

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of dots in various shades of gray and red, arranged in a pattern that suggests a world map or a network of connections.

Political Feminism for a Better Future

Discussion Paper

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- This paper discusses different forms of feminisms, social movements and actors subscribing to feminist ideas, drawing mostly from experiences of the Global South. It also tries to identify ways and ideas to repoliticize feminism and social movements to develop a vision for justice embedded in a practical utopia.
- Contemporary feminist theory can make important contributions to reshaping the necessary debates about the failures of capitalism, and the promises and misperceptions about development and democracy.
- To understand transformation processes, the analytical tools of intersectionality can be used within each specific political and cultural context.
- After reviewing the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism, a renewed transnational feminism is proposed.



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Introduction

In recent years, public debate in and beyond Germany has been dominated by crises: from the financial crisis in the United States (US) and the economic crisis in Europe, to the persistent conflicts in the Middle East and their manifold implications, including what has often been called a »refugee crisis«. This ongoing crisis discourse has far-reaching effects. First, it seems to shrink the space for policymaking, which is transformed into a course of crisis management, and thus into something always merely reactive. Furthermore, and almost paradoxically so, the current crisis discourse seems to shrink the room for debating the causes behind the serious problems with which it is connected—at least in the political realm. However, we need to think beyond the notion of crisis, particularly when the latter is perceived as a momentary social malfunction that can be fixed without larger structural change. Thus, the following considerations begin with the assertion that in order to construct a better future, we need to dig deeper. To do this, we turn to contemporary feminist theory. While some may consider this approach rather far-fetched—because feminism is often deemed a partisan political program, and thus unfit for general political considerations—we will attempt to show that the opposite holds true. Furthermore, for feminist theory, what we might call a state of crisis is a permanent condition, and thus much more than a momentary nuisance. From its inception, feminist theory has reacted to persistent patterns of inequality. The fact that it does so in ever renewed ways, will also be reflected in the following considerations.

This paper begins by explaining why we think intersectionality is a helpful entry point for understanding the myriad challenges and perspectives we are faced with in our contemporary world. Moreover, it aims to connect the critique of neoliberalism with feminist theories, which in turn can make important contributions in terms of reshaping the necessary debates about the failures of capitalism, and the promises and misperceptions of democracy and development. But this paper also attempts to discuss different forms of feminism, social movements, and actors subscribing to feminist ideas, drawing mostly from examples and experiences of the Global South. In conclusion, we try to identify ways and ideas to repoliticize feminism and social movements to develop a vision for justice embedded in

a practical utopia. This can only be done at the global level, in order to challenge the transnational nature of capitalism itself.

1. Intersectionality

One of the central concerns of contemporary feminist theorizing stems from what was once clearly at the margins of feminist movements: the claim by feminists from underprivileged backgrounds that the traditional feminist agenda was too narrow, because it predominantly focused on problems of relatively privileged—in the West mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual—women. Today, the integration of this claim into feminist theorizing is primarily labeled »intersectionality«: the insight that social groups, among them, gender groups, are internally diverse and stratified; and that different axes of difference, social stratification, and discrimination/oppression—like »race«/ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality—are interlocked and interlinked with each other (for an overview see Collins and Chepp 2013).

If this claim is taken seriously—and we think it should be—this implies a potentially radical broadening of political feminism's agenda: for it then has to integrate the complex interplays of sexism with racism, nationalism, and with caste- and faith-based inequalities; it has to focus on the effects of heteronormativity, on an association of femininity with motherhood and household tasks not only on heterosexual women, but also on lesbians, gays and queers; and it needs to include a focus on class, and possibly on all other forms of inequality. Furthermore, taking intersectionality seriously means conceptualizing the subject of political feminism as one that is highly heterogeneous, and potentially internally split—and therefore as a subject whose political priorities can hardly be presupposed, but should be identified in the course of an open political debate based on an awareness of internal differences and potential conflict. Furthermore, intersectional insights imply a need to rethink some of the basic assumptions underlying the framework of international development cooperation. In the context of democracy promotion, for example, the focus has often been on female political representation and on legal aspects of human rights for women in patriarchal societies. As a consequence, the social and economic context of feminist struggles—as well as of pro-democracy movements—has often been neglect-

ed; furthermore, social movements and civil society actors, like trade unions for instance, remain dominated by male actors. In many countries of the Global South, experiences of oppression have multiple dimensions and include forms of discrimination based on economics, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and caste. Hence, to understand transitional processes in democratizing societies, it is important to use intersectional analytical tools within each specific political and cultural context. This might help to gain comprehensive accounts of the diversity of challenges, perspectives, and entry points that go beyond the sometimes rather narrow foci of particular actors and their claims.

2. Feminism and Neoliberalism

In recent years, several social theorists have stressed the broad impact of post-1960s emancipatory movements for the world we live in today. Already a decade ago, Robert Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) claimed that we live in what he calls a global »network society«, characterized by flexibility and manifold horizontal links instead of a clear top-down structure; likewise, he holds that the new social movements in the second half of the 20th century—with their anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical claims—were one among several factors that fostered the emergence of network society. On a similar note, but more pessimistic in tone and analysis, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2006) have stressed the flexible, self-renewing nature of capitalism and hold that contemporary capitalist societies—because they are structured by ideals of autonomy, creativity, mobility, and teamwork—precisely feed off the (artistic) critique of authoritarianism, bureaucracy, and rigid structures that was put forward by new social movements of the last decades, not in order to actually free people, but in order to integrate them into a new regime of network-based, flexibilized capitalist rule.

Feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser holds that something similar was true with regard to feminism, when she writes: »the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society« (2013a, 211). She characterizes this new form of capitalism as post-Fordist, transnational, and neoliberal (ibid.). Drawing on the work by Boltanski and Chiapel-

lo mentioned above, she claims that second wave feminism's quadruple critique of former state-organized capitalism's economism, androcentrism, étatism, and Westphalianism has partly paved the way for a renewal of capitalism, its shift towards its current form, and has partly gained new, legitimating rather than challenging meanings in the course of this renewal. In this light, Fraser stresses part of the second wave's emphasis on identity politics to counter former economism, which according to her often ended up being a one-sided culturalism, rather than a broad form of critique that combines economic and cultural aspects. She mentions the feminist critique of the family wage, which paved the way to universal precarization. She refers to the feminist critique of the welfare state, and problematizes that the latter was dismantled by responsabilizing NGOs and individual (microcredit funded) economic engagement, and that it was not instead transformed in a positive way, precisely by enforcing universal social citizen's rights irrespective of one's employment status, as feminists had envisioned. And finally, she refers to feminist challenges of the nation-state, which, according to her, often lead to merely professionalized forms of transnationalism that are connected to the arena of international politics and the (neoliberal) development sector rather than being a mutual searching ground for change towards justice on a global scale. To find a way out of this problematic constellation, she suggests that feminist critique be decidedly pro gender justice and against neoliberalism, thus reconnecting feminist critique with a critique of capitalism (ibid. 224f.). Such a critique should always combine redistribution, recognition, and representation (or socioeconomic, cultural, and political) issues and update its former claims in a way that make them apt for challenging rather than enabling current neoliberal orders.

In recent decades, feminist movements across the Global South have transitioned from broad-based political movements for female empowerment to project-oriented work—often financed by international donors and usually discussed under the heading of »NGOization« (for example, see Alvarez 1999, Jad 2004, Schild 2007). This transition has changed the agenda of many feminist groups, which were made to focus increasingly on mainstreaming gender within the operational realm of the development sector, as well as on developing non-governmental capacities for social service delivery. At least partly, this development was due to the predominance of neoliberal »adjustment programs« that had a

strong impact on the availability of state budgets and attention for public policies, marking the end of the »developmental states« that existed until the 1980s. So also with regard to contexts in the Global South, it is indeed interesting to consider the extent to which feminist movements have contributed to dismantling the capacities of the (patriarchal) development state, or in Fraser's words, »How feminism became capitalism's handmaid-en« (Fraser 2013b).

In Pakistan, a country dominated by patriarchal family structures, the rates of female students enrolled in secondary and higher education have dramatically improved in recent years (Ahmed 2015). But this improvement has not had its fair impact on the labor market, where women are underrepresented in office and management positions, and continue to suffer from precarious working conditions and various forms of exploitation in the manufacturing industries (e.g., home-based workers in the textile industry). There is also an interesting discussion about whether the slowly, but gradually increasing female participation in the labor market has actually had a positive effect on women's empowerment or whether, on the contrary, it has caused other forms of domination. In some cases, it may have even had adverse impacts on domestic violence, as a reaction to financial conflicts within families. The fierce competition between different countries in Asia for the best investment climates, based on cheap labor costs and a lack of state regulations in export industries, has also had its effects on the »feminization of labor« (Saigol 2016). There are many compelling case studies on these phenomena within global value (and care) chains—such as the textile industries in countries like Bangladesh or Vietnam, or the care industries of Thailand and the Philippines, just to mention a few examples.

On a more positive outlook, and despite the above-mentioned tendencies concerning feminist movement politics, it can be noted that feminist theory contains several entry points to challenge the neoliberal mainstream, which has dominated our perceptions and narratives in recent years. Urgently needed counter-narratives to the big capitalistic project can be built upon feminist insights and examples from the Global South, as well as the North. Despite the many debates about the financial and economic crisis in the old centers of capitalism (the US and Europe), it is surprising to observe that the struggles from what some might perceive as the peripheries have

thus far not found more attention in progressive minds in those old centers. The shrinking of public spheres and the privatization of public goods—including security, education, health, and water—already have a longer history in the Global South than in the Euro-Atlantic world. The experiences of social movements in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia can serve as valuable building blocks for an alternative vision, a needed »practical utopia« that could guide us through the manifold challenges of the 21st century everywhere (for a similar contention, but without much recourse to feminism, see, for example, Sousa Santos 2005, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

3. For a Renewed Transnational Feminism

What could a feminist critique of post-Fordist, transnational, and neoliberal capitalism look like, and how could it be put into political practice? These are difficult questions; in her current project, Nancy Fraser is critically revisiting the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Jürgen Habermas to find suitable answers. Interestingly, her plea resonates with claims made by feminist writing from a postcolonial and/or Global South perspective. Among the most prominent examples is Chandra Mohanty, who in 2003 revisited her famous 1980s article »Under Western Eyes« and argued in favor of »theory, critique, and activism around globalization«, which she identifies as the new »key focus for feminists« who want to respond to the most pressing problems of our times, namely those produced by global capitalism (2003, 230). Mohanty's position of choice for addressing these problems is that of a »transnational, anticapitalist feminist critique«, which takes the living conditions, insights, interests, and struggles of »the most marginalized communities of women« as its anchor and starting point (ibid. 231). Claiming that these women have an »epistemic privilege«—or, in other words, »the most inclusive viewing of systematic power«—Mohanty's suggestion is to »study up« the power structure rather than to »study down«, to analytically grasp »the macropolitics of global restructuring« by starting one's critical analysis by looking precisely at »the micropolitics of their [that is: marginalized women's] ultimate anticapitalist struggles« (ibid. 231ff.).

Clearly, it is debatable whether one should attribute an epistemic privilege to any social group. What Mohanty adds to Fraser's account, however, is her clear decision

to start her critical analysis of transnational capitalism in the Global South based on the assumption that at least some of the problematic effects of this order are felt and fought the strongest in this region. This also holds for another seminal text—*Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (1988), a book written by Gita Sen and Caren Grown and also known as the DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era) manifesto. This once widely discussed text is still of particular interest for at least two reasons. First, it clearly stresses the gender effects of neoliberalism—long before they were apparent and at the center of critical reasoning in feminist theories stemming from the Euro-Atlantic world. Second, it claims links between development, social and economic crisis phenomena, female subordination, and gender. In terms of political goals, Sen and Grown claim a right for all to meet basic needs, as well as planning processes that are oriented towards this goal. Since they assess global capitalism as we know it as a problem rather than as a solution in this regard, they are highly skeptical about measures that merely attempt to integrate women in processes of economic growth. Rather, they argue in favor of large-scale socioeconomic change—and at this point meet up again with the analysis of Fraser.

In practical terms, such arguments mean that we should be more open to different forms and cultures of feminism, rather than having a predetermined set of definitions and tools. In order to address neoliberal and global forms of capitalism with its flexible networks, the answers should also be multidimensional and transnational in nature, a kind of »fluid feminism«. Inclusive platforms for a broad variety of social movements and actors could encourage the development of stronger alliances and narratives. The diversity of actors should be regarded as a strength and positive factor in the creation of such post-identity groups, supporting the notion of solidarity across ethnic, religious, caste-, and class-based barriers (which are reinforced by capitalism).

To illustrate this point, it is worthwhile to assess different feminist movements and actors across Asian countries to generate mutual entry points into the political field.¹ This

1. In October 2015, FES Pakistan organized a regional workshop on »Political Feminism« with experts and activists from Bangladesh, China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Pakistan. After finalizing the country studies on feminist actors, discourses, and strategies, FES is planning to establish a regional project on political feminism.

is particularly the case, because despite the obvious differences in the respective political systems and the dominant cultural norms, a large number of similarities can be identified. These range from structural problems and societal challenges to issues within the feminist struggles. One commonality between Asian societies is that there seems to be a problematic complementarity of the public and the private sphere, the latter of which is traditionally dominated by patriarchal family structures. The governance systems in place either have authoritarian dimensions or lack institutional capacities, both resulting in an absence of democratic spaces for women's movements and other forms of feminist activism. Most welfare states do not provide enough universal access to public goods, ultimately relying on the (conservative) family models to take care of planning, financing, and providing some degree of social security. Another common point is that progressive voices within different Asian societies are facing quite conservative, sometimes misogynous and fascist counter-narratives, imposed from actors that fear losing influence in their perceptions of the »zero-sum games« against the agents of women empowerment. That also means that ultimately the struggles to »repoliticize« feminism are about (re)gaining public spheres, countering the dominant narratives, and proposing a vision that produces more winners in general.

Feminist ideas and thinkers can be very useful in developing transformative proposals and strategies, amidst a political culture that is dominated by tactical calculations and political parties mostly following transactional logics (meaning: how to win the next elections through the most suitable mobilization of voters). Hence, even the very local struggle against domestic violence in a small village in rural Pakistan can be seen as related to the need to produce a global counter-narrative against the belief that »there is no alternative«. Alternatives always exist—despite the great efforts and possibly also dangers that may accompany any fight for such alternatives.

4. Conclusion

In recent decades there has been an interesting trend—often labeled the »third wave of feminism«—in which younger gender activists are returning to some of the basic second wave concerns: sexual harassment and violence, sexual liberties in a broad sense, the distribution and social organization of care work, or a critique of

persisting gender norms. Third wave activists deliberately address these concerns by using new forms of practice—from social media activism to more or less joyful practices of resignification, as in the case of the so-called slut walks (for example, see Findlen 1995, Walker 1992, 1995, Heywood and Drake 1997, Penny 2014). What is most interesting about these new forms of practice is their purposeful linking up with a broad network of actors and action groups working towards social justice. So in this renewed form of feminist practice, traditional feminist claims (which might alienate some younger women because of feminism's successes or its bad reputation as a congregation of self-victimizing man-haters) are put forward in new alliances—including student movements, activism against consumerism and precarization. These are alliances that don't necessarily look for other feminist or even women's groups in order to form or foster a global feminist movement, but that attempt to connect with other-than-gender-centered concerns within national, regional, and global social justice movements. Core feminist claims are thereby dispersed (to put it positively) or decentered (to put it negatively). It is a matter of political preferences and priorities whether one stresses the former, and thus applauds and fosters the dispersal, or underlines the latter, and problematizes the decentering. What seems to be clear, however, is that a feminism that wants to attract future generations should embrace the third wave rather than trying to go back behind it.

If in this light, we take seriously the insights to be gained from third wave, intersectional, socialist, and postcolonial feminist theorists, we have to keep at least four things in mind.

First, a political feminism for a better global future should not try to pursue a single strategy, but be conceptualized as a broad endeavor that links struggles against the different aspects of sociopolitical, cultural, and political gender injustice with one another. This requires a collective effort to understand questions of intersectionality, which should translate into accepting the diversity of actors, their interests and objectives.

Second, coalitions and other forms of links between such political feminisms and the broader social justice movements should be considered a step forward. This

includes domains and spheres that have been outside the classical women's movements—like trade unions or some of the progressive political parties in the Global South, which are often shaped by androcentrism. The question that remains open, however, is how such links can be fostered. This question is particularly crucial in cases in which political actors outside of feminist movements have thus far not only pursued non-feminist agendas, but also agendas that from a feminist perspective might be up for critique. Trade unions that prioritize struggles in favor of the family wage—since the family wage stabilizes the traditional heterosexual male breadwinner family—are an example of this. Better prospects for links between feminist actors and trade unions are imaginable in cases in which the latter emphasizes struggles for universal part-time jobs that would make it possible to combine wage work much more effectively with care work, political work, or other activities for all people.

Third, political feminism should try to formulate alternatives to neoliberalism and be attentive to its potential danger of being appropriated for and playing into neoliberal reasoning and processes of neoliberal restructuring. Moreover, in an era of networks that are adapting their outlook according to changing circumstances, there is a need for a »fluid feminism«—i. e., a feminism that can adapt to societal change without giving up its core, and that may be translated into different cultural norms and political contexts, if it doesn't already spring from various local contexts. In addition, it should be capable of attracting broad popular support and changing the political culture in which democracy has been subordinated to the logics of deregulated markets and capitalism, or is in jeopardy due to other factors of autocratic rule.

Finally, if the new spirit of capitalism is really a transnational one, a timely feminism should always look for global connections, in terms of causes for past and current gender injustice effects as well as possibilities for challenging, or rather fighting such causes and their effects. One way of going about this is to (re)politicize the transnational feminist movement and to create a vision for justice that is embedded in a new practical utopia. The stakes are surely high. But there is no good alternative.



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