

## Race, Gender and Class: Some Reflections on Left Feminist Politics and Organising

**Brenna Bhandar\***

*These are notes from a short talk that I gave at the International Socialist Network meeting in London on 8 June 2013. They are a reflection of an informal discussion of some key issues facing left feminist politics and organising. A version can also be found at <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/analysis/151-brenna-bhandar-race-gender-and-class>.*

One of the speakers just noted how the organised left contingents at recent anti-fascist demos against the EDL and BNP have been largely white, and that there was a need to cultivate an anti-racist politics on the left that included more people of colour. I want to suggest that one reason for this absence is the perception amongst many people of colour on the left that socialist organisations and parties have had, and continue to have a very poor track record of taking issues of race and racism seriously. Taking race seriously requires more than mentioning the words 'anti-racism' and acknowledging that racism exists, and goes to the core of how we analyse political problems. This is what I want to focus on today.

Building a radical left political movement or network means taking race and racism, along with gender and sexuality (and we should also add, disability) seriously. And while there are great instances of solidarity and activism between left organisations and particular campaigns (the SOAS Cleaners' campaign, for instance), or in a different context, the efforts of the organisers of the Historical Materialism conference to account for race and gender, reflected in the stream being organised on [Race and Capital: Marxist Legacies of Anti-Racism and the Black Radical Tradition](#) that explicitly accounts for black feminist activism and scholarship, and critical indigenous theory, there remain quite serious obstacles to advances being made on this front.

An example of socialist feminist work that has failed to take into account issues of race and racism as a core part of its analysis of gender oppression can be seen in Nancy Fraser's recent work, *The Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013). A panel to discuss her work and to reflect on the Future of Feminism was held recently in London. Did the organisers of the session on the Future of Feminism not think it necessary to include any women of colour or scholars whose scholarship deals centrally with both race and gender? One of the panellists, in fact, mentioned at the conclusion of her remarks that race was a problem in the composition of the panel. (The session can be listened to [here](#)). This is important as it reflects a cognizance amongst left feminists that race *is* something that needs to be accounted for in feminist theorising.

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\* Lecturer in Property Law, Queen Mary, University of London. [b.bhandar@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:b.bhandar@qmul.ac.uk).

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This problem of representation is complex; it is not merely about the visible representation of women of colour, although this remains a very important issue because we are all too often absent from these sorts of discussions and our points of view rendered invisible. Representation however is a larger and more complicated problem because the left has not gotten very far in reconceptualising the very categories of analysis that people use to understand political phenomena, such as patriarchy. If socialist feminism(s) had reached a point where race formed a core part of its analyses, then it would perhaps not matter as much, as to whether or not the panel was all white. But chances are that one's standpoint or epistemological framework is still determined by one's experiences in the world. How is it, that nearly 40 years after the publication of Selma James' *Sex, Race and Class* (1976), and 30 years after the publication of Angela Y. Davis' *Women, Race and Class* (1982), race has yet to really permeate socialist feminist theorisations of patriarchy and capitalism?

And here we can briefly turn to Fraser's book (although there are many others that would serve as equally valuable objects of critique), and some of the problems with her frame of analysis that doesn't seem to account for the scholarship of black feminists, women of colour, subaltern and post-colonial feminism. *The Fortunes of Feminism* is a collection of Fraser's essays spanning the past 30 years or so. The collection is a testament to Fraser's original and highly significant contributions to the fields of feminist theory and philosophy.

When it comes to issues of race, gender and sexuality, however, I am not the first person to critique the manner in which race figures (and is also absent) in her work. The chapter entitled "A Genealogy of 'Dependency': Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare State" (co-authored with Linda Gordon) analyses the "racial and gender subtexts" of the discourse of welfare dependency in the U.S. While the chapter usefully unpacks some aspects of the political development of the term dependency, including its colonial and neo-imperialist dimensions, the repetition of the "housewife, pauper, native and slave" quadrumvirate as the focal point of analysis certainly recalls the criticism of Black feminists Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith encapsulated in the title *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of us are Brave* (1982). Black feminists have critiqued modes of analysis that fail to consider how the categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class cannot be kept analytically distinct if one is to understand how oppression operates along these axes in an interlocking manner.

In some of the later essays, Nancy Fraser focuses on the need for a post-industrial welfare state. In the chapter entitled "After the Family Wage: A Post-Industrial Thought Experiment" race disappears entirely from the discussion of waged labour and domestic work in the home. Issues of income equality between men and women take no account of how race and racism operate to devalue the work of women of colour in ways that differ markedly from that of white women. In fact, "'racial'-ethnic justice" is posited as an entirely separate

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goal from gender justice, to be “handled via parallel thought experiments.” The experiences of women of colour as workers in and outside of the home are not accounted for in devising the analytical framework of analysis.

Feminists have revealed the ways in which traditional Marxist understandings of labour as waged labour doesn't account for the socially reproductive work of women. Marxist feminists have also shown how theories of capitalist accumulation have invisibilised the reproductive labour of women who reproduce “the most essential capitalist commodity – labour power” (Federici, 2009, p8).

Feminists who take race as a fundamental part of their gender analysis have taken this critique much further, deepening our analysis of the contradictory ways in which capitalist exploitation operates. As Patricia Hill Collins has noted, Black women's relationship to both paid labour and unpaid work in the home is significantly different from that of white women:

A less developed but equally important theme concerns how Black women's unpaid family labor is simultaneously confining and empowering for Black women. In particular, research on U.S. Black women's unpaid labor within extended families remains less fully developed in Black feminist thought than does that on Black women's paid work. By emphasising African-American women's contributions to their families' well-being, such as keeping families together and teaching children survival skills... such scholarship suggests that Black women see the unpaid work that they do for their families more as a form of resistance to oppression than as a form of exploitation by men. (Collins, 2000, p46)

If time permitted, Collins' argument could lead to an interesting discussion of James' political demand for the remuneration of work done in the home. However, the point I want to make here is that when we try to understand the way in which labour as an analytical category needs to be reconceptualised to account for women's reproductive labour, this becomes a much more complex and contradictory endeavour when race is also a material concern. And this is really important for political organising. These debates have been going on in feminist communities in Britain since the 1970s when Marxist feminists identified the home and domestic work as a key site of women's oppression, without accounting for the very different experiences and understanding that Black women had of their labour and its relationship to the labour market.

I would be remiss in not mentioning the one, albeit very brief mention of the work of Southall Black Sisters by a panellist in the Futures of Feminism session: a brief but welcome attempt at refuting the analytical distinction between a politics of recognition and redistribution that is central to Fraser's theory of recognition. In this theory the issue of race seemed largely reduced to an issue of cultural difference or diversity. From there, it follows that race is understood as a category of identity, and on that basis, Fraser critically assesses an identity-based politics of recognition (while simultaneously

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acknowledging its importance) as having drawn attention away from the pressing political objective of redistribution.

However, in ignoring the ways in which women of colour have out of necessity integrated their claims for equality, recognition and redistribution (for it is impossible to separate these out practically or analytically when racism and sexism always-already constitute the specific form of class exploitation that one is faced with), their experiences, histories, and scholarship are rendered irrelevant. As Aslan and Gambetti have skilfully shown in a related context, Fraser's work has a tendency to "disregard the differences between feminist movements in their cultural, political and geographical contexts" (2011, p133).

One effect of this approach (and the failure to criticise it) is to universalise the experience of white, and most often, middle class women. The word "woman" is used as though it applies to all women when it actually represents and signifies the experiences and histories of white women. This means that the experiences of black women, Asian women (and, in other contexts, indigenous women) are erased or suppressed by the theories and politics of left feminisms. It means that the analyses of political problems that are being presented are partial and incorrect – because (as we know), capitalism has been forged through colonial dispossession, the Atlantic slave-trade, and now, a globalised form of capitalism that depends on third world labour whose value remains fixed – to some degree – by racism and a persistent belief in white superiority.

Now this is not a new problem, and I can only chalk the resistance of white feminists to put race at the forefront of their understanding of patriarchy and capitalism to a few possible things. One is a wilful blindness. Another is the reluctance, perhaps unconscious, to give up the many privileges that accrue to those who are racialised as white. A third is perhaps an inability to distinguish between simply declaring that racism is a problem and actually bringing a critical race analysis to bear upon their theorisations of gender oppression.

And it's clear that feminists outside of socialist and Marxist organisations are doing some of this work, and in some instances, it seems to me, are further ahead on this score. One need only look to Critical Ethnic and Critical Race Studies for evidence of this in academic contexts.

### ***Taking Account of Race, Gender and Sexuality***

There is a long and varied tradition of black radical thought and Marxist feminism that has sought to, in the words of Frantz Fanon, "stretch Marxist categories" in order to account for colonialism. It's important to recognise that the relations of exploitation established during colonialism have not ended. While formal decolonisation swept through Africa and Asia from 1947 onwards, contemporary patterns of globalised capitalist exploitation rely on the economic and political patterns and relationships established during

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colonialism. Settler colonialism continues as an on-going and continuously unfolding event – in places such as Palestine, Canada, Australia, and others, colonialism has not ended from the perspective of indigenous communities and First Nations.

To take another example of someone who incorporates an analysis of gender and race into her work, Silvia Federici has argued (drawing explicitly on earlier work of feminists like Selma James) that the making of the proletariat was only possible through a capitalist system that was committed to both sexism and racism. She writes:

Primitive accumulation, then, was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as ‘race’ and ‘age’ became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat. (Federici, 2009, p64)

So we can see that the sort of analysis that we need to cultivate if we are to take race, gender and sexuality seriously is one that seeks to reinterpret and reshape our conceptual toolkit. Federici has done this in relation to the category of the proletariat; Cheryl Harris in relation to property, gender and whiteness; historians of slavery and revolution – Eric Williams and C.L.R. James for instance – have done this in relationship to our understandings of how race shapes relations of labour and property; and we could go on with a multitude of other examples.

When I was invited to participate in this session, an ISN member mentioned that young activists turning their gaze towards feminism and anti-racism are interested in the idea of intersectionality as a method. Intersectionality emerged from an American academic discourse that was aimed at making liberal legal rights frameworks a bit better at accounting for how some people do not simply suffer discrimination along one axis, either gender or race or sexuality. While intersectionality usefully opened a conversation in the North American, and twenty years later, the British legal academy about how equality law could better function, in my view its usefulness has really run its course. Intersectionality is primarily a left-liberal law reform project that does little to account for class. As a discourse that is primarily academic and law reform-oriented, I don’t think that this has much to offer left political movements or radical Marxist critique. Having said that, a major qualification of this background to the concept of intersectionality is the work of British feminist Avtar Brah, who has used the term to describe a more radical and less limited method of analysing race, gender and class.

I want to conclude with another example of how to re-think the concepts that we use to explain political events. Stuart Hall and others, in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), explores the work that “labels” do when they are applied to certain phenomena. So they look at the label “mugging” that is deployed in the 1970s to construct particular sorts of crimes as novel, and in doing so, racialise acts

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of theft. They analyse how the label of mugging is used to criminalise black communities and bring in harsher forms of policing and sentencing in criminal trials.

What work are the labels that have been used to describe the Woolwich murders doing, when we see headlines in mainstream press such as “Beheaded!” Or “Bloody Terror: Islamist Beheads Soldier on London Street!” or “Blood on his hands, Hatred in his Eyes!”?

- By interpreting this event as one that is primarily if not solely about Islamic fundamentalism, what gets obscured?
- What work does the label of “jihadi” or “Muslim terrorist” do? What have these terms come to represent over the past 11 or 12 years?
- How do these labels detract from the other factors clearly of relevance when we think about the causes of radicalisation – i.e. racism, class disaffection, and the experiences of immigrants in this country?
- These were disaffected young Black British men; one of whom was subject to a violent racist attack right before his conversion to radical Islam. How do these facts fit into the narratives being created by mainstream media?

Richard Seymour (2013) has [written](#) about this eloquently and incisively and so I will refer you to his piece.

So to sum up, whatever priorities this network sets for taking action, for organising, for analysing and theorising, I think what is really vital is not simply using the language of anti-racism or anti-sexism. What is needed is some thinking through of how political campaigns for a living wage, or campaigns against the increasing privatisation of security and prisons, campaigns aimed at fighting increasingly draconian and punitive immigration policies, anti-austerity politics, etc and etc., need to be conceptualised in ways that take account of how capitalism is committed to and thrives off of racism, sexism and heteronormativity in all their complexity.

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