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## Review: The Socialist Feminist Project

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**The Socialist Feminist Project: A Contemporary Reader in Theory and Politics** edited by Nancy Holmstrom. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003. 426 pp.

<http://www.monthlyreview.org/socialistfeminist.htm>

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In troubled times such as these, when many smugly claim that socialism is passé, that feminism can go only as far as liberal reformism will allow, and that theory building is hopelessly bound to a false universalism, we need a book like *The Socialist Feminism Project* to reassert that analyses of women's lives will remain superficial without a serious critique of capitalism, especially as it is manifested globally. This anthology clearly demonstrates that socialist feminism, though not univocal, has a long history and is currently alive and kicking. It promises to be a landmark in feminist theory, taking its place among such books as Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NY: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham's *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Angela Davis' *Women, Race and Class* (Random House, 1982); and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Holmstrom has selected pieces which are well written, thought provoking, and enjoyable to read. The juxtaposition of articles, most of which are quite recent, is very compelling, demonstrating the relevance and timeliness of a socialist feminist endeavor. After an interesting section on foremothers/fathers, the book begins appropriately with the concrete/personal sphere of sex, sexuality, and reproduction, moves through sections on the family, the workplace, debates about public policy, politics and social change, and ends with abstract, general considerations about standpoint epistemology, woman's nature, ecofeminism, and theories of difference.

This book will be an essential resource for those seeking clear investigations into how the multiple aspects of women's lives interpenetrate, whether one's work is in philosophy, literary studies, or social science. For example, in their commentaries on domestic violence, sex work, and women's imprisonment, Janice Haaken, Jo Bindman, Kamala Kempadoo and Angela Davis discuss how gender, race, class, nationality and sexuality interact. Wagadu readers will appreciate the attention given to international issues and movements for global solidarity. The book will be appropriate for upper level undergraduate or graduate classes.

Much attention has been given of late to "intersectionality" analysis, though many studies remain at the level of listing influences that construct people's identity rather than articulating a political theory that opens possibilities for alliances and genuine social change. In this light, Johanna Brenner offers a Marxist theory of intersectionality that goes beyond analyzing identity

“at the level of social location, a ‘place’ defined by . . . intersecting axes of domination” that construct a person’s experience. She argues, “Due account must be taken of class difference within racial/ethnic groups as well as class similarities across racial/ethnic divides as a route toward delineating the potential common ground for a working-class women’s politics and for a feminist politics of class” (336). Micaela Di Leonardo and Roger Lancaster critique the development of identity essentialism in feminism and gay/lesbian studies and the countermove in postmodern theory which extends “the denial of stable core sexual identities to the denial of any identities at all, and of the reality of the material world to boot.” They urge the left to avoid “rudderless idealism that denies our human embodiment in ongoing political economy” (61).

In the US context during the 1970’s, socialist feminism emerged among those who sought revolutionary social change because of the theoretical and strategic inadequacies of liberal individualism and radical feminism. The former could not grasp the collective nature of gender oppression and the latter lumped all men together as the enemy and failed to theorize how significantly class structured women’s experience. Marxism, though revolutionary, seemed insufficient as well. This stance was due to an unfortunate economic determinist interpretation of Marx, which lead people to assume that his method made gender invisible due to its sole focus on class.

Holmstrom’s goal is not to consolidate the many voices of socialist feminism into one voice, but to provide material for debate and dialogue. “[T]here was and remains a lack of clarity, and disagreement as to exactly how different forms of oppression are related” (6). However, “all socialist-feminists see class as central to women’s lives, yet at the same time none would reduce sex or race oppression to economic exploitation. And all of us see these aspects of our lives as inseparably and systematically related; in other words, class is always gendered and raced . . .” This perspective provides unity and gives socialist feminists a “common project” (2).

The Socialist Feminism Project is timely for many reasons. One is that it has become abundantly obvious that Marx was right to say that capitalism draws all the world’s people into its incessant drive for wealth. Internationally, women’s traditional ways of life have been trampled, and they are especially hard hit when social services are cut back to pay off their country’s debts. This book’s readings enable us to understand how the accumulation of capital creeps into every interstice of our lives, even the most intimate ones. Dorothy Allison’s contribution, for example, argues that class constructs sexual practice. Judith Stacey links international capitalism to the instability of marriage and the prevalence of female-centered kin networks while Temma Kaplan shows why fatherless families are becoming a global norm.

This anthology also demonstrates that the struggle for women’s freedom entails the struggle for socialism and the creation of solidarity across gender, race, class and national boundaries. Citing Marx and Engels, Holmstrom sees socialism as a democratic form of life created through working class struggle and self-liberation. It would be “rule of the immense majority,” where “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” (4). Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that Third World women’s struggles against transnational capital resist the co-optation of their bodies, labor and psyches in ways that can inspire new forms of organizing work and everyday life. Rosalind P. Petchesky shows that reproductive rights cannot be achieved within a free trade agenda.

The Socialist Feminism Project will also be useful for those who want to consider standpoint epistemology and the methodological issue of how socialist feminism avoids reductionism. Nancy Hartsock offers a reformulation of her theory of situated knowledges “in the spirit of attempting to develop theoretical bases for coalitions” (354). Meera Nanda challenges us to examine the class and caste oppression that some ideological uses of standpoint theories ignore. She worries that “treating rationality and knowledge as completely constructed by culture puts culture beyond a reasoned critique” (400) and may support reactionary forms of nationalism (403).

Many other methodological and theoretical issues are addressed in the book, for example in the articles by Ellen Meiksins Wood, Ann Ferguson, and Nancy Holmstrom. Wood stresses paradox and contradiction: “The strategic implications are that struggles conceived in purely extra-economic terms – as purely against racism or gender oppression for example – are not in themselves fatally dangerous to capitalism, that they could succeed without dismantling the capitalist system but that, at the same time, they are probably unlikely to succeed if they remain detached from an anti-capitalist struggle” (281). Wood’s approach can be contrasted with Ann Ferguson’s who claims, “The sexual division of wage labor, sexual harassment in the workplace, male decision-making and female obedience roles, and high-status male work versus low-status female work are all specific aspects of the capitalist production process which are its sex/affective production component” (129). In addition, Holmstrom theorizes that the limiting social conditions of the sexual/social division of labor tend to cause men and women to have different natures, but that this sex-differentiated nature is inconsistent with the vision of genuine human freedom to be found in socialism/communism (367).

In short, The Socialist Feminist Project addresses virtually all the themes mentioned in the call for Wagadu’s “Feminists Confront Empire.” And the anthology convincingly promotes socialist feminism as a theory, which “coherently and systematically” addresses the connections among gender, sex, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality in ways that can build a revolutionary global alliance among oppressed people in the struggle for genuine human freedom.