

## **Socialist Feminism Today**

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### **I. Intro: A broader definition of socialist feminism to include Marxism**

Socialist feminism in its broadest sense is an inclusive project.

- All socialist feminists would see class as central to women's lives and women's oppression. Some of us would see class as fundamental from the point of view of explaining the historical origins of women's oppression, for example. Others refuse to give primacy to any one factor over the other.
- Women's oppression, however, is not *simply reduced* to economic exploitation, i.e. the extraction of surplus value. This also applies to national/ethnic or racial oppression.
- All these aspects of society are inextricably linked, i.e. class is always gendered and 'raced'.

Barbara Ehrenreich (What is Socialist Feminism, 1975): The term socialist feminism "is much too short for what is, after all, really socialist, internationalist, anti-racists, anti-hetrosexist feminism."

Such a project has existed for a very long time. Even before the label socialist feminism was invented.

Socialist feminism that excludes or rejects a Marxist analysis of capitalism and class, based on the mistaken argument that Marxism is gender blind because it does not address the sex-gender system (or patriarchy), or relations of reproduction as against relations of production, is a narrow project and an exclusive one. A feminism that speaks of women's oppression, but fails to explain adequately or address capitalism, will be of little help in ending women's oppression. Marxist analysis of history, or capitalism and social change through struggle, is relevant and necessary to understanding the economic and social situation we face today. At the same time a Marxism which has categories of analysis which are understood in a gender or national/ethnic/race *neutral* way will not be able to make itself relevant to the times we live and struggle in.

## **II. Context: To renew and revive it in the context of development today:**

The heart of the socialist feminist project is not merely to interpret the world, but to also change it. A feminist theory that is lost in theoretical abstractions will be useless for this purpose. In looking at the socialist feminist project today we need to situate it in this particular historical conjuncture.

(i) It is a moment in history when the socialist project has once again arisen from the ashes -- a spectre to haunt capitalism -- especially to haunt the leading capitalist nation, the US, with the massive upsurge and radicalization of the struggles in Latin America, spearheaded in the name of socialism, i.e. Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and of course the Cuban revolution. These revolutionary movements, such as that of Venezuela which has encapsulated its revolutionary project with the vision of “Socialism for the XXI Century”, is being supported by millions of, mainly poor, women.

And they are bringing about major economic and social changes to women’s lives.

In the barrios in Venezuela, women are empowering the process of revolutionary transformation taking place under the government of President Hugo Chavez.

The Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela is proposing a democracy based on participation, in which the rights of citizens are not defined as purely political but instead embark on encompassing social justice and equality. Most women look upon this revolution, dedicated to tearing down the formally rigid and exclusive “democracy”, as the beginning of a new phase in the fight for gender equality. The focus is on no longer fighting for legal rights and political power, but instead changing the complexion of society.

The new Bolivarian Constitution (also known as the Magna Carta for Women because of its non-sexist language and gender equality provisions) is unique in that it recognises housework as productive labour that adds value to the economy. Under Article 88 of the constitution, housewives are guaranteed a pension. By allotting economic privileges to work that was previously unrecognised as having economic value, Venezuela is breaking down patriarchal societal norms and capitalist ideology which only sees value in profit-producing enterprises. This very likely makes the Venezuelan constitution one of the most progressive in the world.

In June of 2006, the poorest housewives began receiving payments of 80 percent of the minimum wage (which had just been raised 15 percent) for their work in the home, funds that come from oil revenues.

Poor women have been among Chavez’s strongest supporters. In April 2002, when the capitalist elite, acting with US support, carried out a military coup against Chavez, women from the poorest neighbourhoods of Caracas were the first to mobilise demanding the return of their elected president. A majority of the hundreds of thousands in the street at that critical moment, were poor women. Women were the first in the streets and organised the men to fight back. Filling the streets, the working-class poor, supported by the army’s rank-and-file, defeated the coup-plotters, enabling Chavez’s return to power.

Why, was this the case? It has also been poor women who have most benefited from the Bolivarian revolution: The changes in the constitution; the new education and health campaigns, (funded by the state-owned oil industry, which accounts for 30% of the country's GDP and 50% of government revenues); the government's anti-poverty programs have resulted in an additional 1.5 million children in school getting three free meals a day; at least 1 million illiterate adults learning to read and write; 1.5 million more people with access to safe drinking water; 10,000 Cuban doctors providing free health care in the poorest communities including reproductive health services; food subsidies (or food vouchers) for pregnant women before and after birth; 2 million hectares of land have been distributed to small farmers, with women heads of household (60% of households) being prioritised for land distribution.

Women understood what it would mean if those who wanted to overthrow Chavez succeeded. According to feminist Elena Linares: "There was a feeling of rage at the opposition, that they would take away the rights that had been won". Linares herself was there in those April days and saw women lie down in front of tanks.

Traditionally, a long-standing cultural problem more pronounced in Latin America is *machismo* — where men have several women partners, with a number of children to each one. Latino men have refused, in general, to take responsibility for their children and have abandoned them, with the women taking on the sole burden of raising their children. Seventy per cent of households in Venezuela are headed by women. To deal with this problem, the Chavez government was discussing a law covering paternal responsibility. Under the proposed law, if the mother said a particular man was the father of her children and he refused to take a DNA test, then for all legal purposes he would be considered the father of her children.

The National Institute for Women (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer, INAMUJER) has been set up, to work towards achieving equality for women in all spheres. About 50-100 women were employed there, all paid for by the Chavez government. The Director Maria Leon is a communist. She says that they want to have women actively participating in all political forums and that 50% of the composition of any government committee should be made up of women.

Venezuela is one of the few Latin American countries that acknowledges domestic violence as a serious problem and is attempting to change the situation. INAMUJER has a free telephone line and about 75% of calls are related to the mistreatment of both women and children. It also provides shelter for women who fear for their lives. INAMUJER is also developing education programs for police officers, lawyers, and doctors on gender and domestic violence issues.

With abortion still illegal in Venezuela, as in most of Latin America, the government recently initiated a discussion on the need to decriminalize the procedure. Incidentally, currently women are the ones prosecuted, not doctors. Linares said that the women's movement is working towards laws that would allow for abortions in cases of rape and when the woman's health is threatened. She said that this limited step is very important and a matter of public health, with many women still being injured and dying from back-

alley abortions.

The Venezuelan Constitution (Article 76) also recognizes the sexual and reproductive rights of women and obliges the state to ensure that doctors provide accurate information about family planning. It acknowledges the social function of motherhood and guarantees healthcare to the mother, from the moment of conception and during post-partum. Article 75 states that family relations are based in equality of rights and duties, in solidarity, in mutual comprehension and in reciprocal respect.

What makes Venezuela especially different is also the political involvement of huge numbers of women, and the fact that social change in Venezuela is being driven by a process of self-organisation of the poor and the marginalised. The participation and leadership of women, for example, is key to carrying out agrarian reform in Venezuela. Some 60% of the land has been distributed to women-heads of households. Women are the majority in the land, water and health committees that sort out how the millions who built homes on squatted land can be given legal titles, how water supplies and health care services are to be improved. The Missions have made special efforts to incorporate women, especially in the educational projects, including bringing them into the universities in larger numbers — 70 percent of new students at that level are now women. Women workers are involved in the process of taking over factories that have been closed down or threatened with closure. Because of the revolutions promotion of workers participation in management, very quickly the economy is being taken over by workers, who are increasingly making the key economic decisions and the economic system is steadily being dismantled in a process that is described as “moving away from capitalism.”

Feminism in Venezuela had lost touch with its popular base, the majority of poor and working class women. With the rise of “experts” in gender studies in academia and public institutions, as well as the introduction of a handful of highly visible women in political institutions, feminists have focused on legitimizing themselves before a capitalist and sexist world. Today however, according to INAMUJER, feminism is starting to reach the popular sectors, renew itself and link up with the movements of the masses for revolutionary change.

The developments in Venezuela, where millions of women are becoming empowered and empowering the Bolivarian revolution and identifying with the goals of socialism and the theory of Marxism (there is a massive interest in Marxism and Marxist theory in Venezuela with a proliferation of courses etc in Marxism on campus), where feminists are involved and active participants in these events, is a challenge to the socialist feminist project around the world. Renewing ourselves, also depends very much relating to these revolutions and drawing lessons from them.

Cuba: A further development of the revolution in relation to gender and sexuality issues. While gay marriage is being banned in state after state in the US and the Bush administration has proclaimed its opposition to it, Cuba is on the verge of enacting a law that gives same-sex couples some form of legal status. According to Ricardo Alarcon, president of Cuba's National Assembly, in order to abolish any discrimination against

gays, "We have to redefine the concept of marriage," "Socialism should be a society that does not exclude anybody."

(Note: The "worlds greatest democracy" verses "the totalitarian communist regime".)

The Cuban Parliament is also examining a proposal to authorize sex change operations and modification of identity documents of clinically diagnosed transsexuals. This is part of a national policy to recognize the rights of these people to live a full life in the gender they chose. Mariela Castro Espín, Director of the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (Cenesex) [National Center for Sex Education] and daughter of Raul Castro is the main promoter of the legislation.

In essence, the proposal states that as soon as a person is diagnosed with a gender identity disorder – scientific medical term applied to Transexuality – the person's legal documentation can be changed, from the birth certificate to the passport. This person will also have the right to a sex change operation.

If the bill is passed, it will be the first of its type in the developing world. Cenesex specialists are presently studying existing experiences, mainly European, on the application of such legislation.

This is a far cry from the former Soviet project with its idealization of motherhood or anything in the experience of the Chinese revolution. And is a distinct trend in the opposite direction to what is taking place in a number of industrialized countries in the West, the US and Australia included, where the trend is to take away a range of even formal rights won in the sphere of gender and sexuality.

So what is the basis for these progressive, cutting edge developments? How does it inform the socialist feminist project, especially strategies for change? Need to have more discourse, shift the discourse, along these lines.

Globalisation: Unprecedented centralization and concentration of capital.

Don't want to go into the debate here of whether this represents a modification of imperialism or a fundamental change to imperialism/global capitalism.

But some of the key features of imperialism continue: wars for geopolitical influence ultimately opening up markets for industrial capital; extreme polarization of mass poverty and massive wealth.

Linked. War is ultimately about economics. About access to markets.

(Driven by innate male aggression, i.e. ecofeminists. Maybe, but not the central factor here. Imperial war today does have gender dimensions -- the face of Condry Rice; US female troops torturing Iraqi male prisoners; occupation of Afghanistan becoming synonymous with gender equality in NATO propaganda, etc.)

Social dimensions of globalisation: Extreme polarization of mass poverty and massive wealth (Eg: Forbes magazine, India, some of the poorest communities on earth where farmers commit suicide unable to make ends meet, has a larger number of billionaires

than ever before. Also Philippines?). Polarisation North and South, within the North and within the South.

Joining the mass of the exploited and the oppressed the population of the former Soviet Union and China. Impact on women of “mafia” capitalism in former Soviet bloc is horrendous. Sexual dimensions of this, show extreme forms of exploitation -- the massive increases in trafficking linked to prostitution to feed the brothels of Western Europe, for example. Not a question of saying let’s go back to the Stalinist regimes of the past, although a very strong argument to say despite the limitations, the former planned economies, not the state bureaucracy, did provide basic social protection for women and men in these societies. These fundamental gains of the early revolutions did continue, although politically and ultimately socially heavily eroded and compromised, including on the women’s question. This experience of Stalinist regimes collapsing and giving rise to ‘mafia’ capitalism with horrendous social consequences, and not to some liberal democratic system with political rights, also poses some critical questions for the socialist feminist project.

**The paradox: Unprecedented formal equality, extreme disempowerment for the majority of women. Implications of economic divisions, of class, more pressing than ever.**

What we have and haven’t achieved:

Have achieved: In most parts of the world, including in the Philippines, women have achieved formal equality: Constitutions, CEDAW and other conventions, equal opportunity legislation, etc; the integration of women into progressive struggles; and the steady increase in women’s participation in the workforce and educational and other institutions over recent decades.

**What we haven’t yet won.** That is, real social and economic equality, due to capitalism’s avoidance of all the costs associated with social reproduction (including the replenishment of labour, plus the material and social development of the next generation).

**The global divide of women’s oppression increasing.** Imperialism is furthering the gap between women in the First and Third worlds. Not only is the neoliberal drive worsening economic conditions for women in the poorest countries, but it is also reinforcing and strengthening the feudal subjugation of women, in many parts of the world.

**The class divide amongst women is increasing:** A very small layer of women have become leaders of the capitalist system and a layer of those in the elite political castes, bureaucracy, capitalist corporations, etc, identify with capitalism. A layer of middle-class women have also benefited from the gains made. However, the overwhelming majority, working class and poor women, are bearing the brunt of the brutality of neo-liberal globalization and its policies.

*The class character of women’s oppression is even starker today, than in the last fifty years.*

### **III. The relevance of Marxism for the Socialist Feminist project**

There has been a de-emphasis of class and capitalism in the feminist project especially in the last decade, including amongst one-time socialist feminist. Rather than an attempt to update and integrate Marxist analysis of capitalism and class, the trend has been to reject it in feminist discourse and analysis. Marxism has been caricatured and declared irrelevant, reductionist, binary, etc.

The common caricature of Marxism is to equate it with the political practice of Stalinism or Maoism, as in the case of the Philippines. Marxism became tainted because of the experience of Stalinism, including its Maoist variety: the dictatorship of the *nomenclatura* (the privileged party bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and China) which had nothing in common with the socialist democracy envisioned by Marx and Engels; the glorification of motherhood and the family; the general social conservatism which spilled over into the repression of female and male sexuality, such as gay sexuality, etc. There is also little knowledge of the remarkable gains made during the early stages of the Russian revolution: the 1918 Family Code which legalized divorce, made abortion free and easily accessible, recognized homosexuality and lifted restrictions on sexual behaviour. These gains were the first to be attacked and driven back by Stalin and the newly emerging Soviet bur, starting with the illegalization of abortion. Marxist theory had to be revised to justify these attacks on the social gains of the revolution. So Marx and Engels' analysis of the patriarchal family system was junked and the glorious "socialist family" was invented as a basic institution of socialist society. Motherhood medals were awarded to encourage women to bear children, etc. Class analysis became a narrow tool focusing on the economic struggles of the industrial working class (economism), etc. Crude economism was a key characteristic of Stalinism.

Stalin's dictatorship expropriated the name of Marxism and in the name of socialism established a society where the majority, men and women, instead of becoming self-emancipated and free human beings, were utterly disempowered, thus destroying the vision of a democratic socialism for millions of people. Something that Marx and Engels had never foreseen.

Socialist feminism emerged in this context -- dissatisfied with the biological determinism of radical feminism and the lack of prevailing analysis of women's oppression in the socialist movement. Stalinism had tainted Marxism, in its' political practice, including its hostility to the newly emerging women's movement which it described as petty bourgeois, as it was not a direct product of the struggles of the industrial working class. As Adrienne Rich describes it, these socialist feminists were influenced "by the fear that class would erase gender once again, when gender was just beginning to be understood as a political category". Subsequently the socialist feminist project started to describe itself increasingly in anti-Marxist terms and differentiated itself from Marxism. Thus it became an increasingly narrow project.

What did Marx and Engels actually say?

Yes, their writings do focus on the sphere of production and labor rather than other forms of labor, such as the peasantry or of women's labor in the family, or reproduction. This is because they were trying to understand capitalism and how it functioned. This was at the heart of their theoretical analysis.

Marx and Engels believed that if they could understand how capitalism worked and help make workers' conscious of their oppression (a class in itself to become a class for itself) they could contribute to workers' self-emancipation. They believed that the *self*-emancipation of the working class—men and women, of all nations, races, and creeds—would be the basis for the end of all other forms of oppression. With the establishment of the first real democracy, the rule of the immense majority—that is, socialism—class oppression and antagonism would be replaced by “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” As to how such a society would be organized, they pointed to the Paris Commune of 1870 as “what a workers' government would look like,” but otherwise said very little about what socialist society would look like.

They did attempt a historical analysis of the sphere of reproduction given the specific information in the social sciences that they had access to at the time. Engels in his writings in *Family Private Property and the State* did look at sex and gender systems and relations. He argued that the sex and gender system, which introduced oppressive gender inequalities in the sexual division of labor and restricted female sexuality through the enforcement of monogamy, was the patriarchal family system. With the development of labor and labor productivity, the patriarchal family system developed as an institution of class rule. It marked the “world historic defeat of the female sex” and is the cornerstone of women's oppression, he concluded.

In all their analysis, whether capitalism and the class struggle, the state, human alienation, the family and sexuality, the historical development of societies through successive modes of production, etc, they based it on a materialist premise, framework. Therefore they looked at the development of labor and production and its impact on how society produced, functioned and transformed itself. This is the method they also used to understand and analyse women's oppression.

There have been tremendous developments in Marxist thought and theory since Marx and Engels (Gramsci, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Mandel, Che, Fidel, Ho Chi Minh, etc) and more recently especially in the decades preceding the student radicalization of the 60s and 70s which saw a renewal of Marxism with a new generation being won over to the struggle for socialism. These have included: a critique of Stalinism in theory and political practice and a rejection of its variants including in the Philippines where there were major breakthroughs on this front in the 1990s; integration and developing an analysis of women's oppression, the role of the family, the changing forms of the family system, the sexual division of labor, gender relations within and outside the family; Strategies of how to fight for women's emancipation (slogan no socialism without .... ); enriching Marxist theory with an analysis of homosexuality, gay oppression and sexuality in general; a critique of “vanguardism”, the Stalinist distortion that substituted the party for the masa and the working class; attempts to come to terms with the changing nature of the working class itself through analysis of mental and manual labor, in the Philippines

the role of the urban poor and the so-called “middle forces”; the changing nature of capitalist society (the Philippines “mode of production debate”); the changes amongst the peasantry; how does globalization impact and/or fundamentally transform imperialism and the state, etc.

The potential is there within Marxism and the historical materialist methods of Marxist approaches to review, renew and update its theory, especially through the actual experience of struggles, i.e. praxis. And this has been happening. This work continues to this day. And it has enriched and contributed to advancing the struggles against capitalism.

In their attempt to justify their rejection of Marxist analysis of capitalism and class there is a tendency to caricature Marxism and describe it as it existed in the 50s or even the 80s in the Philippines. This is simply incorrect.

#### **IV. Post-Modernism: The anti-thesis of a historical material perspective**

Postmodernism as a general tendency came out of the decline of the social movements in the First World in the 1960s. It had a major impact on the Western women's movement during the decline of the movement in the 1980s.

The philosophical basis for postmodernism was provided by poststructuralism. (refer to Alex Callinicos' book 'Against Postmodernism') In a nutshell the poststructuralist outlook (1970s, French theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze):

Disagreeing with Marx and others poststructuralists argue that, every force, every set of relations in society is as important as every other. There are no key, identifiable, unifying forces in society. All of the events and happenings in the spheres of nature and human society are simply unconnected, equally significant, random occurrences.

In any case, say the poststructuralists, even if such laws did exist, we can't KNOW the world of society and nature in any objective sense because human comprehension and thinking is absolutely sealed off from the external world of nature and society by language.

Reality, they say, is therefore constructed by human beings through language games. But of course there are as many possible perspectives or language games as there are people and their individual experiences. So, say the post-structuralists and many postmodernists, everything is a "text", there is no common reality.

In this framework, the question of OBJECTIVE TRUTH, of knowledge of an objective reality, regardless of different individuals different perception or understanding of it, recedes completely. So, for example, Marxist theory maintains that an objective truth about capitalism is that it rests on the exploitation of the majority of people - the working class. We understand this as a fact of reality based our study of various social systems, economic systems, in various periods of history and so on. A poststructuralist, however, would say that "exploitation" is but one of a multiplicity of language games or texts with no more validity than the language game of bourgeois economics. Therefore the idea of one class of people systematically benefiting at the expense of another does not exist. In this way, the very real exploitation of workers, or women, or people of colour, etc. is reduced to a matter of discourse. "It depends on your point of view" they say.

The politics of postmodernism takes various forms, such as the elevation of the idea of difference which is having a significant impact on feminism around the world.

According to the politics of difference, because those who have spoken in the name of science and progress in capitalist society, that is, the capitalist ruling class, have silenced and exploited marginal or less powerful groups, then universality, the search for commonality in toto must be rejected. Instead, differences, seen to be the antithesis of the

totalitarianism of capitalism (or Stalinism for that matter), are emphasised. In the sphere of radical politics this leads to a sort of rainbow movement being envisaged where, in their rejection of totalitarianism, political ideas and activity proceeds on the basis that everyone is perceived and treated as an individual first and foremost. Everyone is assumed to perceive things differently from everyone else, everyone does their own thing, everyone believes in their own thing, and (supposedly) respects everyone else's individuality as well. A complete individualization of politics by postmodernists.

This has the actual effect of thoroughly demobilising people. You can no longer even see the commonalities between your own and other individual's experiences - the things that unite you against an oppressor, the things that would make you have solidarity with one another. It is also fundamentally flawed as a strategy for change insofar as it denies the need for UNITY of oppressed groups in the face of the most powerful ruling system and class in history.

While the pro-individual, anti-collectivist perspective of postmodernism was fueled by the experiences and lessons of Stalinist totalitarianism as much as by a critique of capitalism, and while the proponents of difference politics were correct to react against the lack of democracy in the Stalinised left and many of the progressive movements over the past few decades, this position is ultimately regressive in that it inevitably leads to an all-encompassing anti-action and anti-masses perspective. Big trade unions, big mobilisations, big issues, broad alliances - all these phenomena, absolutely necessary for any gains to be defended or reforms to be won, let alone for the socialist project to succeed, are attacked in theory and practice by postmodernism.

Postmodernist feminism goes by various names including "essential" feminism and "cultural" feminism. Their common perspective is the emphasis they place on the differences between men and women, and between women themselves, whether that be the result of race, class, religion or ethnicity, or the most personal psychological/emotional influences in their lives.

In essentialist feminist theory, (e.g. the writings of Julie Kristeva and Luce Irigaray), we see the postmodernist feminist tendency to fall into an emphasis on the biological difference between men and women, woman being ultimately defined in terms of her biological characteristics which in turn give rise to common, identifiable social and psychological characteristics in women (e.g. a tendency to nurturing, empathy, non-violence, etc.).

In summary:

1. Postmodernism's rejection of historical development leads it to be anti-progress. If historical development is denied and put down to a series of unrelated and random events, then the possibility of 'making history', moving it forward, directing it, is ruled out.

2. By abandoning the scientific method, postmodernism does not enrich our theoretical understanding or our practical activity directed towards creating a better, more just social order. Rather, it inhibits it, robbing us of knowledge and thereby disempowering us as a potential force for progressive change.

3. It capitulates to the capitalist class's ideological offensive since the 1980s against any notion of collectivism. It divides, fragments and demobilises the movements and imbues them with a pessimistic outlook. It gives a legitimacy to people's feelings of powerlessness.

In sum, postmodernism ultimately abandons the project of achieving fundamental social change.

## **VI. Strategy question**

- A challenge to post-modernists: Interpreting the world or changing it?
- Based on the mass of poor women: workers, urban and rural poor. This requires a class perspective
- Political independence
- Alliances
- An all encompassing socialist feminist perspective: Explains everything or nothing.