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Book Review: Socialist Feminism: A New Approach by Frieda

Afary

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Abstract

Frieda Afary's new book, *Socialist Feminism: A New Approach* (2022), is an expansive and incisive analysis of feminist and Marxist theories put into conversation with global anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist movements. She moves agilely from discussions of Marxist theories of alienated labour and social reproduction to Black Feminist Intersectionality and queer theory. Her study ultimately takes a Marxist-Humanist and Feminist approach to call on readers to challenge what she sees as the ever-growing threat of authoritarian imperialism and capitalism. Most importantly, her book is a pedagogical tool for activists and academics alike.

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Recent years have seen both a renewal in feminist literature from the Marxist tradition and a resurgence of the global feminist movement. Frieda Afary, in her new book, *Socialist Feminism: A New Approach*, brings the two into the conversation by drawing on her experience as a socialist activist from the Marxist-Humanist tradition rendering a Humanist alternative to what she sees as the dangers of ever-growing authoritarian capitalism.

Afary's book spans an extensive range of feminist traditions, from theories of social reproduction, Black Feminism and intersectionality, as well as queer theory, to weave together her unique critique of capitalism and imperialism. This analysis is based on over forty years of experience as an Iranian-American political activist, philosopher, translator and public librarian. Afary begins the book by locating us in the present moment, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the ecological crisis, the recent #MeToo movement, and the rise of authoritarianism. For Afary, Socialist Feminism offers us a way forward, with the potential to combat militarism and capitalist social relations that produce class divisions and alienation. She argues that by examining and utilizing the tools of four "foundational" theories, we can develop a "more expansive" socialist feminism informed by humanism: (1) theories of social reproduction, (2) theories of alienation, (3) intersectionality, and (4) queer identities (Afary, 2022, p. 1-2).

Following this thesis, she includes a biographical note explaining how the experience of the Iranian Revolution and emigration to the United States has led her to the work of Marxist-Humanist philosopher Raya Dunayevskaya and to study the Black Liberation Struggle in the U.S. For Afary, Dunayevskaya's humanism offers "*the possibility of creating a different society and explores the vision of a total transformation of human relations with new gender relations as its measure*" (Dunayevskaya, 1981; in Afary, 2022, p. 3). Furthermore, Afary believes that today, humanism still offers us "*an alternative to capitalism that challenges all forms of domination and transcends oppressive models of the former USSR and Maoist China, as well as more recent claims to socialism as in Venezuela*" (Afary, 2022, p. 4).

Following the introduction, the first chapter begins with a discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic and the #MeToo movement. Afary notes that the pandemic has had a particular impact on women and women's labour. During the pandemic, women shouldered the burden of reproductive work due to the care crisis. Moreover, "*women, and especially women of colour... are more likely to be essential workers or have precarious employment*", which puts them at greater risk of exposure to the virus (Afary, 2022, p. 11). Afary then explains some

“contradictory developments in gender relations” (Afary, 2022, p. 13). While the #MeToo Movement represented a great advance in pointing out the sexual violence and harassment women are forced to endure under capitalist society, we have at the same time seen a growing global right-wing response to gains in the feminist movement, including assaults on reproductive and LGBTQ rights.

Chapter Two follows with a discussion of the features of authoritarian capitalism and imperialism in the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement and other global uprisings, of which women have been front and centre. She begins by turning to Marx’s *Capital and Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* to examine capitalism as a “mode of production based on alienated labour” (Afary, 2022, p. 29). She then turns to a discussion of neoliberalism, protectionism, both Western and Eastern imperialist powers, mass incarceration and policing, and authoritarian capitalism’s specific attack on women to crush global movements. The chapter ends with discussing what we can learn from the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement.

Chapter Three takes up the discussion of social reproduction theories and capitalist accumulation. This chapter begins with an overview of the many debates within social reproduction literature, including by Silvia Federici, Margaret Benson, Tithi Bhattacharya, Lise Vogel, Angela Davis, and Michelle Barrett, among many others. She re-examines Marx’s categories of value, surplus value, productive labour, and accumulation in light of issues such as education, healthcare, childcare, pregnancy, and the family.

Chapter Four moves to the theory of alienated labour and proposes it as one of the foundations of gender oppression under capitalism. It discusses the work of Angela Davis, Heather Brown, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Nancy Holmstrom, among many others. It argues that Marx’s theory of alienated labour in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* is vital to understanding gender oppression today and the #MeToo movement, of which neither theories of social reproduction nor cultural explanations alone prove sufficient.

Afary takes up Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality in Chapter Five. Notably, she notes that the Black feminist intersectional approach is “not monolithic” and notes its origins in the nineteenth century in the work of Maria Miller Y. Stewart (Afary, 2022, p. 83). She argues against the idea that this literature does not account for exploitation and instead poses

that it amplifies our understanding of racial and gender oppression under capitalism. She begins by examining the Combahee River Collective Statement, which “*promoted international revolutionary solidarity and saw Black women’s struggles as part of the struggles of developing countries’ people from Africa to Asia to Latin America as well as all working-class people*” (Afary, 2022, p. 85). She then discusses the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde (among others) before showing how these theories of intersectionality have been taken up by scholars of prison abolition, such as Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. She ends by discussing Ashley J. Bohrer’s book *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* (2020), which attempts to open the dialogue between Marxism and theories of intersectionality. Importantly, while this book points out that Marx did indeed posit women’s oppression as “*rooted in the social division of labour that create class divisions...*” it also argues that Marx posited women’s oppression as “*preceding exploitation in the historical range*” (Afary, 2022, p. 99).

The next chapter takes up queer theory and asks how a Marxist humanist framework can enrich our understanding of sexual identity under capitalism. Afary outlines Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and examines critiques from socialist feminists, such as Rosemary Hennessy, who argues that this theory fails to explain sexuality in conversation with labour, exploitation, and capitalist social relations. Hennessy (2000) argues that sexual identity must be understood in the context of the rise of globalized capitalism, flexible production, and changes in the international sexual division of labour (Afary, 2022, p. 109).

Chapters Seven and Eight analyse the socialist feminist alternatives to capitalism and imperialism. The former focuses on Socialist Humanist and Feminist alternatives, exemplified in work by Nancy Fraser, Patricia Hill Collins, Maria Mies, and Kathi Weeks, among others. It ends by turning again to Audre Lorde and to Raya Dunayevskaya’s critiques of state capitalism to argue for the importance of abolishing the “*domination of abstract time over the process of production*” to truly abolish alienated labour and oppression, which will require a “*global movement*” (Afary, 2022, p. 143-145). The latter chapter explores the question of domination and the self-other relationship from a philosophical perspective. Afary discusses the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jessica Benjamin to explore domination and follows with Allison Weir, Dunayevskaya, and Franz Fanon, who all rely on Hegelian dialectics to “*create new human relationships*” (Afary, 2022, p. 145).

The Conclusion summarizes the main ideas and arguments of the book. It proposes a set of political issues around which socialist feminists should organize, including opposing war and imperialism in all spheres of the globe, continuing the struggle initiated by the #MeToo movement, connecting anti-authoritarian global struggles to the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., and fighting against alienated labour and the destruction of the environment. For Afary, Humanist-inspired socialist feminism offers us the way forward to solving many of these issues.

Overall, Afary's book is impressive and rich, spanning the various traditions of feminist thought and philosophy in dialogue with Marxist theory. Afary urges socialists to look to literature not often put into conversation with Marxist thought to formulate an updated, more expansive understanding of gender, racial and sexual oppression under capitalism. Her discussion and analysis of contemporary social movements alongside economic and philosophical thought are precious in putting theory into practice. Despite dealing with many theoretically complex texts, Afary makes them approachable and accessible to newer and older readers of socialist feminist ideas. Finally, the most unique aspect of this book is its intent to be used as a pedagogical tool for educators and activists. The book has been published in conjunction with a Workbook of Socialist Feminism for use in classrooms, community reading groups, or individual use. The Workbook includes critical terms and concepts for each chapter, such as "state capitalism", "heteronormativity", and "abstract labour", along with discussion questions and activity ideas. The Workbook can be freely accessed online at www.plutobooks.com. Afary's book sits welcome alongside the newer books on socialist feminism, such as Sophie Lewis' *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (2022) and *Transgender Marxism* (Gleeson & O'Rourke, 2022), as well as older classics.

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