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Liberation Politics

Beyond the Double Standard: Towards a Real Liberation Politics

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A few months ago on the New York subway I saw the most incredible poster, a picture of a crying baby of colour with the words, "Got a good job? I cost thousands of dollars each year". While I was still recovering from the shock, I saw a similar poster of a little Black girl: "Honestly Mom... chances are he won't stay with you. What happens to me?"

These two posters were part of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention campaign organized by the Human Resources Administration of the New York City Department of Social Services. This advertising campaign is a perfect example of the way inequalities around class, race and gender can be entrenched and covered up with a liberal discourse. The message conveyed by the campaign is first of all that you need to have money in order to have the right to have a child: if you are poor and nonetheless have a child, you are responsible for his or her future unhappiness, poverty and social failure. Secondly, there is no mention either of social services or of abortion rights in the posters: the whole problem of teen pregnancy is reduced to a matter of individual choice, where girls are to be considered responsible for their sexual behavior. Hence, here is the kind advice provided by the authorities: finish high school, get a job, and get married before even thinking of having a child. Finally, the prominent use of children of colour in the campaign suggests the message of the campaign is fundamentally racist.

This campaign is evidence of what we might call a "double standard policy" concerning gender and sexual issues. The substantial rights granted to women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) people vary enormously according to their class position, their ethnicity, and even their location within an urban space heavily divided along class and race lines. In the state of New York same-sex marriages were introduced in July 2011. In June 2013 the governor, Andrew Cuomo, announced a Women's Equality Act that is meant to achieve pay equity, stop sexual harassment, prevent pregnancy discrimination in all workplaces, strengthen human trafficking laws and protections for domestic violence victims, end family status discrimination and protect a woman's freedom of choice. How do we explain this pro-equity legislation alongside the shaming racist poster campaign in the subway system?

This double standard situation results from granting women and LGBTQ people formal rights without real resources for equality. The adoption of anti-harassment policies, quotas, anti-discrimination policies, legal gay marriages, and so on has opened the possibility for at least a partial emancipation of women and LGBTQ people. However, these policies have not been accompanied by changes in workplace relations, proper child care programs or other decisive interventions aimed at granting substantial social rights.

In the last decades, a predominantly middle class gay mainstream subculture emerged. This subculture has contributed to the consolidation of a gay identity focused around consumption and commodification, with commercial gay scenes continuing to grow. The recognition of gay rights has gone along with a consumerist visibility requiring in most cases at least a middle class income. Moreover, the high degree of gender-conformity of these middle class gay communities has facilitated their incorporation into the neoliberal social and sexual order. Meanwhile millions of low-income LGBTQ people in advanced capitalist countries are excluded both from the access to these patterns of consumption and from the safety and symbolic recognition attached to them.

The current economic crisis is making this double standard even worse. The dismantling of the welfare state and cuts to social spending put a heavy burden on women's shoulders again, as they are the ones who still perform most care work. While upper-middle class women can still buy their freedom and their right to a professional career by paying someone else for the care work required by their family, working-class women find themselves in a double-bind situation. On the one hand, they are forced to work, as the epoch of the "family wage" where a single income (traditionally male) can support a whole household is over. On the other hand, they still have to take care of the

children, of the elderly and of the ill, because of the absence or weakness of social services, and of the persistence of differentiated gender roles. Even the recent attack on reproductive rights in a series of countries, from the US to Italy, has differential outcomes along class lines, as working-class women have no possibility to travel abroad and pay the costs of private abortion clinics. We are, therefore, in a situation in which both having children and having an abortion are becoming a privilege, rather than a right.

Capitalism and Gender Oppression

This double standard raises important questions about the idea that has become prominent in the last few years that women's emancipation is one of the positive consequences of capitalist globalization. Indeed, the so-called "feminization" of the labor market, that is the massive employment of women in the work force in the Global South, was welcomed as the occasion for a transformation of gender roles and family relationships. Yet, in those very same countries, the current trend is now to "de-feminize" the labour market. As soon as capitalism develops and capital-intensive productive sectors grow, women are again expelled from the work force. Indeed, women's employment is still characterized by the fact that most women are employed in labour intensive sectors, where wages are lower, working conditions are worse, and the turn-over is high. Women still play the role of an "industrial reserve army:" they are cyclically employed and then expelled again from the labour market.

In addition to this, the sharp separation under capitalism between the public and private spheres, and between market and family, has historically hidden and devalued women's domestic work, and therefore women themselves. This fits perfectly well with capitalism's need to have a hierarchically-organized and differentiated labour force: gender oppression and racism are translated into a sexual and racial division of labor, where women and racialized people are at the bottom of the hierarchy and subject to the worst working conditions.

Moreover, it is clear that in moments of crisis the cuts on social spending and the dismantling of the welfare state count on the work of women as surrogates of social services, performing the largest part of the necessary care work for the reproduction of the working class. The hierarchical family and gender relations play an ideological and political role, making deepening inequalities seem natural and contributing to the reproduction of capitalist relations and of the society as a whole.

While women have gained unprecedented formal rights under capitalism, this was due mostly to women's and workers' struggles rather than the automatic unfolding of capital's law of motion. This is why women's rights, such as reproductive rights, are never really granted in a definitive way. And it is why in the absence of struggle formal equality rights are often entirely decoupled from substantial transformations of women's material conditions of life.

Identity Politics and Neoliberalism

It has been surprising in the era of neoliberalism to see a pro-capitalist, and even right-wing, appropriation of women and gay liberation language and slogans. In recent years, some scholars have started adopting the two categories of femonationalism and homonationalism to describe processes where feminist or queer liberation language is used to support imperialist or domestic policies.

Femonationalism is in evidence when pseudo-feminist language is used to support islamophobic policies or imperialist wars. The war in Afghanistan, for example, was celebrated by its supporters as a civilizing and liberating mission in favor of the rights of Afghan women. The so-called "veil law," passed in France in 2004, forbidding the

Islamic veil and any other evident signs of religious affiliation in public schools, appealed both to secularism and women's rights in order to hide its discriminatory and islamophobic purpose.

Homonationalism involves the growing use of gay liberation slogans and concepts in order to justify anti-immigrant and islamophobic policies. In 2010 Judith Butler refused the Berlin Civil Courage Prize, in protest against the increasing commodification of Pride and its complicity with racism. She explained: "Some of the organizers explicitly made racist statements or did not dissociate themselves from them... We all have noticed that gay, bisexual, lesbian, trans and queer people can be instrumentalized by those who want to wage wars, i.e. cultural wars against migrants by means of forced islamophobia and military wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. In these times and by these means, we are recruited for nationalism and militarism. Currently, many European governments claim that our gay, lesbian, queer rights must be protected and we are made to believe that the new hatred of immigrants is necessary to protect us. Therefore we must say no to such a deal."

One of the most apparent cases of co-optation of LGBTQ people by right-wing and nationalist discourse is the pinkwashing of Israel. There gay rights are used to defend the occupation of Palestinian land on the basis that Israel is a civilized land of freedom, in contrast with the backwardness of homophobic Arab countries.

From Identity Politics to Socialist Politics

In the last fifteen years, more intellectuals and activists have started criticizing the separation of class and gender politics, which elides the consideration of capitalism from the analysis altogether. Theoretical trends such as intersectionality, social reproduction theory, and queer Marxism insist on taking account of the class dimension in gender and sexuality. Perspectives on gender and sexuality that do not consider this dimension easily fall prey to neoliberal and even conservative co-optation. The current economic crisis, with its harsh effects on women's conditions of life, is accelerating this process. A lot of work remains to be done, however, in order to provide a non-reductionist and non-determinist account of the way gender and sexual oppression are linked to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation.

On a political level, the divorce that took place in the past between gender and class politics was not only the outcome of the more general crisis of the New Left movements, but also of the sexism of socialist and anti-capitalist organizations. Indeed, the relationship between movements based on class and those based on gender and sexuality has been a complicated one. However, it is not true that workers' movements have always been blind to gender and sexual issues and to the needs of women and LGBTQ people in their organizations. As a matter of fact, workers' movements have historically opened a political and public space where gender and sexual oppression could be finally addressed, often endorsing positions which were much more advanced than those of liberal feminism. It remains nonetheless true that socialist and anti-capitalist organizations have not always been faithful to their promise of emancipation and often tended to reproduce oppressive dynamics or to underestimate the importance of women's and LGBTQ struggles.

The separation between class and gender politics, however, is not a viable or promising alternative. The co-optation of gender and sexual liberation by neoliberal and even conservative forces should remind us that the politics of gender and sexuality risks losing its emancipatory potential when it is separated from anti-capitalism. Moreover, the divorce of gender and sexuality from class has contributed to the more general fragmentation of struggles, which has contributed to almost three decades of social and political defeats in many countries. Finally, this divorce can contribute to the invisibility of the conditions of life, needs, and lived experience of working-class and poor women and LGBTQ people of color, for whom the separation of gender and sexuality from their class position does not make any sense.

What we need is a strong socialist, feminist and LGBTQ politics. This, however, would require some decisive steps.

First of all, it means recognizing the contribution of different strands of critique of gender and sexual oppression, including those that do not share a Marxist or socialist framework of analysis. We need to strongly reject the view of some socialist organizations that feminism is substantially in antagonism with Marxism and with socialist politics. In the same way as there is not only one "Marxism" or one "socialism", there is not only one "feminism," but rather a living and diverse field of analysis and political intervention, from which we have many things to learn.

Second, we need to deepen our analysis of the way capitalist social relations constantly produce and reproduce gender and sexual oppression. To challenge this requires truly democratic forms of organization in which people who experience different forms of oppression can organize autonomously if they so choose. We need to acknowledge that power dynamics creating sexual, gender, and race hierarchies can and do exist within left-wing organizations and must be addressed.

Finally, it requires also the political acknowledgment of the centrality of gender and sexual oppression and analysis to our critique of capitalism and to our political and social struggles. The question should not be whether class is "prior" to gender, but rather whether we can really think of the working class, of its lived experience and the way it fights, as separate from thinking about gender and sexuality.

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