

# Relevant, Irrelevant, or Both?

March 13, 2010

WHILE I WAS IN THE process of reviewing this volume, I took it to a party in Brooklyn attended by varied-and-sundry aging baby boomers, early 40s through 50-something types who are generally progressive, educated and (in tripartite terms of classification) middle-to-upper-middle class. One man who saw me carrying *The Socialist Feminist Project*, a lawyer, walked over and commented “That looks interesting but isn’t it just a little out of date — a throwback to another era?” Although I responded that socialist feminist ideals had not exactly had a golden age even in earlier decades, he had a point. Amidst the deepening conservatism in America from Reagan through the Bushes, this volume’s “project” sounds more “irrelevant” than it might have in the 1970s or 1980s.

Of course, this incident occurred outside the academy, but, even within university walls, socialist feminism does not seem particularly *au courant*. When I teach courses on feminist theory, I regularly include this perspective’s development and ask my students to read articles by well-known socialist feminists like Zillah Eisenstein and Heidi Hartmann. But I have noticed students do not sound quite as engaged (and do not elect to write papers) about this brand of feminism nearly as often as they become intrigued by theorists associated with other perspectives on gender — for example, the work of Judith Butler that can, reflecting Foucault’s influence, be classified under the aegis of post-structuralist feminism and queer theory.

Nancy Holmstrom apparently shared these concerns about socialist feminism’s perceived relevance. Indeed, resuscitating socialist feminism was precisely her goal in this excellent and refreshingly well-organized volume, one that features an extremely diverse array of well- and lesser-known (but, in all cases, quite interesting) contributors. In Holmstrom’s words, “Some would say socialist feminism is an artifact of the 1970s...but [that] since then it has been defunct, both theoretically and politically. I think this view is mistaken and this volume will show why.” (1) While Holmstrom doesn’t mention Butler (and may know that Butler liked to distinguish her own poststructuralist orientation from postmodernism), Holmstrom’s introduction does identify the rise of postmodern thought in the academy as one factor that has contributed to perceptions of socialist feminism as increasingly irrelevant. Here, Holmstrom observes, “Starting from valid critiques of many theories’ overgeneralizations and neglect of historical and political context, postmodernists ended up arguing from very anti-theoretical positions. Their emphasis on the local and particular, their attack on what they call ‘totalizing narratives’ and on the very notion of truth and causality, were deeply discouraging to feminists trying to develop a coherent and systematic theory of women’s oppression.” (6)

Yet even if socialist feminism has not recently been a “hot” topic, taken as a whole, the myriad essays in *The Socialist Feminist Project* do a very good job of showing that this impression is certainly not based on the direction that advanced capitalism has taken. This raises a key query to which I will later return, namely, if socialist feminist perspectives continue to be germane, why aren’t they perceived as such? First, though, let me highlight some of the ways in which writers in this book present convincing cases for understanding what Sennett and Cobb called (in a well-known work of sociology by the same title) “the hidden injuries of class” — and the way these injuries intersect with gender and racial discriminations in both national and international contexts — through distinctly socialist feminist analyses.

Socialist feminism’s characteristic trait of combining radical feminist insights with class-oriented awareness allows for appreciating, as Nancy MacLean shows, the extent to which affirmative action has benefited working class as well as middle-class women in the United States. As MacLean argues,

women's caucuses in unions, efforts to organize clerical unions for women, and anti-poverty strategies aimed at increasing women's access to "non-traditional" jobs, have been responsible for great progress in these areas — even as these efforts need to be continued. Strikingly, like Holmstrom, MacLean likewise expresses frustrations at her sense that feminist theory came to be associated with "deconstruction" rather than with enlarging theory in other directions. As she concludes, though, "Practical struggles such as those over employment discrimination and affirmative action . . . raise a host of questions about the meaning and effects of different sexual divisions of labor . . . and about the connections between capitalism, labor, and state policy in the shaping of our lives." (192).

Other essays that focus on labor struggles outside the United States struck me as valuable in a different way, i.e., for the data they provide on the degree to which gender is constructed (hardly deconstructed) in workplace settings wherein patriarchal ideologies have been used to justify low pay and secondary treatment for women. According to Leslie Salzinger, whose research on Mexican maquiladoras is well-known in American sociology, employers at a Panoptimex television plant preferred women to men because they considered the former a "calmer" — read: more "malleable" — group of workers. Consequently, what has happened recently at such workplace settings is impossible to grasp without blending traditional class analysis with feminist-based understandings of the gendered ideologies Mexican employers have themselves employed to keep wages low and avoid labor conflicts. Analogously in this regard, Chandra Mohanty's essay draws on two case studies — one of lacemakers in Narsapur, India, and the other of electronics workers in the Silicon Valley — to illustrate how gendered definitions of women (in the first case as housewives whose work was construed as "leisure" activity and, in the second, as women defined as mothers, wives and therefore supplementary workers) have also been manipulated to justify "second sex" and poorly- paid working conditions. Elizabeth Oglesby points out that prescribed notions of masculinity are also being used against men in globalizing workplaces: for instance, in Guatemala, cutters on sugar cane plantations are forced to reach unreasonable production goals by employers' reliance on "macho" standards that endanger male workers' health. And, last but not least, in this section of Holmstrom's edited volume, Jo Bindman and Kamala Kempadoo strongly depict the need of sex workers around the world to become organized into unions to escape the simultaneously class, racialized, and gendered subordinations by which they have been affected.

What do all these essays on working women's and men's situations have in common? Clearly, they call out for analysis in terms of multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination. But each of the essays also attest to common interests that workers have in and outside the United States: their dependence on jobs that subordinate them in class as well as gendered terms cries out for political solutions, and for organizing efforts at least as impassioned as those that have taken place in the past. Thus, regarding class in international perspective, the effect of this volume's essays on workers' struggles is to bring socialist feminism alive as more — rather than less — relevant than ever. When we combine this with other equally interesting sections (such as a part of the book on sex and sexuality that features excellent essays by Emily Martin and Rosalind Petchesky, and one on problems in/about families that includes articles by Judith Stacey, Stephanie Coontz, Cherrie Moraga, and Temma Kaplan), it seems fair to say that *The Socialist Feminist Project* has successfully made the case.

BUT IF THE VOLUME fulfills its *raison d'être* with regard to the ongoing relevance of socialist feminism, it may not fare quite so well at exploring why this actuality is out of sync with perceptions. Let me cite three possibilities by way of attempting to stimulate further dialogue about this dilemma beyond this nice volume's confines. For one thing, socialist feminist perspectives may not be "packaged" as well as necessary if ideas that combine class and gender are to be grasped by a

broader American public. A volume like this one is terrific, but will probably be read by a fairly small group of academics and activists already leaning left. On the other hand, when I heard Barbara Ehrenreich speak at a session of last summer's American Sociological Association, she advised her audience of progressive sociologists to write clearly in ways that can appeal to commercial presses and audiences. Ehrenreich's own *Nickel and Dimed* is its own case in point. While it was mostly devoted to illustrating the inadequacy of low-waged labor, the types of jobs that Ehrenreich took — as she conducted a kind of journalistic participant-observation study — are ones, like waitressing and cleaning hotels rooms, disproportionately filled by women. Indeed, the paperback edition of her book prominently features a woman waiting tables on its cover. In these respects, then, *Nickel and Dimed* could be said to be 'socialist feminist' though hardly announcing itself as such. Yet, by writing in an engaging and humorous fashion, Ehrenreich managed to place an arguably 'socialist feminist' perspective on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for well over a year.

Had Ehrenreich explicitly called her book 'socialist feminist,' though, its reach might have never extended so far. This brings me to a second factor that is possibly behind socialist feminism's perceived irrelevance amidst growing applicability — this one having to do with a theoretical conundrum, not with savviness of presentation. Is socialist feminism a theory, or should it be best described as a 'perspective' that combines people's concerns about two (or three, if we include race) distinct kinds of discriminations? If it is a combined perspective, however much an empirically important one, perhaps it is difficult to achieve the kind of conceptual "elegance" — and theoretical systematicity — that can make other types of feminist and social thought (including, much as one may have beefs with it, poststructuralism) appealing. Indeed it was precisely such a concern that motivated Nancy Fraser to try, in an essay recently published in the *Blackwell Companion Guide to the Sociology of Culture*, to bring identity-oriented claims (like those concerning gender and race) and redistributively-oriented claims (like ones involving class) together under the rubric of a common notion: "status." Proposing to use "status" not in a Weberian sense but to signify people's needs to feel powerful across identity and economic issues, Fraser's objective was to advance theory in at once simpler and wider-ranging directions.

Writing presentation, theory development — but what is a third possible explanation for perceived irrelevance amidst, ironically enough, expanding applicability? Last, but not least, I would argue that without both simplifiable ideas and a more unified movement that combines gender, class, and race-based concerns, socialist feminism will also have a hard time getting its message across. Poststructuralism was not a social movement, surely, but it did enjoy 'movement' like adherence at least in academic communities. I don't think the same can be said now for socialist feminism, either in and outside the academy. Significant pockets of organizing exist in union caucuses, in activist organizations, in departments at various colleges and universities. But maybe the biggest challenge of all will be to combine these remnants of concern about women (and men's) simultaneously gendered, raced and class-influenced situations into movements powerful both for what is specific and general about them. If we can find ways to make common cause politically while still respecting differences, as many authors in this volume intelligently recommend, socialist feminism may come into its own again after all.