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# WHAT CAN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT LEARN FROM FEMINISM?

**in** December 2009, 40,000 people representing nations and UN agencies, nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations, media and environmental activists, and indigenous peoples descended upon the city of Copenhagen for the United Nations Climate Change Conference. This meeting was the culmination of two years of negotiations over climate change action under the Bali Roadmap, launched

in December 2007. Many hoped that the Copenhagen Climate Conference would deliver an ambitious and equitable plan to curb climate change. The talks began with a flurry of controversy over transparency, slights by government leaders, and disputes over process. When the dust settled, the result was a weak outline of a global agreement acknowledging the scientific case for preventing temperature increases over 2°C

this century, yet refraining from setting binding emissions reductions. The deal, negotiated between China, South Africa, India, Brazil, and the US was disappointing to countries of the global South who were advocating for stronger emissions reductions to keep global temperature rise under 1.5°C. The frustrating outcomes of the Copenhagen conference have left many environmentalists wondering what the next line of action should be.

At this critical moment after Copenhagen and in the wake of an economic crisis that has posed a serious challenge to neoliberal economic policy, environmentalists should take a lesson from developments in the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The environmental movement faces the same political economy faced by the feminist movement: a capitalist system and mode of production. Feminists have navigated within or fought against this system on the ground level with their struggle for equal opportunity employment, re-valuing productive work such as childcare, decreasing the gender wage gap, and fighting sexual harassment. Feminist confrontations with capitalism were also manifest in the intense theoretical debates that took place during second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s. Liberal, Marxist, and radical feminists posited different answers to the foundational question of how to position oneself within or against a capitalist political economy.

### **Development of Feminist Politics**

The liberal feminist position has generally been to extend the traditional liberal

principles of equality, rationality, and individualism to women through political and legal reform within the capitalist system (Jaggar; Mill). This form of feminism contends that women possess the same capabilities of intellect and rationality so valued in men, but fail to develop them due to lack of opportunity. Radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone, on the other hand, reject the patriarchal values of power, domination, individualism, and competitiveness, which they believe characterize the capitalist social structure. Marxist feminists take on capitalism most directly, proposing that feminist goals of gender equality can happen only with a transformation of the social and economic structure. Certain Marxist feminists maintain that two systems, capitalism and patriarchy, create women's subordination by placing limits on women's access to resources and restricting women's sexuality. In their view, these "dual systems" relegate women to the devalued work of childrearing and housework and facilitate women's economic dependence on men (Hartmann 1981). Other theorists maintain that capitalism and patriarchy form *one* system of which male dominance

and oppression of women is a fundamental attribute (Young, 1981). Regardless of whether capitalism and patriarchy form one system or two intertwined ones, Marxist feminists generally agree that capitalist relations of production and reproduction must be transformed in order to establish gender equality and end women's oppression.

Recent work by Hester Eisenstein and Nancy Fraser provides a retrospective look at the feminist movement's historical development alongside capitalism. These works illustrate how feminism and capitalism have become strange bedfellows within the context of state-organized capitalism and modern-day neoliberalism. They argue that second-wave feminism was at its core a critique of androcentric, state-organized capitalism. Feminists of this period challenged the interlocking economic, cultural, and political dimensions of this system that created gender injustice (Fraser 2009). In the 1970s and 80s, however, these three strands of feminist critique were unraveled, co-opted, and resignified by the state. Post-second-wave feminists' claims for justice were placed second to claims for recognition.

Take for instance the hallmarks of second-wave feminism: struggles for women's individualism and participation in the labor market. While self-determination and economic independence undoubtedly improved women's conditions, the hegemonic idea that women should participate in work outside the home contributed to the decline of the family wage and the abolition of traditional welfare support (Eisenstein 2005). Corporate boardrooms filled with white men simply added one female board member as a superficial symbol of gender equality. As a discursive construct, feminism has been co-opted and watered down, so that even Sarah Palin, in a 2008 interview, could claim to be a feminist. The state along with big business has been able to selectively appropriate aspects of feminist ideology in order to pull the social safety net from under poor, single women and to allow wages to stagnate. While many feminists have sought to challenge the tendencies of capitalism particularly in the workplace, some tenets of feminism about female empowerment and equality have been co-opted into the capitalist project of privatization and the withdrawal of the state from social services.

Fraser's historical analysis demonstrates that feminist ideology has in many ways served the very interests of capital it initially set out to challenge. Fraser offers suggestions for the future of feminism, arguing that post-neoliberal feminists must reconnect the feminist critique with a critique of capitalism and reestablish feminism on the left of the political spectrum. Post-neoliberal anti-androcentrism must focus on severing the tie between feminism's nuanced critique of the family wage and the adoption of a system of flexible capitalism. Moreover, rather than relying on experts, feminists must reconnect the movement to participatory democracy and break the link between feminist critique of statism and the reign of the free market. Lastly, in favor of a more transnational and global feminism, Fraser argues for the breaking of "identification of democracy with the bounded political community" (Fraser 2009: 116).

### **Lessons for Environmentalism**

Fraser's analysis of the feminist movement provides a useful model for critically evaluating the successes, failures, and future of the environmental movement. Just as

the neoliberal regime co-opted strands of feminist thought to achieve goals and policies antithetical to feminism, environmentalism has been adopted by corporate entities. Wal-Mart is a major distributor of organic food, and British Petroleum and Exxon are portrayed in their commercials as environmentally friendly corporations doing good deeds in the Global South. Under the cap-and-trade system, which was the leading solution to global warming discussed in the climate talks in Copenhagen, nations would establish limits on carbon emissions through the distribution of certain amounts of pollution permits to particular nations, with the idea that fewer permits would be distributed each year. Innovative companies with a reserve of carbon permits could sell them at a high price to companies still needing them (Lohmann 2006). Carbon brokers and energy trading firms that facilitate trading could also take in huge profits.

Though the system sounds like a win-win situation for both big business and environmentalism, the partnership has several negative drawbacks. First, the ever-increasing drive for profits and such free-market solutions offer precarious not stable solutions for

global warming. The same logic that brought about the recent economic crisis would be implemented in a new type of market, the carbon stock market. Not surprisingly, proponents of cap-and-trade policy include Enron and Goldman Sachs.

Secondly, the cap-and-trade system mandates that a large portion of the permits be given to industrial polluters for free in order to incentivize big polluters to get on board with the policy (Viard 2009). When this system, which some critics have renamed “cap and giveaway,” was implemented in Europe, it proved thoroughly unsuccessful in reducing emissions, and polluters made billions in windfall profits (Adam 2008). Environmental policy failed to achieve its direct goal of curbing greenhouse gases (GHGs). Meanwhile, wealthy, Western nations are transferring the cost of their polluting to the Global South. Joan Martinez-Alier, an ecological economist, defines this as “ecological debt.” She writes that “ecological debt is the debt accumulated by Northern, industrial countries toward Third World countries on account of resource plundering, environmental damages, and the free occupation of environmental space

## **Such “greenwashing”—hitching environmentalism to capitalism—does not change the root causes of environmental degradation such as overconsumption, inequality, and profiteering**

to deposit wastes such as greenhouse gases, from the industrial countries.” In other words, the Third World (or the Global South) reaps the consequences of a problem it did not create. Under such a system, corporations from the Global North can continue to exploit the resources of the Global South without consequence as long as they purchase carbon offsets. The proposed system demonstrates how social and political critiques made by environmentalists are now being disregarded in the name of environmentalism.

Other critics of cap-and-trade maintain that emissions trading is a distraction from alternatives that could provide genuine solutions. The Climate Justice Action of Copenhagen draft outlines several

solutions including reasserting peoples’ and communities’ control over production, relocating food production, reducing overconsumption in the North, and leaving fossil fuels in the ground. Since such alternatives propose regulation on markets that are in direct contradiction to neoliberal political ideology, they are being considered by governments of the Global North. Environmentalism is enlisted as justification for policy that ignores the ecological debt of the North and ultimately promotes the profiteering of corporate capital.

With environmental policy left dangerously “up in the air,” it is critical for the environmental movement to reevaluate its platform and direction. The global

financial and sub-prime mortgage crisis, the consequences of which are still reverberating throughout the US, should serve as a warning to the environmental movement. A cap-and-trade strategy that makes use of the same profit-driven principles that caused the global economic crisis cannot solve the even more daunting problem of climate change. Instead, the movement should recognize that skepticism about neoliberal policies could offer an opportunity and chance for renewal of the environmental movement. The strategies and policies being implemented in the name of environmentalism need to be scrutinized.

The current changing political and economic context represent an important opportunity for the environmental movement to evaluate itself not only as a movement but also as a discursive construct used by both environmentalists and capital. As a group, environmentalists must demand support for environmental protection that goes beyond words and translates into structural and institutional changes. The environmental movement must grapple with the fact that terms it has created and employs, such as

“green” and “sustainable,” are now being used to describe corporations, businesses, and consumer products that fall far outside their originally intended purview. Such “greenwashing”—hitching environmentalism to capitalism—does not change the root causes of environmental degradation such as overconsumption, inequality, and profiteering. More importantly, capitalist co-optation pushes aside important redistributive, representative, and social justice dimensions at the core of environmentalism. To bring these dimensions back to the center of the movement, environmentalists should take a cue from recent feminist theory and reconnect ecological critique with a critique of capitalism.

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