective bonds beyond a small circle whether defined by blood and kinship or otherwise is an essential part of any liberatory project.

From the early 20th century onward, feminist urban planners, architects, and academics have challenged urban policies that assume a male breadwinner household and the privatization of care work. They have envisioned new kinds of built environments that offer more collective alternatives for caring labor. In the 1950's there were experiments with public housing that incorporated child-care centers, laundries, dining rooms and play spaces in order to meet the needs of working-women heading households. Instead of trying these sorts of models, after a long period of disinvestment, public housing in many US cities was actually demolished. Ironically, while public housing came under attack, professional-managerial class pioneers were organizing to create a new kind of built environment-cohousing projects that encourage caring community. Co-housing offers promise as a strategy for socializing care, because adults share caregiving in reciprocal relationships among an extensive group of people. While most co-housing projects in the US involve upper-middle class homeowners, cohousing could be part of the affordable housing policies that many cities are pursuing. For example, in 2013, the City of Sebastopol California built the first all-rental co-housing project for low-income seniors and families. The non-profit developer, AHA, funded a community organizer who worked for two years with tenants as they developed their community guidelines and norms and their consensus decision-making skills.

Beyond the built environmnent, we also need to create community-based, participatory, and democraticly run institutions providing care across the life cycle.

When we talk about socializing responsibility for care, we need to think about how public services are organized. Just expanding current bureaucratic, centralized, and top-down forms for organizing public services will not be sufficient either to really meet people's needs or to create lasting social bonds and community ties. I think we are all pretty aware of the ways in which Thatcherite, Reaganite, and other neo-liberal discourses about "consumer choice" through the market have been so effective in attacking the welfare state precisely because of people's often alienating experiences with bureaucratic public services.

I would argue for locally-controlled institutions based on participatory decision-making. Through these institutions, such as schools, childcare centers, parks and recreation centers, neighborhood centers that offer classes, activities, and support for people of all ages, cooperatives of home care workers, social workers and other care givers, the work of caregiving can be both collective and democratic.

Talk about "socializing" caring labor makes people quite nervous. Who will set the rules? What kind of choices will we have about how to care and about who will care? What does it mean to make caring work a "public good"? These are really important and complex questions. I think we should approach these questions with three guiding principles: 1) flexibility,variety and choice; 2) universal participation in the work of care; 3) recognition that the right to give care is a basic human right.

Flexibility, variety and choice are important values because we must appreciate the complexity of human relationships and be willing to let people experiment with different strategies for living together, so long as these strategies are based on certain core values–of mutuality, respect, shared power and decision-making. We need to move away from the domination of experts, many of whom operate out of world views based in their particular class locations. Rather than always seeking the "best" approach, we should acknowledge that there are more than one "good enough" strategies for caregiving.

If everyone is expected to contribute to the work of caregiving and daily maintenance of life, then we will value the skills necessary for doing at least a "good enough" job in this work. If all or most people are capable of giving care and providing for daily maintenance then this work can be easily shared and weighs less heavily on any one group or individual.

The right to give care is just as important as the right to receive care. We are perhaps well aware that the right to be cared for is a right that capitalism denies to many. Perhaps because caregiving is so devalued or because it is simply assumed to be a natural expression of femininity, we don't tend to talk about it as an essential human activity that in contemporary capitalism is increasingly put out of reach OR that people engage in only at great cost to themselves. The particular capacities and abilities that people develop through doing this work are essential to their own full humanity. Moreover, there are unique pleasures that are associated with caregiving and everyone should have the opportunity to experience those pleasures.

From this starting point, then, I think locally controlled institutions are best because they allow for and encourage a variety of approaches and experiments with different ways of organizing daily life. However, local solidarity can too easily turn into parochial loyalty unless communities are put into contact in meaningful ways with each other. Moreover, the distribution of resources among communities is a matter for the broader society. Local projects can be linked up and decision-making broadened through a council-type system of public governance, where local groups send representatives to regional decision-making institutions.

For example, day-care cooperatives, rooted in neighborhoods, connected to housing complexes, drawing on volunteers from every child's caring community and employing highly skilled and well paid childcare workers, would send representatives to a city-wide day-care cooperative association. Decision-making about care giving at the level of the co-op would be made jointly by the children's caring community and the day-care teachers. And through their representatives, who would regularly report back, they would also engage in the discussion and dialogue about policies and resource allocation on the regional level. Control over as many decisions as possible would stay locally rooted but, on the other hand, active participation would be expected at broader levels and would be a condition for receiving societal resources.

We have already seen some models for this kind of participatory governance developed—for example, articipatory budgeting in Puerto Alegre, Brasil, which flourished for a time under the newly elected Workers Party. Another example is Quebec's publicly funded childcare centers. Unionized workers and parents cooperate in administering the centers which are run by boards in which 2/3 of the members are parents elected to serve.

George Souvlis: Do you agree with those on the Left that say the Democratic Party can't be reformed to act in the interest of working people? What is your take on the recent Sander's electoral campaign?

Johanna Brenner: Bernie Sanders' campaign showed precisely how/why the Democratic party cannot be reformed in the interest of working people. The Party organized to defeat his

challenge and nominated Clinton who was deeply implicated in the neo-liberal economic policies pursued by the Obama administration. Money in politics is a problem in the US, but an even bigger problem is the winner–take–all electoral system that makes building a third party challenge to the Democrats so difficult. One route toward creating a path outside the corporate-controlled national party is to begin at the local level with broad coalitions that run candidates on programs rather than simply endorsing individuals who seek endorsements from social movement organizations and trade unions.

Many activists counterpose movement politics to electoral politics. I think this is a mistake. Here in Portland, we have fairly dense and successful social movements that since the crash and Occupy have done better at working together in coalition. But we have made little progress in shifting the neo-liberal policies of city government. I think we need our own political instrument with candidates emerging from our movements and office holders who have gotten into office based in grass-roots fundraising and committed volunteers.

In the long run, only an "on-the-ground" activist organization ready to build and lead movements—organizations that educate, mobilize, and disrupt, will shift the political balance of forces. But I'm not convinced that it undermines grass-roots movements when they organize their own electoral expression. It depends on how that electoral organization works, how it draws its horizon of possibility, and how it seeks to penetrate and open up government once its members are in office. (For instance, participatory budgeting established by the Workers Party in Sao Paulo; or the experiments in democratizing governance by radicals engaged in the London Council Government headed up by Ken Livingstone).

An organization capable of mounting an effective and principled electoral campaign will not be built overnight. It will not be built through immediately going out to run individual candidates for office. Instead, we on the left could help to establish urban coalitions that are based in existing grass-roots organizing where activists from the base run for election not as individuals with the right politics but as representatives of a platform that they pledge to implement in office. There are several efforts we can learn from. Two that inspire me are Richmond Progressive Alliance in Richmond CA, and Guanyem Barcelona in Spain.

This interview was first published in Salvage.

*George Souvlis is a doctoral candidate in history at the European University Institute in Florence and a freelance writer for various progressive magazines including *Jacobin*, *ROAR* and *Lefteast*.