Emancipatory Feminism in the Time of Covid-19

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CONCLUSION

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As mentioned at the beginning of this volume, Jacklyn Cock and Meg Luxton, contributors to volume 1 in the Democratic Marxism series in 2013, invited a research focus on socialist feminism as crucial for the renewal of feminism, after the setbacks of second- and third-wave feminism.

We take up their invitation in this volume, and build on it in two ways. First, Cock and Luxton emphasise the life-making role of social reproduction and its centrality within capitalism. The chapters in this volume take this further to argue the conditions for social reproduction today are meeting the total crisis of capitalism. Implicated in this is the hegemonic role of liberal feminism that has been mainstreamed as ‘feminism’ over the past four decades of global restructuring of capitalism. Today, social reproduction is being gridlocked by the systemic crisis tendencies of patriarchal capitalism such that life-making at a societal scale and in households is in jeopardy. Covid-19 has amplified and revealed more sharply the worsening of the crises, not just of social reproduction, but of socio-ecological reproduction; subaltern women, labour and nature are all interconnected in this crisis of life-making. Liberal feminism has fallen short in this context; its exclusionary class, race and ecological aspirations have proven to be complicit in the oppression of subaltern women. Second, Cock and Luxton invited us to clarify what a politics that takes social reproduction seriously would be all about. What would it look like? Various chapters in this volume explore this in relation to women’s resistance before and during Covid-19. Their resistance includes the search for a renewed pan-African feminism at the frontlines of anti-extractivist struggles; women leading the defence of Rojava; women building food sovereignty pathways in communities, villages, towns and cities; women championing climate justice in mining-affected communities; women transforming the androcentric and gender
division of labour in mining; women understanding the limits and challenges of the structural class location for African women; women contesting macro-economic policy and women seeking to improve the working conditions of nurses. This is not an exhaustive list, but certainly highlights important examples of a fourth wave of feminism.

This volume contends that emancipatory feminism is finding its expression much more prominently in the fourth wave of feminism. It has the potential to clarify and define this wave. Emancipatory feminism is certainly eclipsing liberal feminism as grassroots women search for a politics at the frontlines of the crises of socio-ecological reproduction. At the same time, emancipatory feminism is building the capacities to confront a new extreme right wing marching across the planet in the name of nativist, patriarchal, socially conservative and exclusionary nationalisms. Such a right wing is either ‘post- or anti-feminist’. Both these tendencies suggest either that women’s oppression has been addressed or that women’s emancipation has gone too far and therefore feminist gains must be rolled back. In many places, religious fundamentalism, articulated with patriarchy and capitalism, is giving warrant to this reactionary politics. Embracing world making and constituting power from below positions emancipatory feminism to build alternatives and advance political projects in resistance to the challenge of right-wing polarisation. Democratic deepening and democratic systemic reforms give this form of emancipatory feminism a powerful democratising role. Convergences between Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, eco-feminists and indigenous feminists are, however, crucial and this volume embraces and fosters this dialogue in order to find genuine universals that will become a basis for the building of domestic and transnational unities. The post-modern notion of difference is now understood: there is no monolithic social category termed ‘women’. However, at the same time, accentuating difference in the name of ‘black socialist feminism’ or ‘white eco-feminism’ is politically irrational, given the worsening global crisis of socio-ecological reproduction and the descent of societies into authoritarian and, in some instances, neofascist politics. Emancipatory feminism holds out the potential to transcend both academic and political polarisation, as it seeks to deepen transformative anti-capitalist resistance.

At a practical level, political demands for Covid-19 fiscal support (basic income, unpaid labour transfers and other relief measures); ending hunger through food sovereignty; preventing climate harm through accelerating and deepening the just transition; climate jobs and free, quality and accessible public health services have the potential to rally women, even if they are not feminists, together with wider society. These positive solidarities, affirming of emancipatory alternatives, enable women to
lead the reimagining and remaking of society in struggle. Nonetheless, the organising challenge of movement building looms large. Emancipatory feminists are aware of this challenge and the importance of feminist education and consciousness raising, as opposed to merely crowd-sourcing street politics to make symbolic noises. Many examples in this volume showcase variegated practices: coalition building, giving feminism ideological and political control in autonomous territories, building grassroots alliances, movement building and encouraging transformative trade unionism. The march of emancipatory feminism is just gaining momentum and already it is demonstrating creative forms of mass organising. This has the potential to generate truly conscious feminist organisation – a necessity if there is going to be an adequate response to the global crisis of socio-ecological reproduction and an advance to a democratic, decolonial, eco-socialist, feminist world.