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## FEMINISM, CAPITALISM AND THE CUNNING OF HISTORY

I WOULD LIKE HERE to take a broad look at second-wave feminism. Not at this or that activist current, nor this or that strand of feminist theorizing; not this or that geographical slice of the movement, nor this or that sociological stratum of women. I want, rather, to try to see second-wave feminism whole, as an epochal social phenomenon. Looking back at nearly forty years of feminist activism, I want to venture an assessment of the movement's overall trajectory and historical significance. In looking back, however, I hope also to help us look forward. By reconstructing the path we have travelled, I hope to shed light on the challenges we face today—in a time of massive economic crisis, social uncertainty and political realignment.<sup>1</sup>

I am going to tell a story, then, about the broad contours and overall meaning of second-wave feminism. Equal parts historical narrative and social-theoretical analysis, my story is plotted around three points in time, each of which places second-wave feminism in relation to a specific moment in the history of capitalism. The first point refers to the movement's beginnings in the context of what I will call 'state-organized capitalism'. Here I propose to chart the emergence of second-wave feminism from the anti-imperialist New Left, as a radical challenge to the pervasive androcentrism of state-led capitalist societies in the postwar era. Conceptualizing this phase, I shall identify the movement's fundamental emancipatory promise with its expanded sense of injustice and its structural critique of society. The second point refers to the process of feminism's evolution in the dramatically changed social context of rising neoliberalism. Here, I propose to chart not only the movement's extraordinary successes but also the disturbing convergence of some of

its ideals with the demands of an emerging new form of capitalism—post-Fordist, ‘disorganized’, transnational. Conceptualizing this phase, I shall ask whether second-wave feminism has unwittingly supplied a key ingredient of what Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello call ‘the new spirit of capitalism’. The third point refers to a possible reorientation of feminism in the present context of capitalist crisis and US political realignment, which could mark the beginnings of a shift from neoliberalism to a new form of social organization. Here, I propose to examine the prospects for reactivating feminism’s emancipatory promise in a world that has been rocked by the twin crises of finance capital and US hegemony, and that now awaits the unfolding of Barack Obama’s presidency.

In general, then, I propose to situate the trajectory of second-wave feminism in relation to the recent history of capitalism. In this way, I hope to help revive the sort of socialist-feminist theorizing that first inspired me decades ago and that still seems to offer our best hope for clarifying the prospects for gender justice in the present period. My aim, however, is not to recycle outmoded dual-systems theories, but rather to integrate the best of recent feminist theorizing with the best of recent critical theorizing about capitalism.

To clarify the rationale behind this approach, let me explain my dissatisfaction with what is perhaps the most widely held view of second-wave feminism. It is often said that the movement’s relative success in transforming culture stands in sharp contrast with its relative failure to transform institutions. This assessment is doubled-edged: on the one hand, feminist ideals of gender equality, so contentious in the preceding decades, now sit squarely in the social mainstream; on the other hand, they have yet to be realized in practice. Thus, feminist critiques of, for example, sexual harassment, sexual trafficking and unequal pay, which appeared incendiary not so long ago, are widely espoused today; yet this sea-change at the level of attitudes has by no means eliminated those practices. And so, it is frequently argued: second-wave feminism has

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<sup>1</sup> This essay originated as a keynote lecture presented at the Cortona Colloquium on ‘Gender and Citizenship: New and Old Dilemmas, Between Equality and Difference’ in November 2008. For helpful comments, I thank the Cortona participants, especially Bianca Beccalli, Jane Mansbridge, Ruth Milkman and Eli Zaretsky, and the participants in an EHESS seminar at the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale, especially Luc Boltanski, Estelle Ferrarese, Sandra Laugier, Patricia Paperman and Laurent Thévenot.

wrought an epochal cultural revolution, but the vast change in *mentalités* has not (yet) translated into structural, institutional change.

There is something to be said for this view, which rightly notes the widespread acceptance today of feminist ideas. But the thesis of cultural success-cum-institutional failure does not go very far in illuminating the historical significance and future prospects of second-wave feminism. Positing that institutions have lagged behind culture, as if one could change while the other did not, it suggests that we need only make the former catch up with the latter in order to realize feminist hopes. The effect is to obscure a more complex, disturbing possibility: that the diffusion of cultural attitudes born out of the second wave has been part and parcel of another social transformation, unanticipated and unintended by feminist activists—a transformation in the social organization of postwar capitalism. This possibility can be formulated more sharply: the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society.

In this essay, I aim to explore this disturbing possibility. My hypothesis can be stated thus: what was truly new about the second wave was the way it wove together, in a critique of androcentric state-organized capitalism, three analytically distinct dimensions of gender injustice: economic, cultural and political. Subjecting state-organized capitalism to wide-ranging, multifaceted scrutiny, in which those three perspectives intermingled freely, feminists generated a critique that was simultaneously ramified and systematic. In the ensuing decades, however, the three dimensions of injustice became separated, both from one another and from the critique of capitalism. With the fragmentation of the feminist critique came the selective incorporation and partial recuperation of some of its strands. Split off from one another and from the societal critique that had integrated them, second-wave hopes were conscripted in the service of a project that was deeply at odds with our larger, holistic vision of a just society. In a fine instance of the cunning of history, utopian desires found a second life as feeling currents that legitimated the transition to a new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal.

In what follows, I propose to elaborate this hypothesis in three steps, which correspond to the three plot points mentioned earlier. In a first step, I shall reconstruct the second-wave feminist critique of androcentric

state-organized capitalism as integrating concerns with three perspectives on justice—redistribution, recognition and representation. In a second step, I shall sketch the coming apart of that constellation and the selective enlistment of some of its strands to legitimate neoliberal capitalism. In a third, I shall weigh the prospects for recovering feminism’s emancipatory promise in the present moment of economic crisis and political opening.

### I. FEMINISM AND STATE-ORGANIZED CAPITALISM

Let me begin by situating the emergence of second-wave feminism in the context of state-organized capitalism. By ‘state-organized capitalism’, I mean the hegemonic social formation in the postwar era, a social formation in which states played an active role in steering their national economies.<sup>2</sup> We are most familiar with the form taken by state-organized capitalism in the welfare states of what was then called the First World, which used Keynesian tools to soften the boom–bust cycles endemic to capitalism. Drawing on the experiences of the Depression and war-time planning, these states implemented various forms of *dirigisme*, including infrastructural investment, industrial policy, redistributive taxation, social provision, business regulation, nationalization of some key industries and decommodification of public goods. Although it was the most wealthy and powerful OECD states that were able to ‘organize’ capitalism most successfully in the decades following 1945, a variant of state-organized capitalism could also be found in what was then termed the Third World. In impoverished ex-colonies, newly independent ‘developmental states’ sought to use their more limited capacities to jump-start national economic growth by means of import-substitution policies, infrastructural investment, nationalization of key industries and public spending on education.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this term, see Friedrich Pollock, ‘State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations’, in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, London 1982, pp. 71–94.

<sup>3</sup> Then, too, economic life in the Communist bloc was notoriously state-organized, and there are those who would still insist on calling it state-organized capitalism. Although there may be some truth in that view, I will follow the more conventional path of excluding the region from this first moment of my story, in part because it was not until after 1989 that second-wave feminism emerged as a political force in what were by then ex-Communist countries.

In general, then, I use this expression to refer to the OECD welfare states and the ex-colonial developmental states of the postwar period. It was in these countries, after all, that second-wave feminism first erupted in the early 1970s. To explain what exactly provoked the eruption, let me note four defining characteristics of the political culture of state-organized capitalism:

- ▶ *Economism*. By definition, state-organized capitalism involved the use of public political power to regulate (and in some cases, to replace) economic markets. This was largely a matter of crisis management in the interest of capital. Nevertheless, the states in question derived much of their political legitimacy from their claims to promote inclusion, social equality and cross-class solidarity. Yet these ideals were interpreted in an economistic and class-centric way. In the political culture of state-organized capitalism, social questions were framed chiefly in distributive terms, as matters concerning the equitable allocation of divisible goods, especially income and jobs, while social divisions were viewed primarily through the prism of class. Thus, the quintessential social injustice was unfair economic distribution, and its paradigm expression was class inequality. The effect of this class-centric, economistic imaginary was to marginalize, if not wholly to obscure, other dimensions, sites and axes of injustice.
  
- ▶ *Androcentrism*. It followed that the political culture of state-organized capitalism envisioned the ideal-typical citizen as an ethnic-majority male worker—a breadwinner and a family man. It was widely assumed, too, that this worker's wage should be the principal, if not the sole, economic support of his family, while any wages earned by his wife should be merely supplemental. Deeply gendered, this 'family wage' construct served both as a social ideal, connoting modernity and upward mobility, and as the basis for state policy in matters of employment, welfare and development. Granted, the ideal eluded most families, as a man's wage was rarely by itself sufficient to support children and a non-employed wife. And granted, too, the Fordist industry to which the ideal was linked was soon to be dwarfed by a burgeoning low-wage service sector. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the family-wage ideal still served to define gender norms and to discipline those who would contravene them, reinforcing men's authority

in households and channelling aspirations into privatized domestic consumption. Equally important, by valorizing waged work, the political culture of state-organized capitalism obscured the social importance of unwaged care work and reproductive labour. Institutionalizing androcentric understandings of family and work, it naturalized injustices of gender and removed them from political contestation.

- ▶ *Étatism*. State-organized capitalism was also étatist, suffused with a technocratic, managerial ethos. Relying on professional experts to design policies, and on bureaucratic organizations to implement them, welfare and developmental states treated those whom they ostensibly served more as clients, consumers and taxpayers than as active citizens. The result was a depoliticized culture, which treated questions of justice as technical matters, to be settled by expert calculation or corporatist bargaining. Far from being empowered to interpret their needs democratically, via political deliberation and contestation, ordinary citizens were positioned (at best) as passive recipients of satisfactions defined and dispensed from on high.
- ▶ *Westphalianism*. Finally, state-organized capitalism was, by definition, a national formation, aimed at mobilizing the capacities of nation-states to support national economic development in the name—if not always in the interest—of the national citizenry. Made possible by the Bretton Woods regulatory framework, this formation rested on a division of political space into territorially bounded polities. As a result, the political culture of state-organized capitalism institutionalized the ‘Westphalian’ view that binding obligations of justice apply only among fellow citizens. Subtending the lion’s share of social struggle in the post-war era, this view channelled claims for justice into the domestic political arenas of territorial states. The effect, notwithstanding lip-service to international human rights and anti-imperialist solidarity, was to truncate the scope of justice, marginalizing, if not wholly obscuring, cross-border injustices.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller account of the ‘Westphalian political imaginary’, see Fraser, ‘Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World’, NLR 36, November–December 2005.

In general, then, the political culture of state-organized capitalism was economistic, androcentric, étatist and Westphalian—all characteristics that came under attack in the late 1960s and 1970s. In those years of explosive radicalism, second-wave feminists joined their New Left and anti-imperialist counterparts in challenging the economism, the étatism, and (to a lesser degree) the Westphalianism of state-organized capitalism, while also contesting the latter's androcentrism—and with it, the sexism of their comrades and allies. Let us consider these points one by one.

- ▶ *Second-wave feminism contra economism.* Rejecting the exclusive identification of injustice with class maldistribution, second-wave feminists joined other emancipatory movements to burst open the restrictive, economistic imaginary of state-organized capitalism. Politicizing 'the personal', they expanded the meaning of justice, reinterpreting as injustices social inequalities that had been overlooked, tolerated or rationalized since time immemorial. Rejecting both Marxism's exclusive focus on political economy and liberalism's exclusive focus on law, they unveiled injustices located elsewhere—in the family and in cultural traditions, in civil society and in everyday life. In addition, second-wave feminists expanded the number of axes that could harbour injustice. Rejecting the primacy of class, socialist-feminists, black feminists and anti-imperialist feminists also opposed radical-feminist efforts to install gender in that same position of categorial privilege. Focusing not only on gender, but also on class, race, sexuality and nationality, they pioneered an 'intersectionist' alternative that is widely accepted today. Finally, second-wave feminists extended the purview of justice to take in such previously private matters as sexuality, housework, reproduction and violence against women. In so doing, they effectively broadened the concept of injustice to encompass not only economic inequalities but also hierarchies of status and asymmetries of political power. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that they replaced a monistic, economistic view of justice with a broader three-dimensional understanding, encompassing economy, culture and politics.

The result was no mere laundry list of single issues. On the contrary, what connected the plethora of newly discovered injustices was the notion that women's subordination was systemic, grounded in the deep structures of society. Second-wave

feminists argued, of course, about how best to characterize the social totality—whether as ‘patriarchy’, as a ‘dual-systems’ amalgam of capitalism and patriarchy, as an imperialist world system, or, in my own preferred view, as a historically specific, androcentric form of state-organized capitalist society, structured by three interpenetrating orders of subordination: (mal)distribution, (mis)recognition and (mis)representation. But despite such differences, most second-wave feminists—with the notable exception of liberal-feminists—concurred that overcoming women’s subordination required radical transformation of the deep structures of the social totality. This shared commitment to systemic transformation betokened the movement’s origins in the broader emancipatory ferment of the times.

- ▶ *Second-wave feminism contra androcentrism.* If second-wave feminism partook of the general aura of 1960s radicalism, it nevertheless stood in a tense relation with other emancipatory movements. Its chief target, after all, was the *gender* injustice of state-organized capitalism, hardly a priority for non-feminist anti-imperialists and New Leftists. In mounting their critique of state-organized capitalism’s androcentrism, moreover, second-wave feminists had also to confront sexism within the Left. For liberal and radical feminists, this posed no special problem; they could simply turn separatist and exit the Left. For socialist-feminists, anti-imperialist feminists and feminists of colour, in contrast, the difficulty was to confront sexism within the Left while remaining part of it.

For a time, at least, socialist-feminists succeeded in maintaining that difficult balance. They located the core of androcentrism in a gender division of labour which systematically devalued activities, both paid and unpaid, that were performed by or associated with women. Applying this analysis to state-organized capitalism, they uncovered the deep-structural connections between women’s responsibility for the lion’s share of unpaid caregiving, their subordination in marriage and personal life, the gender segmentation of labour markets, men’s domination of the political system, and the androcentrism of welfare provision, industrial policy and development schemes. In effect, they exposed the family wage as the point where gender maldistribution, misrecognition and

misrepresentation converged. The result was a critique that integrated economy, culture and politics in a systematic account of women's subordination in state-organized capitalism. Far from aiming simply to promote women's full incorporation as wage-earners in capitalist society, second-wave feminists sought to transform the system's deep structures and animating values—in part by decentring wage work and valorizing unwaged activities, especially the socially necessary carework performed by women.

- ▶ *Second-wave feminism contra étatism.* But feminists' objections to state-organized capitalism were as much concerned with process as with substance. Like their New Left allies, they rejected the bureaucratic-managerial ethos of state-organized capitalism. To the widespread 1960s critique of Fordist organization they added a gender analysis, interpreting the culture of large-scale, top-down institutions as expressing the modernized masculinity of the professional-managerial stratum of state-organized capitalism. Developing a horizontal counter-ethos of sisterly connection, second-wave feminists created the entirely new organizational practice of consciousness-raising. Seeking to bridge the sharp étatist divide between theory and practice, they styled themselves as a countercultural democratizing movement—anti-hierarchical, participatory and demotic. In an era when the acronym 'NGO' did not yet exist, feminist academics, lawyers and social workers identified more with the grass roots than with the reigning professional ethos of depoliticized expertise.

But unlike some of their countercultural comrades, most feminists did not reject state institutions *simpliciter*. Seeking, rather, to infuse the latter with feminist values, they envisioned a participatory-democratic state that empowered its citizens. Effectively re-imagining the relation between state and society, they sought to transform those positioned as passive objects of welfare and development policy into active subjects, empowered to participate in democratic processes of need interpretation. The goal, accordingly, was less to dismantle state institutions than to transform them into agencies that would promote, and indeed express, gender justice.

- ▶ *Second-wave feminism contra and pro Westphalianism.* More ambivalent, perhaps, was feminism's relation to the Westphalian dimension of state-organized capitalism. Given its origins in the global anti-Vietnam War ferment of the time, the movement was clearly disposed to be sensitive to trans-border injustices. This was especially the case for feminists in the developing world, whose gender critique was interwoven with a critique of imperialism. But there, as elsewhere, most feminists viewed their respective states as the principal addressees of their demands. Thus, second-wave feminists tended to reinscribe the Westphalian frame at the level of practice, even when they criticized it at the level of theory. That frame, which divided the world into bounded territorial polities, remained the default option in an era when states still seemed to possess the requisite capacities for social steering and when the technology enabling real-time transnational networking was not yet available. In the context of state-organized capitalism, then, the slogan 'sisterhood is global' (itself already contested as imperializing) functioned more as an abstract gesture than as a post-Westphalian political project that could be practically pursued.

In general, second-wave feminism remained ambivalently Westphalian, even as it rejected the economism, androcentrism and étatism of state-organized capitalism. On all those issues, however, it manifested considerable nuance. In rejecting economism, the feminists of this period never doubted the centrality of distributive justice and the critique of political economy to the project of women's emancipation. Far from wanting to minimize the economic dimension of gender injustice, they sought, rather, to deepen it, by clarifying its relation with the two additional dimensions of culture and politics. Likewise, in rejecting the androcentrism of the family wage, second-wave feminists never sought simply to replace it with the two-earner family. For them, overcoming gender injustice meant ending the systematic devaluation of caregiving and the gender division of labour, both paid and unpaid. Finally, in rejecting the étatism of state-organized capitalism, second-wave feminists never doubted the need for strong political institutions capable of organizing economic life in the service of justice. Far from wanting to free markets from state control, they sought rather to democratize state power, to maximize citizen participation, to strengthen accountability, and to increase communicative flows between state and society.

All told, second-wave feminism espoused a transformative political project, premised on an expanded understanding of injustice and a systemic critique of capitalist society. The movement's most advanced currents saw their struggles as multi-dimensional, aimed simultaneously against economic exploitation, status hierarchy and political subjection. To them, moreover, feminism appeared as part of a broader emancipatory project, in which struggles against gender injustices were necessarily linked to struggles against racism, imperialism, homophobia and class domination, all of which required transformation of the deep structures of capitalist society.

## II. FEMINISM AND THE 'NEW SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM'

As it turned out, that project remained largely stillborn, a casualty of deeper historical forces, which were not well understood at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that the rise of second-wave feminism coincided with a historical shift in the character of capitalism, from the state-organized variant just discussed to neoliberalism. Reversing the previous formula, which sought to 'use politics to tame markets', proponents of this new form of capitalism proposed to use markets to tame politics. Dismantling key elements of the Bretton Woods framework, they eliminated the capital controls that had enabled Keynesian steering of national economies. In place of *dirigisme*, they promoted privatization and deregulation; in place of public provision and social citizenship, 'trickle-down' and 'personal responsibility'; in place of the welfare and developmental states, the lean, mean 'competition state'. Road-tested in Latin America, this approach served to guide much of the transition to capitalism in East/Central Europe. Although publicly championed by Thatcher and Reagan, it was applied only gradually and unevenly in the First World. In the Third, by contrast, neoliberalization was imposed at the gunpoint of debt, as an enforced programme of 'structural adjustment' which overturned all the central tenets of developmentalism and compelled post-colonial states to divest their assets, open their markets and slash social spending.

Interestingly, second-wave feminism thrived in these new conditions. What had begun as a radical countercultural movement was now *en route* to becoming a broad-based mass social phenomenon. Attracting adherents of every class, ethnicity, nationality and political ideology, feminist

ideas found their way into every nook and cranny of social life and transformed the self-understandings of all whom they touched. The effect was not only vastly to expand the ranks of activists but also to reshape commonsense views of family, work and dignity.

Was it mere coincidence that second-wave feminism and neoliberalism prospered in tandem? Or was there some perverse, subterranean elective affinity between them? That second possibility is heretical, to be sure, but we fail to investigate it at our peril. Certainly, the rise of neoliberalism dramatically changed the terrain on which second-wave feminism operated. The effect, I shall argue here, was to resignify feminist ideals.<sup>5</sup> Aspirations that had a clear emancipatory thrust in the context of state-organized capitalism assumed a far more ambiguous meaning in the neoliberal era. With welfare and developmental states under attack from free-marketeers, feminist critiques of economism, androcentrism, étatism and Westphalianism took on a new valence. Let me clarify this dynamic of resignification by revisiting those four foci of feminist critique.

- ▶ *Feminist anti-economism resignified.* Neoliberalism's rise coincided with a major alteration in the political culture of capitalist societies. In this period, claims for justice were increasingly couched as claims for the recognition of identity and difference.<sup>6</sup> With this shift 'from redistribution to recognition' came powerful pressures to transform second-wave feminism into a variant of identity politics. A progressive variant, to be sure, but one that tended nevertheless to overextend the critique of culture, while downplaying the critique of political economy. In practice, the tendency was to subordinate social-economic struggles to struggles for recognition, while in the academy, feminist cultural theory began to eclipse feminist social theory. What had begun as a needed corrective to economism devolved in time into an equally one-sided culturalism. Thus, instead of arriving at a broader, richer paradigm that could encompass both redistribution and recognition, second-wave feminists effectively traded one truncated paradigm for another.

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term 'resignification' from Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, London 1994.

<sup>6</sup> For this change in the grammar of political claims, see Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition?', NLR 1/212, July–August 1995.

The timing, moreover, could not have been worse. The turn to recognition dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism. Thus, feminists absolutized the critique of culture at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy. As the critique splintered, moreover, the cultural strand became decoupled not only from the economic strand, but also from the critique of capitalism that had previously integrated them. Unmoored from the critique of capitalism and made available for alternative articulations, these strands could be drawn into what Hester Eisenstein has called ‘a dangerous liaison’ with neoliberalism.<sup>7</sup>

- ▶ *Feminist anti-androcentrism resignified.* It was only a matter of time, therefore, before neoliberalism resignified the feminist critique of androcentrism. To explain how, I propose to adapt an argument made by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello. In their important book, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, they contend that capitalism periodically remakes itself in moments of historical rupture, in part by recuperating strands of critique directed against it.<sup>8</sup> In such moments, elements of anti-capitalist critique are resignified to legitimate an emergent new form of capitalism, which thereby becomes endowed with the higher, moral significance needed to motivate new generations to shoulder the inherently meaningless work of endless accumulation. For Boltanski and Chiapello, the new ‘spirit’ that has served to legitimate the flexible neoliberal capitalism of our time was fashioned from the New Left’s ‘artistic’ critique of state-organized capitalism, which denounced the grey conformism of corporate culture. It was in the accents of May 68, they claim, that neoliberal management theorists propounded a new ‘connexionist’, ‘project’ capitalism, in which rigid organizational hierarchies would give way to horizontal teams and flexible networks, thereby liberating individual creativity. The result was a new romance of capitalism with real-world effects—a

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<sup>7</sup> Hester Eisenstein, ‘A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization’, *Science and Society*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2005 [Paris 1999]. For an interpretation of psychoanalysis as the spirit of ‘the second industrial revolution’, which concludes by positing feminism as the spirit of the ‘third’, see Eli Zaretsky, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Spirit of Capitalism’, *Constellations*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2008.

romance that enveloped the tech start-ups of Silicon Valley and that today finds its purest expression in the ethos of Google.

Boltanski and Chiapello's argument is original and profound. Yet, because it is gender-blind, it fails to grasp the full character of the spirit of neoliberal capitalism. To be sure, that spirit includes a masculinist romance of the free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual, which they aptly describe. But neoliberal capitalism has as much to do with Walmart, *maquiladoras* and microcredit as with Silicon Valley and Google. And its indispensable workers are disproportionately women, not only young single women, but also married women and women with children; not only racialized women, but women of virtually all nationalities and ethnicities. As such, women have poured into labour markets around the globe; the effect has been to undercut once and for all state-organized capitalism's ideal of the family wage. In 'disorganized' neoliberal capitalism, that ideal has been replaced by the norm of the two-earner family. Never mind that the reality which underlies the new ideal is depressed wage levels, decreased job security, declining living standards, a steep rise in the number of hours worked for wages per household, exacerbation of the double shift—now often a triple or quadruple shift—and a rise in female-headed households. Disorganized capitalism turns a sow's ear into a silk purse by elaborating a new romance of female advancement and gender justice.

Disturbing as it may sound, I am suggesting that second-wave feminism has unwittingly provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism. 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: at one end, the female cadres of the professional middle classes, determined to crack the glass ceiling; at the other end, the female temps, part-timers, low-wage service employees, domestics, sex workers, migrants, EPZ workers and microcredit borrowers, seeking not only income and material security, but also dignity, self-betterment and liberation from traditional authority. At both ends, the dream of women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist

accumulation. Thus, second-wave feminism's critique of the family wage has enjoyed a perverse afterlife. Once the centrepiece of a radical analysis of capitalism's androcentrism, it serves today to intensify capitalism's valorization of waged labour.

- ▶ *Feminist anti-étatisme resignified.* Neoliberalism has also resignified the anti-étatisme of the previous period, making it grist for schemes aimed at reducing state action *tout court*. In the new climate, it seemed but a short step from second-wave feminism's critique of welfare-state paternalism to Thatcher's critique of the nanny state. That was certainly the experience in the United States, where feminists watched helplessly as Bill Clinton triangulated their nuanced critique of a sexist and stigmatizing system of poor relief into a plan to 'end welfare as we know it', which abolished the Federal entitlement to income support. In the postcolonies, meanwhile, the critique of the developmental state's androcentrism morphed into enthusiasm for NGOs, which emerged everywhere to fill the space vacated by shrinking states. Certainly, the best of these organizations provided urgently needed material aid to populations bereft of public services. Yet the effect was often to depoliticize local groups and to skew their agendas in directions favoured by First-World funders. By its very stop-gap nature, moreover, NGO action did little to challenge the receding tide of public provision or to build political support for responsive state action.<sup>9</sup>

The explosion of microcredit illustrates the dilemma. Counterposing feminist values of empowerment and participation from below to the passivity-inducing red tape of top-down étatisme, the architects of these projects have crafted an innovative synthesis of individual self-help and community networking, NGO oversight and market mechanisms—all aimed at combating women's poverty and gender subjection. The results so far include an impressive record of loan repayments and anecdotal evidence of lives transformed. What has been concealed, however, in the feminist hoopla surrounding these projects, is a disturbing coincidence:

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<sup>9</sup> Sonia Alvarez, 'Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO "Boom"', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1999; Carol Barton, 'Global Women's Movements at a Crossroads', *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2004.

microcredit has burgeoned just as states have abandoned macrostructural efforts to fight poverty, efforts that small-scale lending cannot possibly replace.<sup>10</sup> In this case too, the feminist critique of bureaucratic paternalism has been recuperated by neoliberalism. A perspective aimed originally at transforming state power into a vehicle of citizen empowerment and social justice is now used to legitimate marketization and state retrenchment.

- ▶ *Feminist contra and pro Westphalianism resignified.* Finally, neoliberalism altered for better and for worse second-wave feminism's ambivalent relation to the Westphalian frame. In the new context of 'globalization', it no longer goes without saying that the bounded territorial state is the sole legitimate container for obligations of, and struggles for, justice. Feminists have joined environmentalists, human-rights activists and critics of the WTO in challenging that view. Mobilizing post-Westphalian intuitions that had remained impracticable in state-organized capitalism, they have targeted trans-border injustices that had been marginalized or neglected in the previous era. Utilizing new communication technologies to establish transnational networks, feminists have pioneered innovative strategies such as the 'boomerang effect', which mobilizes global public opinion to spotlight local abuses and to shame the states that condone them.<sup>11</sup> The result was a promising new form of feminist activism—transnational, multi-scalar, post-Westphalian.

But the transnational turn brought difficulties too. Often stymied at the level of the state, many feminists directed their energies to the 'international' arena, especially to a succession of UN-related conferences, from Nairobi to Vienna to Beijing and beyond. Building a presence in 'global civil society' from which to engage new regimes of global governance, they became entangled in some of the problems I have already noted. For example, campaigns for women's human rights focused overwhelmingly on

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<sup>10</sup> Uma Narayan, 'Informal Sector Work, Microcredit and Third World Women's "Empowerment": A Critical Perspective', paper presented at the XXII World Congress of Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy, May 2005, Granada; Eisenstein, 'A Dangerous Liaison?'

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, NY 1998.

issues of violence and reproduction, as opposed, for example, to poverty. Ratifying the Cold War split between civil and political rights, on the one hand, and social and economic rights, on the other, these efforts, too, have privileged recognition over redistribution. In addition, these campaigns intensified the NGO-ification of feminist politics, widening the gap between professionals and local groups, while according disproportionate voice to English-speaking elites. Analogous dynamics have been operating in the feminist engagement with the policy apparatus of the European Union—especially given the absence of genuinely transnational, Europe-wide women’s movements. Thus, the feminist critique of Westphalianism has proved ambivalent in the era of neoliberalism. What began as a salutary attempt to expand the scope of justice beyond the nation-state has ended up dovetailing in some respects with the administrative needs of a new form of capitalism.

In general, then, the fate of feminism in the neoliberal era presents a paradox. On the one hand, the relatively small countercultural movement of the previous period has expanded exponentially, successfully disseminating its ideas across the globe. On the other, feminist ideas have undergone a subtle shift in valence in the altered context. Unambiguously emancipatory in the era of state-organized capitalism, critiques of economism, androcentrism, étatism and Westphalianism now appear fraught with ambiguity, susceptible to serving the legitimation needs of a new form of capitalism. After all, this capitalism would much prefer to confront claims for recognition over claims for redistribution, as it builds a new regime of accumulation on the cornerstone of women’s waged labour, and seeks to disembed markets from social regulation in order to operate all the more freely on a global scale.

### III. AN OPEN FUTURE?

Today, however, this capitalism is itself at a critical crossroads. Certainly, the global financial crisis and the decidedly post-neoliberal response to it by leading states—all Keynesians now—mark the beginning of neoliberalism’s end as an economic regime. The election of Barack Obama may signal the decisive repudiation, even in the belly of the beast, of neoliberalism as a political project. We may be seeing the early stirrings of a new wave of mobilization aimed at articulating an

alternative. Perhaps, accordingly, we stand poised at the brink of yet another 'great transformation', as massive and profound as the one I have just described.

If so, then the shape of the successor society will be the object of intense contestation in the coming period. And feminism will feature importantly in such contestation—at two different levels: first, as the social movement whose fortunes I have traced here, which will seek to ensure that the successor regime institutionalizes a commitment to gender justice. But also, second, as a general discursive construct which feminists in the first sense no longer own and do not control—an empty signifier of the good (akin, perhaps, to 'democracy'), which can and will be invoked to legitimate a variety of different scenarios, not all of which promote gender justice. An offspring of feminism in the first, social-movement sense, this second, discursive sense of 'feminism' has gone rogue. As the discourse becomes independent of the movement, the latter is increasingly confronted with a strange shadowy version of itself, an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow.<sup>12</sup>

In this essay, I have mapped the disconcerting dance of these two feminisms in the shift from state-organized capitalism to neoliberalism. What should we conclude from it? Certainly not that second-wave feminism has failed *simpliciter*, nor that it is to blame for the triumph of neoliberalism. Surely not that feminist ideals are inherently problematic; nor that they are always already doomed to be resignified for capitalist purposes. I conclude, rather, that we for whom feminism is above all a movement for gender justice need to become more historically self-aware as we operate on a terrain that is also populated by our uncanny double.

To that end, let us return to the question: what, if anything, explains our 'dangerous liaison' with neoliberalism? Are we the victims of an unfortunate coincidence, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and so fell prey to that most opportunistic of seducers, a capitalism so indiscriminate that it would instrumentalize any perspective whatever, even one inherently foreign to it? Or is there, as I suggested earlier, some subterranean elective affinity between feminism and neoliberalism? If

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<sup>12</sup> This formula of 'feminism and its doubles' could be elaborated to good effect with respect to the 2008 US Presidential election, where the uncanny doubles included both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin.

any such affinity does exist, it lies in the critique of traditional authority.<sup>13</sup> Such authority is a longstanding target of feminist activism, which has sought at least since Mary Wollstonecraft to emancipate women from personalized subjection to men, be they fathers, brothers, priests, elders or husbands. But traditional authority also appears in some periods as an obstacle to capitalist expansion, part of the surrounding social substance in which markets have historically been embedded and which has served to confine economic rationality within a limited sphere.<sup>14</sup> In the current moment, these two critiques of traditional authority, the one feminist, the other neoliberal, appear to converge.

Where feminism and neoliberalism diverge, in contrast, is over post-traditional forms of gender subordination—constraints on women's lives that do not take the form of personalized subjection, but arise from structural or systemic processes in which the actions of many people are abstractly or impersonally mediated. A paradigm case is what Susan Okin has characterized as 'a cycle of socially caused and distinctly asymmetric vulnerability by marriage', in which women's traditional responsibility for child-rearing helps shape labour markets that disadvantage women, resulting in unequal power in the economic market-place, which in turn reinforces, and exacerbates, unequal power in the family.<sup>15</sup> Such market-mediated processes of subordination are the very lifeblood of neoliberal capitalism. Today, accordingly, they should become a major focus of feminist critique, as we seek to distinguish ourselves from, and to avoid resignification by, neoliberalism. The point, of course, is not to drop the struggle against traditional male authority, which remains a necessary moment of feminist critique. It is, rather, to disrupt the easy passage from such critique to its neoliberal double—above all by reconnecting struggles against personalized subjection to the critique of a capitalist system which, while promising liberation, actually replaces one mode of domination by another.

In the hope of advancing this agenda, I would like to conclude by revisiting one last time my four foci of feminist critique:

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<sup>13</sup> I owe this point to Eli Zaretsky (personal communication). Cf. Eisenstein, 'A Dangerous Liaison?'

<sup>14</sup> In some periods, but not always. In many contexts, capitalism is more apt to adapt to than to challenge traditional authority. For the embedding of markets, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 2nd edn, Boston 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, New York 1989, p. 138.

- ▶ *Post-neoliberal anti-economism.* The possible shift away from neoliberalism offers the opportunity to reactivate the emancipatory promise of second-wave feminism. Adopting a fully three-dimensional account of injustice, we might now integrate in a more balanced way the dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation that splintered in the previous era. Grounding those indispensable aspects of feminist critique in a robust, updated sense of the social totality, we should reconnect feminist critique to the critique of capitalism—and thereby re-position feminism squarely on the Left.
- ▶ *Post-neoliberal anti-androcentrism.* Likewise, the possible shift to a post-neoliberal society offers the chance to break the spurious link between our critique of the family wage and flexible capitalism. Reclaiming our critique of androcentrism, feminists might militate for a form of life that decentres waged work and valorizes uncommodified activities, including carework. Now performed largely by women, such activities should become valued components of a good life for everyone.
- ▶ *Post-neoliberal anti-étatism.* The crisis of neoliberalism also offers the chance to break the link between our critique of étatism and marketization. Reclaiming the mantle of participatory democracy, feminists might militate now for a new organization of political power, one that subordinates bureaucratic managerialism to citizen empowerment. The point, however, is not to dissipate but to strengthen public power. Thus, the participatory democracy we seek today is one that uses politics to tame markets and to steer society in the interest of justice.
- ▶ *Post-neoliberal anti-Westphalianism.* Finally, the crisis of neoliberalism offers the chance to resolve, in a productive way, our longstanding ambivalence about the Westphalian frame. Given capital's transnational reach, the public capacities needed today cannot be lodged solely in the territorial state. Here, accordingly, the task is to break the exclusive identification of democracy with the bounded political community. Joining other progressive forces, feminists might militate for a new, post-Westphalian political order—a multi-scalar order that is democratic at every level. Combining subsidiarity with participation, the new constellation

of democratic powers should be capable of redressing injustices in every dimension, along every axis and on every scale, including trans-border injustices.

I am suggesting, then, that this is a moment in which feminists should think big. Having watched the neoliberal onslaught instrumentalize our best ideas, we have an opening now in which to reclaim them. In seizing this moment, we might just bend the arc of the impending transformation in the direction of justice—and not only with respect to gender.