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Contra Fraser on Feminism and Neoliberalism

NANETTE FUNK

This article is a critical examination of Nancy Fraser’s contrast of early second-wave feminism and contemporary global feminism in “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” (Fraser 2009). Fraser contrasts emancipatory early second-wave feminism, strongly critical of capitalism, with feminism in the age of neoliberalism as being in a “dangerous liaison” with neoliberalism. I argue that Fraser’s historical account of 1970s mainstream second-wave feminism is inaccurate, that it was not generally anti-capitalist, critical of the welfare system, or challenging the priority of paid labor. I claim Fraser mistakenly takes a minority feminist position as mainstream. I further argue that Fraser’s account of feminism today echoes arguments from James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer (2001) to Hester Eisenstein (2009), but such arguments ignore contemporary feminist minority positions. I challenge Fraser’s arguments that feminism legitimates neoliberalism to women, that women’s NGOs are simply service-providers enabling the state to withdraw services, and that criticisms of microcredit lending programs can be generalized into criticisms of women’s feminism and women’s NGOs today. I argue that these claims are vast over-generalizations and ignore countertrends. I give empirical evidence to support my objections by considering women’s activities in post-communist European countries, which Fraser discusses.

In the past ten years there has been a spate of criticism of second-wave feminism, including by those on the left. Recently Nancy Fraser in “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History” (Fraser 2009) offered a critical account of past and present second-wave feminism, at once historical and analytic, with a proposal for its future. This account echoes Hester Eisenstein’s recent arguments (Eisenstein 2009) and much earlier arguments by James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer (2001), among others.

I challenge Fraser’s invidious comparison of contemporary feminism with early second-wave feminism, on both analytic and empirical grounds. Her account of early second-wave feminism as fundamentally anti-capitalist is inaccurate, and confuses a minority movement within early second-wave feminism with the movement writ large. Fraser’s reasons for claiming that contemporary feminism promotes neoliberalism
are also unconvincing. I buttress my analytic arguments with empirical cases of women’s organizations in post-communist countries in Europe.

Fraser’s account, as illustrative of many similar criticisms, deserves our attention. Fraser argues that as neoliberalism transformed capitalism, it also transformed feminism from a critic of state-based Keynesian capitalism to a provider of legitimation and resources for transnational neoliberalism. Feminism, she argues, now has to regain its status as an emancipatory movement with a “transformative project” (Fraser 2009, 107) and as a critique of capitalism.

I have problems with Fraser’s account of early second-wave feminism as well as her account of contemporary feminism. I argue that the former is too laudatory, whereas the latter is too negative. Fraser also fails to provide sufficient evidence to support her criticisms of the latter in face of evidence to the contrary.

**FRASER’S ACCOUNT OF EARLY SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM**

Fraser argues that early second-wave feminism offered a critique of four aspects of state-based capitalism: its “economism,” “androcentrism,” “etatism,” and “Westphalianism.” Mid-twentieth-century “state-based” Keynesian capitalism was economistic, Fraser claims, in addressing class- but not gender-based distributive injustices. Early second-wave feminism challenged this economism of state-based capitalism (Fraser 2009, 106).

But Fraser’s categorization of twentieth-century capitalism as economistic departs from the traditional meaning of that term. “Economism” is the reduction of all problems, including gender and racial injustices, to economic issues. Thus orthodox Marxism was considered by some second-wave socialist feminists to be economistic for presuming a purely economic solution to women’s oppression. If mid-twentieth-century capitalism was economistic, as Fraser claims, this would imply that after World War II it was committed to redressing unjust gender and race relations by economic means. But whereas orthodox Marxism and mid-century state communism did address gender injustices, but offered an inadequate, purely economic solution to those injustices—incorporating women into the paid labor force—U.S. Keynesian capitalism simply ignored the problem of gender injustice altogether, as Fraser recognizes. However, ignoring gender injustice is not economism. As is well known, U.S. capitalism after World War II opted for a “back to the home” movement for white women in the United States, presuming a gender ideology that claimed white women would be happy to be back at home with family and children. The prevalent ideology was that this was just, ignoring the racial injustice of black women and men in low-paid jobs. Keynesianism primarily served to stabilize and placate—to stabilize postwar capitalism and placate unemployed white men by displacing white women who had done paid work during wartime. This policy placated the strongest and most organized parts of labor and even depicted white-male unemployment as a form of class injustice that Keynesianism could erase. Keynesianism assumed an economic solution to all grave injustices of capitalism, but gender injustice was not among them.
Therefore Fraser’s claim is mistaken that U.S. state capitalism was economistic in the ordinary sense of the term, and that early second-wave feminism challenged capitalism’s economism. Fraser’s mistaken use of this term leads her to later draw a mistaken conclusion that this same anti-economism of early second-wave feminism was transformed in the twenty-first century into support for neoliberalism.

Second, it is mistaken to claim that second-wave feminism offered a systemic criticism of state capitalism. The dominant form of mid-century second-wave feminism was liberal feminism that criticized the state, but focused on changing policies and laws, and modifying, but not fundamentally criticizing, capitalism. Women’s right to abortion and anti-discrimination laws were major issues for second-wave feminism, but these were criticisms of the state and its laws, and such changes were not generally considered incompatible with a robust capitalism. Liberal feminism did not consider these injustices as rooted in the core of capitalism. In addition, much early second-wave radical feminism criticized gender relations in the family and private sphere, including domestic violence, not the fundamental nature of the political economy. Marxist and socialist feminists did criticize capitalism for what were considered its core features, but this was a minority position within early second-wave feminism and in no way characterized second-wave feminism generally. Fraser therefore over-generalizes from a minority position within mid-century second-wave feminism to mid-century second-wave feminism as such.

This same overstatement of the prevalence of Marxist and socialist feminism in second-wave feminism appears in Fraser’s account that second-wave feminism criticized the “androcentrism” and “etatism” of state-based capitalism and the political economy. “Etatism” is a term for extensive state control, direction, and intervention in a country’s economy. Using categories she had earlier adopted, Fraser interprets early second-wave feminism as having challenged capitalism on grounds of distributive injustice, failure of recognition, and representation (Fraser 2009, 104). By “representation” Fraser means the representation of an issue, that is, the descriptive, normative, and sociopolitical understanding of social, political, and economic issues, what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink call “framing” (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Fraser argues that early second-wave feminism criticized the androcentrism of capitalism for “decentering,” that is, ignoring the central role of the gendered division of labor in capitalism. The latter ignored the economic value of women’s unpaid care work and valorized paid work, and focused instead on the male worker and presumed a male head of household working for a family wage. The claim is made that early second-wave feminism also criticized the androcentrism of a welfare system that deemed the absence of a man in the home as a prerequisite for receiving welfare benefits. Feminism, Fraser further claims, criticized the “etatism” of the welfare system, that is, the way the welfare system looked to the state both to determine women’s needs and to heavily police and monitor the families of those on welfare (Fraser 2009, 105). Early second-wave feminism, she claims, thereby showed that women’s subordination was “grounded in the deep structure” of a top-down, Fordist, production-based, capitalist political economy. Such a system relied on just such hierarchical oversight by a managerial elite to maximize efficiency, output, and profit in the case of
assembly-line work. Second-wave feminism claimed that this capitalist political economy was also based on a gendered division of labor that was presumed to be “natural,” and that led to distributive injustices. Feminists, according to Fraser, also criticized this “bureaucratic–managerial ethos of state organized capitalism in which citizens were treated as clients, consumers” (Fraser 2009, 105). Fraser thus presents early second-wave feminism as challenging the basic structure of capitalism.

But, contrary to Fraser, such a criticism of the welfare system neither entailed nor presupposed a broad-based criticism of a hierarchically production-based capitalism, and feminists did not generally claim to be making such a fundamental criticism of “state organized capitalism.” To assume otherwise is to over-generalize from socialist feminism and the welfare rights movement to early second-wave feminism generally. Second-wave feminism did generally criticize the androcentrism of capitalism on various grounds: for not providing white, middle-class women a choice as to whether to enter the paid work force; for presupposing that it was “natural” for women to stay in the home; for men having better pay, higher paying jobs, and more powerful positions. But the self-understanding of mainstream liberal feminism was that the needed corrections could be made within capitalism. Liberal feminism, the overwhelming majority of the movement, held that the gendered division of labor could be transformed by legislation, such as anti-discrimination and harassment laws and mechanisms for their enforcement. In addition, the mainstream feminist movement often focused on gender relations in the private sphere and unequal decision-making in the home; domestic violence, harassment and rape; women’s voices not being heard; and discrimination in education and employment. It was only socialist feminists, including Ann Ferguson, Nancy Folbre, Maria Rosa della Costa, and Joan Tronto, among others, who linked criticism of androcentrism to criticism of the fundamental nature of mid-twentieth-century capitalism. It was only socialist feminists who addressed the concatenation of paid work, the gendered division of labor, the welfare system, and the privileged position of paid labor. Within this minority position only some made further, stronger claims that care work should be recognized as work and should be paid, or even further, that paid work should not have the privileged normative position it had under capitalism, and that adequately paid care work was incompatible with capitalism. Fraser speaks as though these positions were held by second-wave feminism generally, which was not the case. Most second-wave feminists who did discuss care work argued for a redistribution of care work and gender hierarchy in the home, rather than that care work should be paid. It is not obvious that the former set of demands challenges the deep structure of capitalism, and Fraser provides no argument that they do. Even pay for care work in itself does not challenge capitalism if it is privatized, that is, if individual families that can afford to do so hire a care worker.

Even the welfare-rights movement, with its limited criticism of “statism,” that is, state surveillance of the family and state determination of women’s needs, was a small part of the early second-wave feminist movement, since most liberal feminists did not challenge the welfare system or stress the economic. This is not to deny the importance of the welfare-rights movement but to deny that one can generalize from its
claims to the position of the early second-wave women’s movement generally. The welfare-rights movement also did not generally have the self-understanding that Fraser attributes to it. It did not view its demands as constituting a challenge to capitalism’s deep structure, and it did not extend its criticisms to hierarchical structures and Fordist capitalism more generally. Although Fraser herself may have considered the criticisms made by the welfare-rights movement as inextricable from a broader criticism of capitalism, the welfare-rights movement itself did not make such a claim. Liberal feminism certainly did not challenge etatism generally, that is, it did not challenge state direction of the market and the workplace.

Finally, Fraser claims that early second-wave feminism was ambivalent regarding the nation-state and “Westphalianism,” the system of nation-state sovereignty codified by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This agreement ended the Thirty Years War of 1618–48 in Germany, which involved many of the then European powers. It established the recognition of nation-state borders and national sovereignty over territory. Prior to that there had been an overlapping authority of religious and political powers in any given territory.

Surprisingly, the structure of this argument contravenes Fraser’s earlier reasoning. Her account of the feminist challenge to capitalism’s economism and androcentrism generalized from minority movements within second-wave feminism to second-wave feminism writ large. But here Fraser does not generalize from minority feminist criticism of “Westphalianism” to early second-wave feminism more generally. Strikingly, she here downgrades such positions challenging Westphalianism, that is, nation-state sovereignty, to merely reflecting an “ambiguity” within early second-wave feminism. Fraser cannot have it both ways. If she generalizes from a minority position in earlier arguments, then consistency requires her to do the same here. Fraser’s failure to do so enables her to draw a strong contrast between early second-wave and contemporary feminism. Yet feminist advocacy of a “non-Westphalian” position was already strong in the 1960s. It had already led to the transnational norms embodied in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1967, and the International Women’s World Conference in Mexico City in 1975. The last conference advocated effective procedures to eliminate discrimination against women, a demand that finally led to the transnational Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, ratified in 1981. All of these principles and practices go beyond a focus on the nation-state and domestic gender injustice, as did some second-wave socialist feminists’ transnational solidarity struggles with women in Nicaragua, Vietnam, and elsewhere in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. It is not surprising that a movement that claimed that “sisterhood is global” would propose international principles of gender justice and not only state-based gender principles.

In the 1970s and 1980s feminists such as Esther Boserup (1970), Irene Tinker and Michelle Bo Branssen (1976), and Perdita Huston (1979) also focused on the exclusion of women from development programs. Women in Development (WID) criticized development programs in the early 1970s for bypassing women or treating them only as mothers. They argued that poverty reduction, often a goal of Western-based
development programs for Africa, Asia, and Latin America, could be effectively addressed only if women’s economic position was improved, again a transnational norm adopted by the UN. Lourdes Beneria and Gita Sen (1997), Chandra Mohanty (1997), and others in turn criticized Boserup’s account for not going far enough, accepting existing political and economic structures, and having a Western perspective on development. In the second half of the 1970s, Women and Development (WAD) extended the WID criticism, arguing that development programs actually increased structures of inequality (Visvanathan 1997, 18). In the 1980s, Gender and Development (GAD) further argued for the transnational principle that gender, gender relations, and power, not women, should be the primary category of analysis in which gender roles and power relations were examined, criticized, and changed (Goetz 1997; Young 1997). Women, it was further argued, needed to be “empowered,” that is, they should not remain objects of policy, but should become subjects transnationally, determining policy. My claim is not that these positions were representative of second-wave feminism generally, but that Fraser’s arguments are inconsistent.

Thus there are serious problems in Fraser’s account that mid-twentieth-century second-wave feminism was not ambiguous, but challenged “the deep structure of capitalism,” its “economism,” “etatism,” and androcentrism, but was at best only ambiguous regarding state sovereignty (Westphalianism). Her non-standard use of the term “economism” enables her to draw inappropriate contrasts between early second-wave feminisms and contemporary feminisms. Fraser’s analysis also falsely suggests that socialist feminism was a dominant form of early second-wave feminism, which it was not from the 1960s through the early 1980s.

That Was Then But Now…

Fraser’s idiosyncratic interpretation of second-wave feminism becomes a set-up for a false contrast with a co-opted contemporary feminism. Fraser’s historical account, in effect, contrasts the largely good old days—early second-wave feminism—with now, in which global feminism is found to be wanting, having at best a much more ambiguous position, perhaps in bed with or in some other “dangerous liaison” (Fraser 2009, 114) with neoliberal capitalism. This latter accusation repeats criticisms made by many over the last ten years, including the earliest and most influential authors Sonia Alvarez (1999), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer (2001), Kristin Ghodsee (2004), Julie Hemment (2004), Joan Roelofs (2007), and many others. Such criticisms include what I have elsewhere referred to as the “ideological” or “imperialist” criticism of women’s NGOs. One of the most recent such accounts is Hester Eisenstein’s in Feminism Seduced (Eisenstein 2009, 162–63). Fraser is certainly right that there have been changes in feminism, but Fraser’s, as well as Eisenstein’s, charges about the relationship between early twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism and feminism are frustratingly vague or overstated.

Fraser and Eisenstein rightly criticize neoliberalism for bringing deregulation, privatization, and reduction of taxation for the wealthy; for advocating a trickle-down
economic theory, causing a reduction of the welfare state; and arguing for the “lean mean competition state.” Instead of recognizing citizens’ rights to social benefits, that is, “social citizenship” (Fraser 2009, 107), neoliberalism has emphasized individualism, self-reliance, and responsibility for oneself.

Fraser, along with Eisenstein, makes several claims designed to show connections between neoliberalism and contemporary feminism. (1) Fraser states that throughout the world, including in “East/Central Europe” (Fraser 2009, 107), second-wave feminism “thrived in these new conditions [of neoliberalism] … feminist ideas found their way into every nook and cranny of social life” (Fraser 2009, 108).

This claim asserts, so far, a one-sided affinity whereby neoliberalism fostered feminism. This echoes Eisenstein’s claim that “the era of SAPs has also been the era of the NGO” and a veritable industry of gender experts (Eisenstein 2009, 161).

But it is rather strange to claim that feminism “thrived” under neoliberalism, whether in the United States or elsewhere. In the United States in the 1990s the backlash against feminism was intense, and feminism was weakened rather than strengthened. Susan Faludi’s Backlash documents this development (Faludi 1991). Feminist concerns did seep into the “nooks and crannies” of U.S. society, but these concerns began well before the entrenchment of neoliberalism, starting in the 1970s. In fact in the 1990s and later, feminism became a “dirty word,” a label rejected by many younger women. This was also true in east and central Europe and the former Soviet Union since the 1990s, where feminism did not become widespread and popular. To the contrary, here as elsewhere in the world, feminism was even derided and condemned for many years, as it had been under state socialism. There was development aid for women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide, but this hardly counts as the “thriving” of feminism. In post-communist European countries this aid was strong for about eight years in the 1990s and seriously reduced by 2000; even at its height, support to women’s NGOs was never more than a small percentage of donor support for NGOs or civil society in the region. Feminism certainly did not seep into the “nooks and crannies” of daily life, the workplace, or parliaments in this region, where women’s membership in newly constituted parliaments remained quite low. Previously the socialist state had quotas of 30% women in parliaments, although these bodies were relatively powerless. Therefore, in short, Fraser’s claim cannot be regarded as true.

(2) Fraser further states that second-wave feminism has unwittingly provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism (Fraser 2009, 110; my italics).

Contrary to the earlier claim (1), this second claim asserts that feminism also benefited neoliberalism. Fraser suggests that feminist claims and actions became “resignified,” that is, took on a different meaning in the changed context of neoliberalism. To speak of feminism as a “key ingredient” suggests that feminism was essential to neoliberalism, which would not have otherwise been successful. But such a strong claim would be implausible, and no arguments are provided for it. However, Fraser’s claim may be the weaker claim that feminism was very useful to neoliberalism. Eisenstein makes a much weaker claim in stating that “the ideology of twenty-first century feminism lends itself to the principles behind globalization” (Eisenstein 2009, 39; my italics).
Assuming both claims (1) and (2) are true, Fraser continues and rhetorically asks (3): “Was it mere coincidence that second-wave feminism and neoliberalism prospered in tandem? Or was there some perverse, subterranean elective affinity between them?” (Fraser 2009, 108).

In contrast to the first two claims, this last claim (3) is not asserted but only “suggested” (Fraser 2009, 114). However, given Fraser's argument, this suggestion is a red herring. As already shown, it is not in fact true that feminism prospered in tandem with neoliberalism, and therefore the answer to her question must be, “no there wasn't.” However, even without an “elective affinity” between the two, it may still be true that feminism was a “key ingredient” of neoliberalism, and many of Fraser's examples actually purport to support such a claim. These will be examined below.

Fraser's claim (3) is her Weberian reformulation of some oft-made criticisms of second-wave feminism. In speaking of “elective affinities,” Fraser adopts Weber's very vexed, contested, and ambiguous term, originally used by Goethe for the title of his novel of the same name (Goethe 1809/1971). Goethe's term was a chemical metaphor for purportedly freely chosen love relationships that he regarded as more like unavoidable, chemical attractions or affinities between persons, binding them to each other. Weber then used this term to characterize the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Given the confusions surrounding the term elective affinity, which are not elucidated in this text, it is not very useful to couch the argument in such vague but suggestive terms.

Fraser's claim that feminism is a “key ingredient” of neoliberalism is a necessary condition for her problematic claim of an “elective affinity” between the two, but also an important claim in its own right. Many of Fraser's arguments are, in fact, arguments for feminism as having become part of the spirit of neoliberalism. The most plausible interpretation of such a claim is that feminism provided support for neoliberalism. Fraser echoes claims about feminism that have been made by many, including Eisenstein as well as Petras and Veltmeyer. Fraser's grounds for this claim are threefold:

1. Feminism as Legitimation of Neoliberalism. The claim is that in the early twenty-first century, feminist demands for women's autonomy and fulfillment, and the related need for women to have paid employment, created women's “romance” with neoliberalism. It legitimated to women their entry into paid neoliberal employment worldwide.

   Our critique of the family wage now supplies a good part of the romance that invests flexible capitalism with a higher meaning and a moral point. Endowing their daily struggles with an ethical meaning, the feminist romance attracts women at both ends of the social spectrum. (Fraser 2009, 110–11)

According to this argument feminism enabled neoliberalism to tap a reserve army of women, employing them in low-paid jobs in Walmarts and export manufacturing
zones. Profitable microcredit lending programs, sometimes charging high interest rates for small loans, were also thereby able to find many poor women in the developing world ready and eager to become autonomous by becoming small business owners.

Feminist critiques of the state and demands for women’s empowerment purportedly thereby legitimated “marketization and state retrenchment” (Fraser 2009, 112), that is, the rise of a leaner, meaner neoliberal state. In England, feminist critiques of welfare-state paternalism (“etatism”) purportedly legitimated Thatcher’s conservative attack on the “nanny state” (111) and its dismantling. Feminist arguments became a legitimation for eroding state employment policies and their replacement by microcredit lending programs (111). In the developing world, feminist critiques of the state along with “feminist values of empowerment and participation from below” (111) were supposedly transformed into support for NGOs and their microcredit lending activities.

2. NGOs as Service Providers and Promoters of Microcredit Lending Programs. NGOs purportedly took over “a wide range” of former state services and engaged in microcredit lending practices, leading to the creation of neoliberal minimal states. Eisenstein at one point makes a weaker claim, arguing only that support for NGOs was “a tacit acknowledgement” that state welfare services in developing states would not continue (Eisenstein 2009, 163). Fraser, Eisenstein, and Joanna Brenner (Brenner 2003), among many others, rightly criticize microcredit lending programs as a blatant form of marketization and a substitute for state policies to deal with economic injustices.

3. Depoliticization of Women’s Movements. The “NGO-ification of feminist politics” is said to have reduced strong criticism of capitalism, making NGO activists beholden to their neoliberal funders and their agendas, taming them and removing them from connection to grassroots groups. Twenty-first-century feminism’s “anti-economist” focus on cultural theory, that is, identity politics, supposedly supplanted criticisms of gender-based distributive injustices of capitalism with demands for recognition (Fraser 2009, 108). In the EU “the absence of genuinely transnational, Europe-wide women’s movements” led to women’s groups “dovetailing in some respects with the administrative needs of a new form of capitalism” (113). Twenty-first-century feminists focused only on their own state (“Westphalianism”), on reproductive rights, and on violence against women. Consequently, they effectively scaled down anti-capitalist criticisms of women’s unemployment, “privileging recognition over redistribution.”

(Re: 1) Feminist Romance and Legitimation of Neoliberalism

But there is a difference between feminism legitimating or providing the “spirit” of neoliberalism and neoliberal exploitation of the partial realization of feminist demands. In the United States it is the latter, in that the presence of many women already in the paid labor force since the 1970s, due in part to the women’s movement and the concomitant capitalist elimination of the family wage, provided the material
conditions of a steady supply of low-wage women employees. It is also true that huge numbers of women in developing countries acceded to neoliberalism’s and “flexible capitalism’s” agenda, taking part-time, low-paid, and/or insecure paid jobs in terrible conditions in maquiladoras, or accepting microcredit loans to establish small businesses. But these women largely did not do so because of legitimation by feminist arguments for women’s personal fulfillment and autonomy, but out of a traditional sense of their moral duty and responsibility to care for their families in the face of neoliberal elimination of their traditional ways of doing so. Neoliberal IMF structural adjustment programs (SAPs) wiped out women’s work as the majority of subsistence farmers, leaving few options other than going to cities for paid “Mcjobs” in factories and maquiladoras, taking microcredit loans, entering prostitution, doing reproductive labor for first-world women, or marrying first-world men.

Nor was it feminism or neoliberal appropriation of feminist principles that legitimated to women their becoming sex or reproductive workers, as Fraser claims (Fraser 2009, 110), but coercion, a moral sense of their duty and their concern for their children.

In post-communist European countries there was no “romance” with paid employment at all, and the extensive turn to prostitution was not out of a feminist “romance” with paid employment, but due to the absence of viable alternatives! The state-socialist need for women in paid employment and the communist ideology after World War II in east and central Europe and since the revolution of 1917 in the Soviet Union meant women’s full-time paid employment had been the norm for forty to seventy years. Feminist claims of the virtues of paid employment had no purchase there. If anything, there existed an aversion to feminism, rather than an appropriation of it. Too many years of the triple burden led many women after 1989 to initially want to return completely to the home or to work only part-time, that is, to accept “flexible capitalism.” Fraser’s arguments thus once again overgeneralize about feminism’s impact worldwide, failing to distinguish between regions and to respect cultural and political particularities. If a general claim is not true about some particular “geographical slice,” then it is falsified (Fraser 2009, 97). Exceptions to her generalization are not only to be found in the former “second world” but in other regions as well. Fraser’s argument neglects the fact that although feminists may have sometimes made calculated strategic compromises with neoliberalism, weighing the costs and benefits, this was not equivalent to legitimating neoliberalism; some feminists in fact explicitly challenged neoliberalism.

It is true that some feminist intellectuals, including those in developing countries, argued that women’s employment in Walmarts, export processing zones, and maquiladoras gave rural and poor urban women opportunities to break out of traditional gender roles, freedom from patriarchal families, and higher status within the family. In societies forcibly changed from non-monetary to monetary economies, what gave one status had changed. But these were feminist accounts to explain to women in the “global North” the impact of such employment on women, so that they would avoid simplistic criticisms of such employment and instead take into account the benefits to women, as well as the harm, of such employment. But explanations and
legitimation, that is, normative justification, are not the same. These accounts were not legitimations of such employment or justification of low-wage, unstable jobs under extremely poor work conditions. Neoliberals, as opposed to feminists, may have co-opted feminist arguments in an attempt to legitimate to the world at large their exploitative employment of women and use of women as targets of microlending programs, but, as stated above, it is not such arguments that legitimated paid employment to women workers themselves.

There is also a difference between legitimation and cooptation. Neoliberalism exploited, distorted, and coopted feminist arguments, as capitalism has long done with progressive movements it is unable to defeat, justifying microcredit loans as empowering women to start their own small businesses. Such cynical arguments are not evidence of a “romance” or “elective affinity” between feminism and militarism, capitalism, or neoliberalism. Weber did not mean that it was a cynical, unwarranted cooptation of Protestantism and the Calvinist notion of a “calling” that made them the spirit of capitalism. Cynical, unsound arguments relying on a purported commitment to feminist premises, belied in action, conjoined with false empirical claims, or invalidly drawn conclusions from those premises, thereby fail to legitimate neoliberalism. Microcredit loans did not empower women, and there were no good grounds to expect that they would. Instead, such loans led some women, as well as men, to become pulled ever deeper into a spiral of debt and multiple loans, leading some to suicide.

Microcredit lending programs did serve neoliberalism by making women responsible for their own economic well-being, relieving the state of its responsibility to address poverty and unemployment. But microcredit programs are particularly problematic and do not justify the general conclusion that the feminist demand for women’s empowerment, women’s NGOs, and global feminism legitimated neoliberalism. Although some feminists supported microcredit lending programs, and in doing so legitimated neoliberalism, many others did not, and even strongly criticized those programs, denying that they empowered women. Microcredit lending programs were also not equally widespread in all regions. In post-communist European countries, microcredit loans were not common, appearing more in Bosnia than elsewhere in this region. Such loans were more common in other regions than in post-communist areas. Many feminists in post-communist regions, as in other regions, also criticized those programs.

Equally important, justified criticisms of microcredit lending programs cannot be generalized into overall criticism of women’s NGOs. NGOs did not generally work like microcredit lending programs; most women’s NGOs did not provide or receive microcredit loans. The lion’s share of such lending came to be provided by banks and other profit-making organizations charging usurious rates of interest (MacFarquhar 2010; Polgreen and Bajaj 2010; Bajaj 2011).

Further, contrary to Fraser’s argument, Thatcher’s criticism of the “nanny state” in England was not a “resignification” of feminist criticisms but a traditional androcentric argument. Identifying the state as doing what women have traditionally done—caring for citizens—by providing childcare, health care, senior services, and maternity
and unemployment benefits enabled conservatives to demean and devalue the state and those policies, just as activities coded as women’s have long been demeaned. In other words, from a conservative perspective, the “femininity” of the state was grounds to criticize it. Thus, it is an anti-feminist, not a feminist-based, anti-state critique that legitimated conservative criticism of the welfare state.

(RE: 2) DISMANTLING THE STATE

Nor was the direction of development aid away from states and toward NGOs legitimated by feminist criticisms of the state, but by donor- and aid-community criticisms of the developing state. In the 1970s, the aid community developed an overly optimistic “enthusiasm for NGOs,” arguing that NGOs were more transparent, less corrupt, less likely to pocket the money, and more able to reach the poor than was the developing state. Feminists argued on grounds of equality and justice, not based on criticisms of the state, that if international donors funded NGOs instead of states, they should also fund women’s NGOs. Feminists also argued on instrumentalist grounds, not on a critique of the state, that donors could not reduce poverty without targeting women. There were feminist critiques of the state as male-dominated and of some development aid to states as actually harmful to women, but these were arguments for women’s empowerment and greater participation of women, both in the state and in NGOs, not arguments for the reduction of aid to states.

Equally important, claims that twenty-first-century feminist support for women’s NGOs promotes neoliberalism assume that women’s NGOs: help to reduce state-provided services or do not challenge reduction of services (Schild 1998; Hanlon 2000; Hemment 2007; Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2009); depoliticize radical local women’s groups that criticized capitalism and neoliberalism (Hanlon 2000; Ghodsee 2004; Rojas-Durazo, 2007; Hemment 2007; Eisenstein 2009); skew local women’s agendas toward neoliberal donors’ agendas; and provide alternative employment to take up the slack, enabling “the virtual disappearance of formal sector employment” (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001, 128–30,132–33; Hemment 2004; Eisenstein 2009, 163). One problem with all of these assumptions is that they once again over-generalize from some women’s NGOs to women’s NGOs generally, either in a given country, region, or globally. Though some women’s NGOs promoted neoliberal agendas in post-communist European countries, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, some had no impact one way or the other on neoliberalism, whereas other women’s NGOs undermined neoliberalism. The latter addressed harms and injustices to women without reducing services or supporting neoliberalism, while others did not remain silent in face of neoliberal withdrawal of state services. Many women’s NGOs provided new services that formerly had never been provided by the state, or the NGO’s service-providing activity was minimal and not their primary work. At least thirty or forty women’s NGOs in the former Soviet bloc urged state provision of services. Some states initiated services only because women’s NGOs first created those services and then urged the state to provide such services, such as services for female victims of violence and
domestic violence. Women’s NGOs also initiated public awareness of the issue, and were partially effective in changing consciousness, for example, in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, Poland, Russia, and elsewhere. Although NGOs advocating for more state services may not have been the majority of women’s NGOs, such women’s NGOs may have been the most active and effective in that region. Explicitly feminist and nonfeminist women’s NGOs engaged in many other non-service-providing activities, including creating women’s studies programs, women’s centers, and women’s magazines; working for new legislation; and blocking regressive legislation. Some Western funders, in east, south, and central Europe, such as the German Green Party’s Heinrich Boell Foundation, one of the major funders in this region, even refused to fund service NGOs. In Poland in the 1990s the Boell Foundation was unwilling to support a women’s NGO providing legal services for women facing discrimination in employment, rather than working solely to change laws on gender discrimination in employment, although the NGO was in fact doing both.

Would it have been better if the state did it all? Maybe, but such a maximalist position was not realistic under conditions of state-formation, no state at all, or a very weak or over-burdened state. Devastating war and immediate urgent situations in east, south, and central Europe and the former Soviet Union demanded immediate relief, such as for women raped in war in the 1990s in the successor states of Yugoslavia. Other women’s NGOs, such as NaNe in Hungary, initially did not want state provision of domestic violence services because state-provided safe houses were perfunctory and did not serve women well; NaNe knew they did not have the power to change that practice.

Thus it is an over-simplification to claim that women’s NGOs and women’s support for NGOs led to or legitimated neoliberalism by legitimating and enabling either state reduction of services or state failure to institute such services. Those NGOs that did substitute for state services in post-communist Europe were often state-based, “quasi NGOs” as in the former Soviet Union, where such NGOs were not legitimated by feminist norms, but by past Soviet practices, with its semi-state women’s organizations. Feminist support of women’s NGOs did sometimes and in some ways lend itself to neoliberal interests, but women’s NGOs and feminist principles also countered neoliberalism. In the face of these sorts of examples, a critic of contemporary feminism needs evidence that on balance, either globally, or within a given state or region, support for neoliberalism outweighed the opposite impact of women’s NGOs. It is more plausible to make the much weaker claim that women’s NGOs are not inherently anti-neoliberal, with which I agree. Moreover, even if only a minority of women’s NGOs opposed neoliberalism, that is, today’s form of capitalism, this would not differ from mainstream early second-wave feminism, of which only a minority was fundamentally anti-capitalist.

Overstatement of the support feminist principles and activities provide neoliberalism is also evident in Eisenstein’s claims that women’s NGOs, in providing employment, contributed to the “virtual disappearance” of formal sector employment. In post-communist Europe, only a very small percentage of unemployed women found employment in women’s NGOs, mainly highly educated women, and only a few of
them, and generally these jobs did not last. In some states such as the former German Democratic Republic, women were initially hardest hit by the collapse of the state or were displaced by men from what had been predominantly women’s jobs, as in the banking sector or as economists, and some provision for them was necessary. In European post-communist regions the state is still the largest employer, even after the introduction of women’s NGOs in the 1990s. The loss of state employment was much more a result of war, state dissolution, and its replacement by ethnically defined states, as in the former Yugoslavia, than a result of feminist legitimation and women’s NGO activity.

Other women’s NGOs, although they may have promoted neoliberalism, did so only minimally whereas their contribution to gender justice was much more significant, especially in the long run. Thus, NGO members learned business methods, which in some instances was their only contribution to instilling neoliberal capitalism, but they also established women's journals and centers, providing the major or sole access to such literature in their city or country; on balance their contribution to neoliberalism was negligible. One thus needs to consider not only whether, but how much, the NGO promoted neoliberalism, and how much it had a beneficial impact, and then weigh the effect on balance of women’s NGO activity. Fraser and Eisenstein, along with many critics, consider women NGOs’ impact on fostering neoliberalism, but ignore their activities to the contrary. They also do not consider whether their contribution to neoliberalism was great or small, or perhaps simply neutral, and ignore the beneficial consequences of their activity for women. In the face of these omissions it is very misleading to claim that feminist support for women’s NGOs promoted neoliberalism and did not promote justice. That women’s NGOs in some way or other promote neoliberalism is not surprising in a moment that is not “revolutionary,” and when neoliberalism is dominant.

RE: (3) DEPOLITICIZING WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS

The claim that feminists’ support for women’s NGOs promoted neoliberalism and not justice, by subordinating themselves to first-world funders’ agendas, assumes that donors all had neoliberal agendas. But sometimes women's NGOs did both: they confronted injustices and adopted first-world funders’ agenda. Not all donors had neoliberal agendas. Kvinna del Kvinna and Mama Cash, the major Western feminist donors of women’s NGOs in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, and the Network of East-West Women, to name a few, did not promote neoliberalism but, rather, gender justice.

The claim that feminist support for women’s NGOs and donor support of them depoliticized local women’s groups also over-generalizes across regions. In east and central Europe and the former Soviet Union pre-1989 there were few pre-existing, explicitly feminist groups, and little traditional feminism to depoliticize, a very different situation than in Latin America. Official state-socialist women’s organizations were anti-capitalist, but often neglected important criticisms of their own political
system's gender, political, social, and economic injustices. Their significance on behalf of women is only beginning to be researched. Independent women's NGOs that had existed in the former Yugoslavia, such as SOS Hotline in Belgrade, did not diminish, but increased their demands, activity, and radical politics after 1989. Some newer women's NGOs were effective in stimulating the growth of other younger women's activist groups that made further, quite politicized demands on the state. One cannot know whether, and how, women's groups would have developed without donor support, and if they would have been more opposed to neoliberalism. Though it is true that a focus on reproduction and violence against women are safer issues for neoliberalism than is a focus on poverty and unemployment, reproductive rights and violence against women also bear on the gendering of poverty and democracy. Attention to reproductive rights was also not an unconstrained feminist choice, but a response to extensive anti-reproductive rights work on the part of the Catholic Church and other organizations in the last twenty years at the UN and in particular regions. In post-socialist European countries, church activity threatened state-socialist-created abortion rights.

Fraser also claims that the feminist “anti-economism” of early second-wave feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century depoliticized feminism and promoted neoliberalism. “Anti-economism” turned into ignoring economic issues and focusing instead on culture and identity politics. This claim presumes her earlier mistaken characterization of early second-wave feminism as anti-economistic because it challenged the “economism” of capitalism. It also rests on her adoption of the Hegelian conception of “recognition” to describe contemporary politics. She states: “Second-wave feminists effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another” (Fraser 2009, 108). But such a claim about contemporary feminism seems to identify such feminism with limited forms of academic feminism, ignoring even feminist economics. It also ignores the identity politics of women activists, including lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women struggling for employment, housing, and marriage rights and their concomitant economic and health benefits. These politics may not have contained fundamental criticisms of capitalism, but neither did mainstream, mid-twentieth-century, second-wave feminism.

**Feminism and the Future**

Fraser is certainly right in some of her criticisms of the transnational women's movement, and in some ways, at some moments, global feminism promotes neoliberalism. However, her account is selective and erases the long and hard work of many women's NGOs and other women's activities that challenge neoliberalism, or make only the most minimal contributions to it.

Fraser proposes that feminism must now challenge neoliberalism. Though important, global feminism is a movement for gender justice first and foremost, not only a movement to challenge neoliberalism, however much these are related, and however important both goals are. It is difficult to develop transnational feminist practices,
and on Fraser's own account, this effort is in its infancy. There are missteps, but not only missteps, and not all she claims as missteps actually are. For example, her own suggestion—that the best way to criticize masculinism or androcentrism is to “decenter work” and valorize non-paid work, including care work—is problematic. In times of high unemployment, to decenter work could easily become a recipe for the very cooptation of feminist principles that Fraser rightly deplores, and risks legitimating women’s unemployment. Fraser claims that feminists should promote participatory democracy and strengthen public power struggles for global and regional democracy and not direct democratic demands only to states, that is, it should not promote “Westphalianism.” Although this is a useful suggestion, many existing women’s demands are already being directed to regional institutions, including the European Union and the UN, and are being incorporated into regional women organizations such as the European Women’s Lobby and European women’s organizations on reproductive rights. European feminists have also been arguing for the principle of “subsidiarity” Fraser proposes, that is, that EU policies should be carried out at the most local level possible, such as by states in the EU. But democratic demands to the state must also be high on the agenda, as events in the Occupy Wall Street Movement and Tunisia, Egypt, and the Arab world in 2011 show, not to mention the need to challenge growing right-wing constraints on democracy in Western states, including the United States. In an imperfect world, which policies are the best feminist policies, which issues and forms of democracy need to be stressed, which compromises need to be made in the struggle for gender justice and against neoliberalism, are questions that women active in each region and country need to decide. Fraser’s global condemnation of contemporary feminism is not helpful to that end.

NOTE

I presented an earlier version of this paper to the Socialist Feminist Philosophers Association (Sophia) and wish to thank the participants for their comments. I am also especially grateful to Wolfgang Wenning for his very careful reading of earlier drafts and for his suggestions. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of Hypatia for their comments and suggestions, all made in a very constructive spirit.

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