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Explaining Feminist Failure

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Today, hardly anyone speaks of feminist revolution.
— bell hooks ([1984] 2015, 159)

At a moment when xenophobic nationalism has been mobilized by right-wing leaders across the globe, bell hooks's critique of the profound limitations of bourgeois feminism appears remarkably prescient. When anti-immigrant rhetoric is cavalierly deployed to shore up white supremacy in Europe and North America, her cautions about the pervasiveness and persistence of racism remain as telling as ever. When the world's richest 42 people have greater wealth than the poorest half of the human population — 3.7 billion people (Elliott 2018) — her claim that socialist feminists have not succeeded in making class war a priority for feminism seems undeniable. In a year when the Women's March splintered over charges of anti-Semitism and homophobia, hooks's insistence that solidarity among women will be possible only when "racial, class, and a host of other prejudices are recognized" ([1984] 2015, 44) and eliminated seems altogether prophetic.

Yet hooks's diagnosis of feminism's failure "to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture . . . and to reorganize society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism" ([1984] 2015, 26), capitalist expansion, militarism, and the white supremacist patriarchal system seems far too insular to account for the seismic transformations that have characterized the past four decades. In hooks's account, white feminist theory shoulders most of the blame for feminism's failure to create a mass base. In co-opting feminism to advance their own class interests, white bourgeois feminist thinkers have theorized sexism, family relations, education, work, male-female dynamics, power, sexuality, and social change in ways that have alienated

the masses (women and men), whose allegiance is essential to revolutionary social transformation. Where affluent white academic feminists have gotten things wrong, hooks suggests, “black women are in a unique position . . . collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, [their] overall social status lower than all others . . . the only group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor . . . to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create counter-hegemony” (16). Thus, hooks combines a standpoint claim concerning the “special vantage point of the most marginalized” (16) with the prospects for creating “a liberatory ideology that can be shared by everyone,” positioning Black feminists as organic intellectuals who theorize and mobilize guided by love for the people (164–65).

Indeed, hooks is quite right that feminist theory has much to offer when it illuminates the complex ways in which racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity are immutably connected ([1984] 2015, 53), and she is unquestionably correct in emphasizing that Black feminists were the first to theorize such an intersectional approach. But if we understand feminist theory as a form of praxis — “action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it” (114) — as hooks, following Paulo Freire, recommends, then feminist theorizing since the 1970s has been more capacious than hooks allows. And attention to more capacious modes of feminist theorizing affords more sophisticated accounts of the factors that have precluded feminist social transformation than hooks acknowledges.

The proliferation of global feminist praxis in the 1970s did not occur in a vacuum. The version of market fundamentalism consolidated in the “Washington Consensus” emerged at the same time. Birthed as a top-down policy strategy that relies on the power of nation-states and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for its materializations, neoliberalism envisioned a future and combined activism, political interventions, and policy transformations to bring that future into being (Bergeron 2006; Peterson 2003). Neoliberalism, like global feminism, sought to create profound changes in consciousness, attitudes, mentalities, and expectations on the part of institutions and agencies of governance as well as individuals in their daily lives. Over the past five decades, feminism and neoliberalism have sought to move the world in markedly different directions.

Neoliberal globalism differs most starkly from global feminism in terms of the future it seeks to produce. Global feminism in its various instantiations seeks to reduce and ultimately eliminate the complex inequities and

inequalities characteristic of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based oppression (Basu 1995; Basu 2000). Toward that end, it envisions expanded state provision to create adequate health care, education, welfare, employment, personal security, and a range of policies that redress gender- and race-based injustices. Suspicious of the continuing depredations of male-dominant states, global feminism has sought to engender states and their policies, seeking gender parity and gender quotas in elective and appointive offices, constitutional guarantees of equal citizenship, and equal protection of the law; policy changes to require gender mainstreaming; gender-impact analyses; gender-equitable budgets; and monitoring to ensure compliance with equality objectives across all policy domains. In the spheres of reproductive and domestic labor, feminist activists have sought to reduce the burden of women's triple and quadruple shifts by redistributing subsistence, care work, and community-building labor, as well as formal sector employment more equitably across genders. Global feminism envisions transformations in consciousness that would make gender-, race- and sexuality-based inequities — that permeate interpersonal relations, social organizations, economic and political structures, and symbol systems — visible, actionable, and intolerable.

Neoliberal globalism seeks to cut back the very aspects of the state that feminist activists seek to build up. Structural adjustment policies mandated by international financial institutions as a condition for loans necessitate severe funding cuts in state provision in the areas of health, education, and welfare, shifting responsibility for the private provision of these services largely onto women (Bakker and Gill 2003; Waring 1988). State strategies to produce marketization and privatization seek to winnow down the state, reducing expenditures on education and welfare, eliminating civil service positions in social welfare agencies that have been a route to economic security for many women, deregulating the corporate sector, devolving power in export processing zones to unprincipled and abusive subcontractors, and outsourcing a range of military support and domestic security operations.

Embracing the economic determinism of modernization theory, neoliberal activists within international financial institutions seek to transform women into *homo economicus* via “womenomics,” promoting the incorporation of women into the formal sector of the economy and women's entrepreneurialism as the panacea for economic development, family well-being, and profit maximization (*Economist* 2006, 2007; World Bank 2000, 2006). Toward this end, World Bank policy papers identify transformation of consciousness as a goal, and World Bank

fieldworkers are trained to cultivate “export mentality” and “market mentality” while whittling away “protest mentalities” among the poor in the global South (Bedford 2005, 2009).

Since the 1970s, activists promoting these competing visions of the future have been vying for popular allegiance, enacting systemic transformations, and permeating the consciousness of supporters and detractors alike. Yet each gain for neoliberalism has been a setback for feminism. One incontestable effect of neoliberalism has been growing inequality. Since 1975, practically all the gains in household income have gone to the top 20 percent of households. Indeed, the economic condition of the bottom 90 percent has been stagnating or declining, while the economic gains of the top 10 percent have been soaring. Oxfam (2014, 2016) suggests that neoliberalism has succeeded in redistributing the greatest wealth to the richest 1 percent. As economists celebrate “womenomics” as a panacea, the United Nations Development Programme (2013, 179) has documented that women’s attitudes are becoming more gender equitable but men’s are not.

Although the exponential growth of inequality has affected people in all regions of the world, postsocialist states have been particularly hard hit. In the countries of the former Eastern bloc, market fundamentalism after the fall of communism in 1989–91 generated massive unemployment as state-owned enterprises were privatized (Suchland 2015). The Soviet Union’s long-standing commitment to equality was hastily dispatched with the sale of public resources, which transferred wealth to the new owners of privatized companies. The wealthiest 1% of Russians — who benefited from the opaque process of privatization — now hold 71% of the nation’s wealth. Beyond the creation of massive economic inequality, marketization also engendered new modes of women’s subordination. During the Soviet era, 90% of adult women were in the labor force — one of highest percentages in the world. During the transition to capitalism, two-thirds of those laid off were women, while only 23% of those rehired were women. Women’s share of legislative seats declined from 33% in the Supreme Soviet to 5% in the Russian Duma.

As men consolidated control over the economic and political sectors, women were pushed into experiments in entrepreneurialism and the emerging civil society — both of which require registration with the state and payment of huge “taxes” on grant funds provided to cover operating expenses (Sperling 1999). Economic liberalization strengthened male elites, who used informal networks to circumscribe women’s roles in nongovernmental organizations, allowing them little room to represent

women's interests. Indeed, Janet Elise Johnson (2018) suggests that male elites have structured very narrow roles for women, ranging from “work horses” and “political cleaners” (anticorruption loyalists) to “showgirls” whose responsibility is to ornament men in power.

Neoliberalism is not alone in its efforts to undermine feminism's vision of social justice. Since the 1970s, the Vatican has joined forces with Christian, Islamic, and Jewish fundamentalists to wage a worldwide, multifront war on what it calls “gender ideology” (Case 2019, 640; Corredor 2019). The goal is to “put a stop not only to the English word ‘gender’ as it is used in legal and policy-making documents by such bodies as the United Nations and the European Union but also to those many reforms in secular law governing the sexes, sexuality, reproduction, and the family” (Case 2019, 641). This conservative coalition takes aim at feminist efforts to dismantle entrenched divisions of labor and power, challenge heteronormativity, recognize diversity of family forms and of sexual and gender expression and to provide access to new reproductive technologies, condoms, contraceptives, and abortion — in short, most of what goes under such diverse headings as sexual and reproductive rights, protections for sexual orientation and gender identity, family law reform, and the elimination of sex stereotyping” (641). In these battles, feminism is cast as extremely dangerous — a form of “ideological colonization . . . that plot[s] designs of death, that disfigure the face of man and woman, destroying creation” (Fullam 2015, cited in Case 2019, 649).

Feminists have theorized the devastating effects of neoliberal governance, economic precarity, racist populism, xenophobic nationalism, and religious attacks on “gender ideology.” Rather than gaining ground in their efforts to create a world without caste, class, ethnic, racial, gender, and geopolitical oppression, feminists devote intensive energy to preserving the fragile gains they have made (Chappell 2006). The revolution stalls, but not for want of feminist effort. These sophisticated theorizations provide an important supplement to hooks's analysis for those struggling to understand structural power in the twenty-first century.

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bell hooks: 35 Years from Margin to Center

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It would be something of an understatement to say I owe an immeasurable intellectual debt to bell hooks. Her vision of black women as central to feminist scholarship is foundational to my craft as a black feminist educator and urban ethnographer. I have no fewer than 20 of her titles in my personal library. I return time and again to bell hooks for wisdom, inspiration, clear and indisputable definitions of feminism, and pedagogical insight and technique. Since being tenured, I have devoted two freshman seminars entirely to the study of bell hooks. Without a doubt, these have been some of the most rewarding teaching experiences of my life. Both times, more than half of the enrolled have gone on to either major or minor in feminist studies! With that said, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* is among my least favorite books written by her. This may sound harsh, but allow me to explain.

I find that *From Margin to Center* is most useful for white people who desperately need to learn and unpack how racism and sexism inform both their understanding and their application of feminist theory. The first time I read the book was in 2002. I was a doctoral student taking an undergraduate class on feminist politics at Rutgers University. I was one of two black bodies in a sea of whiteness. I listened to white women refer to bell hooks as “angry,” “mean-spirited,” and “intellectually sloppy.” I watched them cry crocodile tears as they were challenged by other students and pointedly checked by my white female instructor. I watched as the other black woman student in the class called out our instructor for her patronizing tone and problematic phrasing.

That particular class was like getting a tooth pulled. I remember thinking: when we will get to the good stuff? I wanted to talk about how hooks’s definitions of feminism intersected with my own experiences and