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Albena Azmanova

## **Empowerment as Surrender: How Women Lost the Struggle for Emancipation as They Won Equality and Inclusion**

"For I am pleading for the rights of the individual against the system... [in] a court of justice, not of law."

—Doctor Reeves in *Stairway To Heaven* (Powell and Pressburger 1946).

### **Introduction**

Could it be that as women won the battle for equality, they lost the war for emancipation? As women mobilized successfully in the second half of the twentieth century for liberation from patriarchy and for parity with men in the labor market and the workplace, they failed to fight a bigger fight. They failed to aspire to a radical transformation that could have also emancipated men from the productivist imperatives of competitive profit-making that set the parameters of our societies. As I will argue in what follows, two remarkable success stories combined to arrange this failure. One is political, the other intellectual. The political story is that of the struggle for equal rights. The intellectual story is that of the democratic turn in political theory. In a word, this is a tale of the failure of success.

It is important to note that I do not mean to deride in any way the struggles for equal rights and the democratic turn. The idea is to regard them, dialectically, as tragic victories—victories that entail failure not by having committed to the wrong goals or due to some

deficiency (failure by omission) but rather by force of these victories' very logic of achievement (failure by success).

These failures of critique and political mobilization call for a rethinking of the agenda of feminism from the point of view of a broader critique of contemporary market democracies, in which instances of gender injustice are symptomatic of broader social pathologies rooted in the operative logic of the social system. I adumbrate the elements of such a turn within democratic theory and practice after a review of the two success stories of failure (i.e., of political and intellectual mobilization) in the first part of this analysis.

At the outset, let me dispel a possible misapprehension. The criticism and critique of feminist mobilization offered here does not concern the unfinished business of gender parity (yes, much remains to be done), nor does the concern with failure that drives this analysis chime with conservative regrets about the damage feminism has allegedly done to domestic happiness (no, it hasn't done so). Liberal calls to women to "lean in" (i.e., bite the bullet, do the job, stand tall) and conservative ones to "lean back" (i.e., get married, take care of kids, and let men earn the wages) have a common denominator—they affirm the broader parameters of a way of life feminist mobilization should be rejecting. Let us neither lean in nor lean back. My call to women is: "Get out! And take the boys with you."

## **I. The Drama of Political Success in Two Acts of Failure**

The combined achievements of the first and second waves of feminism profoundly altered Western liberal democracies, with powerful spillovers around the globe. Were it only for the fact that women have been elevated out of their second-class status, it would be a truism to assert that feminist mobilization (the feminists and the political forces they gathered in support of their cause) has made the world a better place for women in many ways and, with that, a less unjust world for all to inhabit. The first wave of the feminist movement (in the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) aimed at removing legal obstacles to equality (e.g., property rights and voting rights). With this, it successfully delivered equality of citizenship. The second wave, spanning the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, presented a radical challenge to the androcentrism of capitalist societies. Kate Weigand (2000) traces the continuation between first- and second-wave feminists, with the Communist Party being one of their homes. Communist feminists such as Betty Millard, Susan B. Anthony II, and Eleanor Flexner provided an important continuum between first- and second-wave feminism, as they conceptualized gender, sexism, and race as central components of culture, economics, and politics in American society.

As part of the larger movement for equal rights, this feminist mobilization focused on a broad spectrum of economic, political, and cultural dimensions of the distribution of power that entailed the discrimination of women. Political struggles targeted the stigmatization of women as caregivers and the devalorization of this role in relation to that of the male breadwinner, a mainstream culture of sexism permeating all spheres of life and cutting across income and educational levels, as well as women's unequal access to and unequal positioning within the labor market. My subsequent analysis will predominantly draw on the mobilization of second-wave feminism in the United States.

These invaluable victories of second-wave feminism took place within a larger drama of failure that unfolded in two acts. In act one, set in the belligerent 1970s, women framed the agenda of their emancipation as freedom from the confines of domesticity and from their economic and social dependence on men. One of the key strategies for obtaining justice was to gain entry into, and an honorable place within, the political economy of capitalism. Women fought for the right to be exploited on a par with men, thus missing the opportunity to mobilize a broad alliance of forces (including working men) in favor of changing the model of wellbeing. The first failure is, therefore, that of narrowing the scope of combat to

the goals of inclusion and equality. In the second act of the drama, set in the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s, women were confronted with the negative consequences of their successful struggle for inclusion. The price of women's emancipation here comes in the form of deepened labor commodification and exploitation. I will address these two distinct trajectories of failure in turn.

### Failure by Success: Act One

One of the main targets of second-wave feminism has been the gendered “homemaker vs. breadwinner” model, which feminists saw as a locus of women's double subjugation: in the paternalism of the traditional family setup designating the man as a “head of household” on the one hand, and the economic and social dependence on a husband on the other. Gaining access to the labor market was the most direct road to economic and social emancipation. Women, of course, had excellent reasons to demand access to the labor market—they inhabited a political economy in which both social recognition and economic independence are almost exclusively sourced from one's participation in economic production. Yet, as they set out to mobilize against the gender-based “breadwinner vs. homemaker model,” they missed the opportunity to reject this model as a form of institutionalized mutual exploitation serving the imperatives of a system to which both men and women were subjugated.

In other words, women fought successfully against their subordination to men in terms of the place they occupied within a system of social relations. This is a form of domination we might call relational (as it concerns the position of one group in relation to others, or relative to others)—domination resulting from the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources between actors. However, focusing on inclusion into, and equality within, a certain model of wellbeing (a system of social relations) did not allow women to question the broader parameters of that model of wellbeing. Thus, they failed to fight for

emancipation from what we might call systemic domination—subordination of all to the functional imperatives of the particular system of social relations. (I first introduced this dichotomy as a distinction between relational and structural domination in Azmanova 2012a, but the notion of ‘systemic’ is more apt.<sup>1</sup>).

These two dimensions of domination are well captured in Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of gendered social relations in *Masculine Domination* (2001 [1998]). The object of his analysis here is the quasi-traditional Kabyle community, which at the time of his research in the early 1960s was a well-preserved androcentric society. Bourdieu dissects the process by which the socialization of boys and girls into different social roles and forms of behavior takes place. On the one hand, he describes this as a set of practices that favor more strongly in boys the various forms of the libido dominandi, which eventually leads to the subjugation of women to men as women are confined to roles of inferior social status. This is the remit of the relational domination of men over women. Yet Bourdieu also addresses the subjugation of men to the overarching logic of social reproduction and the suffering this entails, as “[m]en are also prisoners, and insidiously victims, of the dominant representation” (Bourdieu 2001, 49). He discloses the logic of this suffering in terms of men’s being subjected to societal expectations of success, which condemn them to failure despite perpetual striving for success:

Male privilege is also a trap, and it has its negative side in the permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances.

Inasmuch as its real subject is a collective—the lineage or the house—itsself shaped by the demands immanent in the symbolic order, the point of honour presents itself as an ideal, or, more precisely, as a system of demands which inevitably remains, in many cases, inaccessible.

Manliness, understood as sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and to exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a duty. Unlike a woman [...] a real man is someone who feels the need to rise to the challenge of the opportunities available to him to increase his honor by pursuing glory and distinction in the public sphere. [...] Everything thus combines to make the impossible ideal of virility the source of an immense vulnerability. (Bourdieu 2001, 50–51)

The imprisonment of man into the role of a dominating subject is the remit of systemic domination. Here men and women are together subjugated to the particular demands of the production and reproduction of symbolic and social capital. Usually, the terrain of relational domination is where victims fight other victims, and it is that antagonism that prevents them from joining forces in opposing systemic domination.

While Bourdieu's analysis addresses the trajectories of injustice in a traditional androgenic world, the same vectors of domination can be discerned within the operation of the modern capitalist societies that have provided the context of feminist struggles in the second half of the twentieth century. In their mobilization to eradicate forms of relational domination (their inferior social status vis-à-vis men), women failed to fight for the eradication of systemic injustice, the subjugation of both men and women to a particular logic of social reproduction typical of capitalism—namely, the competitive production of profit with its attendant dynamics of exploitation, alienation, and stratified distribution of life-chances.

From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, the fact that second-wave feminists idealized the role of breadwinner to such an extent as to make it the telos of their

combat is surprising. Were they oblivious of how deeply exploitative and alienating the status of breadwinner was? Surely, if they were to target the injustices this model entailed also for men, their struggles would have been worthier and more likely to succeed through this larger alliance.

The 1950s and 1960s were far from void of male voices protesting exploitation (in the style of the familiar Marxian critique). More remarkably, there were also voices rejecting the gendered “homemaker vs. breadwinner” model for the injustice it inflicted on men. We find such protestations in the most unlikely of places. In an article that appeared in the September 1963 issue of *Playboy* magazine (whose public sphere is hardly that of the exploited worker), the author remonstrates the exploitative and alienating nature of the marriage contract—for men:

The cloying quicksands of calculated exploitation make a mordant travesty of the marrying male’s romantic dreams ... [men] think they marry for love, but instead they take on the obligation of the “hubby” status—slaving to support a woman. (Iversen 1963, 92)

Surely, men and women had a joint interest in rejecting forms of institutionalized exploitation, including that of the traditional marriage, in common combat for an alternative, less alienating, form of existence.

It would be unfair, in fact, to reproach the pioneers of second-wave feminism for lacking a wider vision and a higher ambition. “Unlike now, we didn’t want a piece of the pie. We wanted to change the pie,” activist Alice Wolfson says in a recent documentary that chronicles the movement for women’s rights in the 1960s and early 1970s (Dore 2014). Socialist feminism had initially set out to elaborate such a new vision as an alternative to the two large strands of progressive mobilization of the time: liberal individualism with its

emphasis on personal liberation and growth, and the socialist movement, which focused on the way productive relations oppress all. Socialist feminists cautioned that the former risked leading to a “formless insulation rather than to a condition in which we can fight for and win power over our own lives,” while the latter tended to be “insensitive to the total lives of women” (Hyde Park Chapter Manifesto 1972). Moreover, the programmatic statement of socialist feminism calls for men and women to form an alliance: “More basically, under certain circumstances, working with men is feasible, desirable, and necessary to achieve our vision. Separatism as personal practice is a matter of choice, as political position is illusory” (ibid).

Why did feminists fail to build a larger alliance in a struggle not just for equality but also for a better form of life? Many factors contrived to narrow the feminist agenda. Traditional Marxists rejected feminism as a bourgeois ideology. Androcentric culture had a stronghold within the socialist movement. The documentary I referred to above contains striking archival footage showing activist Marilyn Webb attempting to address a crowd at an antiwar demonstration and being shouted down by men—her New Left comrades—who demanded that someone “fuck her down a dark alley” rather than allow her to continue talking. “Often our male comrades could not see their own sexism, and even when they did, could not grasp that there was something wrong with that. They simply could not help it,” comments Wolfson, highlighting the magnitude of obstacles to joining forces with men within the Left.<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning another factor in the exclusion of standard socialist concerns from the agenda of second-wave feminism in the United States. As the federal government was already committed to social reform in the 1960s (i.e., Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society reforms), in the words of another prominent feminist, socialism was no longer “sexy,” not exciting enough to spark mass mobilization, as was the struggle for equal rights.<sup>3</sup> Thus, emancipation from the all-pervasive, institutionalized male domination deeply rooted

in culture became the immediate and urgent task that allowed the various strands of feminism to unite around a common cause.

### Failure by Success: Act Two

The second act of the drama of the women's movement opens with the onset of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s. In recent work, Nancy Fraser (2009, 2013) has observed that neoliberal capitalism has managed to coopt the emancipatory politics of second-wave feminism as these politics focused on women's empowerment via their integration into the workforce. For instance, by increasing the volume of the labor force, women have alleviated the threat labor presents to capital via the possibility to obstruct production, which effectively increases the power of labor over capital. There is nothing that stimulates exploitation quite so effectively as the oversupply of labor. Thus, while women's entry into the labor market diminished to a considerable extent the relational domination of men over women, it deepened the relational domination of capital over labor.

In their detailed dissection of neoliberal, "networked" capitalism, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) claimed that the intellectual projects and political struggles of the Left in the second half of the twentieth century, including those of feminism for gender equality, have fallen into complicity with the agenda of neoliberal capitalism. A remarkable way in which feminism rendered service to advanced (neoliberal) capitalism is via the idea of flexible work arrangements (ones that allow combining work and care for the family), which neoliberalism hijacked to penetrate spaces and times previously free of production, such as the home and the holidays. The emancipatory energy of flexible working arrangements opened the door to deepened commodification, as the very insecurity of employment necessitates one's endless pursuit of an entry into the job market as well as perpetual engagement in strategies for remaining employable (Azmanova 2012b).

Thus, the relative success of such strategies targeting inclusion and equality within the model of wellbeing typical of modern capitalist democracies has come at a price. Not only has this model of wellbeing remained unquestioned, but it also has been given added valorization, as inclusion within it has become the telos of justice struggles (and with this the paragon of justice). Tellingly, one of the most prominent slogans of the Spanish Indignados (the young Spaniards who, in the summer of 2011, protested against the pathologically high unemployment among young people) reads: “We are not against the system; the system is against us.” (Coronado 2011) Rather than rejecting a system of political economy that no longer produces jobs yet persistently conditions social status and even social survival on holding a job, the protesters granted added legitimacy to the system of neoliberal capitalism by calling for inclusion into it. Similarly, rather than rejecting a system of social relations that conditioned one’s life chances on how successfully one participates in the competitive production of profit, feminists granted added legitimacy to that system by fighting for inclusion into it. Struggles against relational forms of injustice (inequality and exclusion) in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries did not simply marginalize the importance of systemic injustice. Be it inadvertently, such struggles fought relational forms of domination in the name of systemic domination.

## **II. Second-Wave Feminism and the Calamities of Critique**

The political parameters of the struggle against injustice might not be directly affected by the nature of intellectual critique, but there is an important correlation that is worth tracing. I turn to this next.

The mobilization for equality of citizenship that marked progressive politics in the late twentieth century was accompanied by a “democratic turn” in social and political philosophy, illustrated, for example, by the proliferation of models of participatory and

deliberative democracy in the 1980s and 1990s. The great debates on the merits of competing socioeconomic systems had come to their nadir in the 1960s, giving way to concerns about the failures of liberal democracies to deliver on their promise for equal and inclusive citizenship. I will argue that the normative matrix of democratic inclusion and equality, within which injustice came to be conceptualized, disabled the questioning of the systemic trajectory of domination.

### An Underlying Normative Fallacy

Let me begin by addressing a constraint social critique inherits from the very project of the Enlightenment—the compass for progressive politics within which the democratic turn itself takes place. The myopia regarding systemic forms of domination that has marked much of political activism and social critique in our times could most broadly be attributed to a peculiarity in the overarching matrix of normative justification as developed within the two most authoritative Western philosophical traditions—Republicanism and Liberalism—and the set of values they have offered in framing emancipatory struggles since the Enlightenment. Equality and personal freedom are the two core normative beacons through which Republicanism and Liberalism respectively assess the normative worth of political arrangements (Bellamy 2007).<sup>4</sup> These two values also came to gauge the normative contours of the post-Marxian critiques of capitalism. The social criticism developed within the labor movement paid allegiance to equality, while the humanistic rejection of capitalism developed within the New Left came to be driven by ideas of autonomy.

Equality and liberty form a powerful synergy in the principle of nondiscrimination (as discrimination hampers both), which has come to be vested in the constitutional legal orders of liberal democracies. It is this principle that guided much of the struggle for equal rights in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet it confines the conceptualization of

emancipation only to relational forms of nondomination. Let me resort to an example to highlight the downsides of this otherwise potent normative matrix.

A gender-parity law ensuring a 50 percent quota for women in politics was promulgated in France in 2001, obliging all political parties to present an equal number of male and female candidates in elections. The typical justification for the law ran along the logic of fundamental equality. As Denise Fuschs, head of the European Women's Lobby, put it: "Human beings are not abstract, they are men or they are women, so having a 50–50 system is a reflection of the way things really are" (Daley 2001).

This appeal to fundamental principles of equality and liberty energizes most of the authoritative accounts of justice that ground intellectually western democracies. Such appeals have been professed since the proclamation of "self-evident" notions of rights by the founders of modern normative philosophy, such as John Locke, and the founders of modern liberal democracies, such as Thomas Jefferson. However, by presenting these notions as self-referential normative guidelines, such thinking renders itself impervious to examining the social conditions under which these normative ideals gain particular social signification. For instance, the impotency of an appeal to abstract equality and freedom in alleviating social injustice became apparent in the struggles against racial discrimination before the separate-but-equal doctrine was repudiated in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. The Court had upheld the legitimacy of racial segregation in 1896 on the grounds that segregation did not amount to discrimination so long as equal conditions and equal treatment were provided.<sup>5</sup> When, half a century later, the Supreme Court judged separate educational facilities of equal quality to be inherently inequitable, it did not suffice to invoke the universal moral principle of equal treatment vested in the Fourteenth Amendment. Arguing that racial segregation is detrimental to good citizenship (as a second-order reason for interpreting segregation as a form of discrimination), the Court based its

decision on considerations regarding the sociostructural logic of citizenship in liberal democracies.<sup>6</sup> The separate-but-equal doctrine had ensured only (abstract-legal) relational equality between the races. However, the persisting systemic domination comes into view when the issue of citizenship is seen within the operative logic of liberal democracies as political systems. Such systems are constitutively reliant on the principle of the abstract sameness of citizens (not just their equality) in the eyes of political authority. Thus, drawing group distinctions within the body of the citizenry is by definition alien to liberal democracies because it violates the systemic imperative of civic sameness—ergo, the need to remove all legal distinctions. In other words, only when it came to see racial segregation as a matter of systemic injustice (eroding political sameness as the constitutive principle of citizenship) did the Court effectively resolve it as a matter of relational injustice (i.e., the inequality and exclusion African Americans suffered).

Feminist critique has developed within an intellectual horizon already delineated by concerns with relational forms of nondomination, such as individual autonomy and equality—the invaluable heritage of the Enlightenment. This accounts for the manner in which the movement has failed in its very achievements. Let me now zoom in on some specific iterations of the democratic turn within which the feminist agenda developed, examining the achievements for grains of failure.

### The Cultural Turn and Identity Politics

An important element of the democratic turn in social and political theory is what has come to be known as the “cultural turn” in critique. This turn energized the flourishing of identity politics in the late twentieth century, without which we would have had neither the success story of the mobilization for emancipation of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, nor that of the struggles against the maldistribution of recognition and respect based on gender and

sexual orientation. Nevertheless, this victory has come at the cost of marginalizing the critique of capitalism beyond redistributive concerns, thereby obscuring the systemic trajectory of domination, as I shall demonstrate next.

Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) distinguish between two types of criticisms of capitalism that have developed since the nineteenth century. The first, labeled “social criticism,” has as its vector the labor movement and it targets inequality, misery, and exploitation. The second, labeled “artistic criticism,” targets pervasive commodification and market domination, and it vindicates the ideal of individual autonomy. The latter provided the conceptual engine for the humanist and cultural turn in social critique in the late twentieth century, which found expression in identity politics and the struggle for equal rights. This is an unequivocal achievement. Yet, as Boltanski and Chiapello contend, the cultural turn in social critique, by replacing the Marxian focus on the political economy of exploitation with a focus on the cultural logic of dehumanization, eventually brought the intellectual projects of the Left into complicity with capitalism in its neoliberal iteration. The notions of individual autonomy, flexibility, and choice that the humanist critique had espoused were absorbed into the legitimation resources of the neoliberal, flexible, “networked” capitalism that ensued in the 1980s.

The charge of abandoning concerns with systemic domination (i.e., related to the imperatives of competitive production of profit) is particularly heavy for neosocialist feminists, who, as Teresa Ebert observes, “by-and-large have substituted Foucault for Marx, discourse for ideology, and have joined other poststructuralist feminists in embracing a cultural or discursive materialism” (1995, 113). This transformation took place within a broader communicative turn that also established the hegemony of deliberative democracy in democratic theory and practice. Within critical social theory of the Frankfurt School descent, the communicative turn was initiated by Jürgen Habermas as he replaced the original

commitment of this school of thought to a critique of technological modernity (also the object of his own earlier work) with analyses of rationality as he developed an instrumentarium for normative critique derived from communicative practices in the form of what he named “discourse ethics.”

With the unwavering advent of deliberative democracy since the 1980s, “for contemporary democratic theorists, democracy is largely a matter of deliberation,” as John Dryzek (2005, 218) notes, without deliberate sarcasm, it seems to me. Deliberative politics, for instance, takes pride of place in the Charter of Shared Social Responsibilities the Council of Europe recently adopted in an effort to tackle social and economy adversity (Council of Europe 2011). In it, “shared decision making based on impartial reasoning” is deemed “essential in order to guarantee the principles of social, environmental and intergenerational justice” (ibid, 5). In this important document, the reliance on deliberation as a solution to social injustice contrasts with the lack of mention of policy ideas to tackle the social risks incurred by free and open markets. This lack is typical since the democratic turn in political theory and social criticism: as it made the shortcomings of democracy its empirical entry point, democracy its normative horizon of critique, and democratic deliberations the method of emancipation, social critique drained itself of resources to address systemic forms of domination.

The cultural turn (as a shift away from a critique of the political economy of capitalism) was not an unfortunate misstep—on the contrary, the struggle for equal rights would have been futile without critical attention to the way culture and discourse endow identities and social roles with particular valorization, which in turn affects the distribution of life chances in society. Without that, pledges to equality and inclusion would have been little more than political declarations. Moreover, in their gender blindness, “classical paradigms” were not only unsuitable for feminist critique but also detrimental to the feminist cause. Seyla

Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (1987, 1) observe, in the introduction to a volume that presents leftist feminism as a novel and comprehensive trajectory of critique, that "the confrontation between twentieth-century Marxism and feminist thought requires nothing less than a paradigm shift ... [described as] the 'displacement of the paradigm of production.'" This displacement was equally away from the "utopia of labor" as from "emancipation through the liberation of work" (ibid, 3). Surely, the collective consciousness and collective identity of women could not be derived exclusively from their position within the production process, as emancipation could not come simply through that process.

With the necessity to overcome what they saw as economic determinism in "classical Marxism,"<sup>7</sup> much of leftist feminism fell into discursive determinism, just as democratic theory became infatuated with deliberation. This has robbed these strands of critique of a conceptual apparatus to address the manner in which the systemic imperative for a competitive production of profit (and not just the process of economic production) hijacks women's emancipation for the purposes of the neoliberal agenda. The novel strands of materialist feminism without Marxism (i.e., without an interest in the political economy of capitalism) have left a heritage of, as Ebert poetically puts it, "identity politics of undone identities" (Ebert 1995, 129). Similarly, but without attributing the causality of damage as running so directly from identity politics to the demise of critique, Fraser (2013) has discussed how feminism's immersion (I would say necessary immersion) in identity politics has coincided with the rise of neoliberalism.

The dialectical balance between the ideational and material aspects of the feminist agenda is probably best obtained in Fraser's critique of women's emancipation: identity recognition here goes hand in hand with women's access to, and position within, the workplace. Access to the labor market and identity recognition are treated as goods to be distributed fairly between men and women in order to remedy the injustice of women's social

exclusion and subordination to men. Importantly, recognition of valued identities is not derived from the fair redistribution of access to the labor market—these are distinct, albeit related, trajectories of women’s emancipation. To this, Fraser adds the dimension of political inclusion, to form the triad of women’s empowerment: “redistribution, recognition, and representation” (Fraser 2005). More recently, as she admits the unintended complicity between second-wave feminism and neoliberal capitalism, Fraser (2013) has suggested that radical feminism join forces with other movements to bring the economy under democratic control.

Note, however, that even the best strategies for empowerment have been conceived along what I called the “relational” trajectory of justice—the equal distribution of society’s material and ideational resources, including the distribution of access to these resources, is to ensure that no group is dominated by another. Thus, while attention is focused on the inclusion of women within a certain socioeconomic model and their parity with men within this model, there is no questioning the way the larger parameters of the system are set by capitalism’s imperative for a competitive production of profit, with all the familiar damages exploitation and alienation incur. While redistribution is very welcome, predistribution would be even better.

This points to a wider myopia that afflicts more than the cultural/humanist turn in social critique that focused attention on the asymmetries of symbolic power and identity misrecognition (e.g., discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation). This myopia has also afflicted whatever has remained of the critique of political economy—the “old school” socialist critique of economic inequalities demanding remedial policies of redistribution of resources and access to the labor market. These are still conceptualizations of injustice within relational domination—the concern is invariably with the way society redistributes its resources (material and symbolic), not with the way it produces them.

Telling of this reflex to understand problems of systemic injustice as problems of relational domination is the way socialist feminists understood social relations. They criticized the agenda of liberal feminism with its stress on personal autonomy as being dangerously solipsistic and proposed instead to focus on social relations. In doing so, however, they conceptualized these relations strictly in terms of the asymmetry of power between men and women, proposing therefore to target the “institutionalized system of oppression based on the domination of men over women: sexism.” Capitalism’s contradictions were seen as being “based on the hostile social relations set into force by this domination” (Hyde Park Chapter Manifesto 1972), and not the relations into which actors enter under the imperative for a competitive production of profit.

Setting the diagnosis of gender injustice exclusively in terms of relational, rather than systemic, domination might be traced back to Engels’ treatment of the issue in his “The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State” (1884), which was an authoritative source for Left intellectuals. In this work, despite noting that men’s dominance over women stems from the institution of private property, Engels fails to treat the issue within a Marxian critique of the larger operative logic of capitalism—the dynamics of commodification and alienation affecting not only wage labor. Thus, Engels eventually concludes that the only way to liberate women from what Lenin later called “domestic slavery” was to incorporate them into the paid labor force. Such a position, however, subsumes one form of relational domination into another—that of the domination of women by men into the domination of wage labor by capital.

Bebel (1879) and Lenin (1919) went beyond the idea of emancipation via labor-market inclusion, arguing that the only way to liberate women was to liberate the working classes through the elimination of private property. While targeting private property is a (facile) shortcut to the structural logic of capitalism, this obscures the matter of the very

practices of the material production of social life (which had been essential for Marx). The reduction of modes of social practice to forms of ownership allowed public authority, under the regimes of state socialism, to assume the role of owner of the means of production without changing essentially the systemic dynamics of competitive generation of profit, thereby perpetuating the exploitation and alienation that these dynamics incurred. State socialism thus maintained the logic of systemic domination at work in capitalism, even as it eliminated some forms of relational domination within it (i.e., the inequality between men and women), as well as structural domination (by eliminating the structure of private property).

To sum up: Intellectually and politically, the critical enterprise came to be directed against disparities in social status, political voice, and access to resources. It therefore sought to eliminate status hierarchies, economic inequality, and political subordination, in order to ensure equal and active citizenship for all via recognition, redistribution, and participation—as Fraser (1996) articulated the comprehensive agenda of justice for our times. With this, however, the remarkable, and remarkably successful, political struggle of the Left in the late twentieth century exclusively targeted the relational dimension of domination engendered by the asymmetrical distribution of power within a system of social relations, without challenging the system itself.

Redeeming the feminist agenda from its current cooptation by neoliberal capitalism would therefore necessitate the articulation of a perspective of critique that allows us to see gender injustice as a symptom of broader social pathologies rooted in systemic domination, domination to which even the winners in the relational distribution of power—men, in this case—are subjected.

### **III. Transforming the Antagonism of Gendered Injustice into the Agonism of De-**

## **gendered Social Critique**

As I commented earlier, on the plane of relational domination, often victims of systemic domination fight other such victims. While the winners and losers from the unequal distribution of power here are engaged in a zero-sum game—ergo, in an antagonistic struggle against each other—their relations on the plane of systemic domination are neither those of complicity nor of antagonism; their relations are agonistic – able to trigger a mutual activation and empowerment.

A reformulation of the critique of gender injustice enabling it to also address systemic domination would require that we sublimate the analysis of antagonistic conflicts (over the unequal distribution of power between men and women) into agonistic mobilisations of the former antagonists, targeting the common structural origins of the often conflicting experiences of injustice.

However, to undertake a critique that transcends concerns with unequal distribution of power, we need first to overcome our infatuation with relational solutions to injustice (such as inclusion and redistribution) by introducing a pragmatist idea of justice and normative validity – to which I turn next. Rather than postulating the ideals of a just society in terms of deontological notions of equality or individual autonomy (as in the socialist and liberal strands of feminism), the acceptability of remedies to injustice should be assessed in terms of the extent to which these measures alleviate suffering—i.e., the extent to which they are (1) an effective response to the grievance of suffered injustice that has activated the debates of justice and (2) an effective response to the systemic domination to which relational domination is a symptom. I have named this normative principle that of “critical relevance”—a principle allowing the issue of justice to be approached hermeneutically, as a problem of experienced injustice attributable to deep structural sources. The principle of

critical relevance specifies the epistemic basis of validity of norms. It is neither the “true” and the “rational” (Habermas) or the “reasonable” (Rawls) but the “critically relevant”: what divergent evaluative perspectives see as relevant in the critical sense of qualifying as an object of disagreement. This notion of relevance implies a correspondence between the principles that guide practices, on the one hand, and, on the other, specific societal concerns of injustice, concerns that critically (as opposed to instrumentally) motivate these practices (Azmanova 2012a, 194).

Within a model of judgment guided by the principle of critical relevance, equality between men and women provides but a poor justification for the French law on gender parity, to take the example I discussed earlier. This is the case because gender is not relevant to the distribution of political office, in the way, for instance, citizenship or age are. However, the law finds stronger justification when its validity is tested on grounds of the alleviation of particular, structurally generated social harm. From this perspective, the proper normative grounds for the French parity law would not be the allegedly “natural” equal ratio of men to women (on which the argument about nondiscrimination of women largely relies). The law can be, instead, justified as providing a solution to a situation of historical injustice in French society—namely the systematic marginalization of women in the workplace, including the distribution of political office. In 1995, then Prime Minister Alain Juppé dismissed eight of the twelve women ministers he had hired six months earlier. This act drew attention to the precarious status of women in politics, making this a relevant issue for debates on justice. The highly visible gesture of disrespect for women in politics created a public feeling of injustice to which the law, passed in early 2001, was a reaction. The law was born not out of the “discovery” of an authentic situation of numerical equality among men and women, but out of bringing to public attention (making visible) a longstanding and deeply rooted injustice.

Within such logic of normative justification, the principle of critical relevance would deprive a gender-parity law of validity, should such a law be adopted in a context free of gender discrimination. Moreover, when critique is guided by the principle of critical relevance, we are brought to examine not only whether gender is relevant to the distribution of political office but also the way in which it becomes relevant—namely via a historical pattern of creating exclusion and power asymmetries that go beyond the initial grievance—e.g., beyond the subordination of women. Thus, we will notice that ethnic and racial minorities have suffered similar injustices to those of women (e.g., exclusion from political office and the labor market, as well as malrecognition). This questioning of the way claims to justice acquire political relevance would then bring to light the fact that power inequalities between men and women in the distribution of public office are akin to other forms of relational domination that the French law on gender parity obliterates. For instance, citizens of North African origin have limited access to professional politics in France, despite the fact that they constitute a numerically significant minority among French citizens. Thus, while the original grievance about gender discrimination serves as an empirical entry point of critique, the dynamics of reasoning would lead to the discovery of an ever-broader pattern of injustice rooted in the manner in which the political and socio-economic systems interact.

With regard to gender justice, however the dynamics of generalization reaching beyond gender-specific relational forms of domination and into systemic forms of domination are often hampered by the very regulations that were meant to tackle the pathology, as these regulations tend to institutionalize gendered equality as a paragon of justice. Let me use an example. Since the Amsterdam Treaty of the European Union (signed in 1997), which introduces an explicit commitment to gender parity (in Article 2), a number of legal instruments have been adopted to valorize the role of women in the European Union (EU) while granting them the same prerogatives as men. This positive affirmation of the rights of

women in EU law fails to eliminate completely the idea of gendered social roles (as these regulations treat women as a socially relevant collective entity). Moreover, the logic by which neoliberal capitalism has hijacked progressive politics, which I discussed in the first part of this analysis, plays here in full force. Significantly, provisions on gender equality have been introduced in the highest legal order of the EU in order to prevent market distortions. By increasing competition, the lifting of trade barriers among member states risked prompting companies to seek competitive advantage by hiring lower-paid female labor (Burri and Prechal 2010). Thus, gender parity was institutionalized in the EU for the purpose of aligning the new political architecture of the union with the constitutive vision, for the EU, of a competitive market economy. In this way, however, regulations addressing gender parity perpetuate the systemic logic of capitalism while presenting equality between the sexes as a self-referential ideal of justice. Thus, gender parity, being institutionalised in EU law as the final horizon of justice, precludes the feminist agenda from aspiring for the complete degendering of social roles.

How is critique of forms of relational domination to transform into critique of systemic domination? As I suggested, we should seek a common denominator among the grievances of the antagonists, as this common denominator will guide us to identify the dynamics of systemic domination that afflict all.. In the case at hand, let us examine the grievance of the privileged group in the relational distribution of social advantages between men and women—those of the skilled male workers. Data from the European Social Survey indicate that nowadays this group reports the highest levels of work-life conflict under the pressure of stressful jobs (McGinnity and Calvert 2009). Overall, more men work very long hours; the percentage of male employees working very long hours across OECD countries is 17 percent, compared with 7 percent for women (OECD 2016). Moreover, research indicates that increased commodification pressures (especially working overtime) are particularly

strong on skilled labor, irrespective of gender, in sectors exposed to globalization, as here the competitive pressures are strongest (Azmanova 2012b, 455–6). Social surveys also signal that increasingly the shared grievance is not about poor work-family balance, but about the impossibility of balancing work, family, and leisure time (time free of both work and care).

Such a broader, agonistic analysis of grievances would lead us away from solutions available on the plane of relational justice. One such typical solution has been for men and women to share the family responsibilities just as they have begun sharing the breadwinning burden (Slaughter 2015). This might indeed accomplish the liberation of men and women from prescribed roles. Yet, as this strategy still works within the distributive logic of justice (seeing the matter as relational domination), it is unlikely to give but a temporary respite. The problem is not only the unequal, and gendered, distribution of care and breadwinning responsibilities but also the intensified competitive pressures that the political economy of neoliberal capitalism generates for all participants. These pressures are produced by policies enacting the operative principle of the system—in the case at hand, the competitive production of profit in globally integrated economies. It is this operative principle that dictates the logic of social reproduction (e.g., making oneself and one’s children employable), which increases the productivist pressures at work, at home, and during one’s leisure time, as it charts notions of desired self, personal achievement, and societal well-being. Unless we target the institutionalised logic of competitive production of profit, inclusion and equality within the system of capitalist democracies would be but palliatives, dulling pains that call for a radical cure.

### **Conclusion: Women, Get Out and Take the Men with You!**

I have argued that the manner in which women fought for, and won, gender equality within the context of capitalist democracies without attempting to change in significant ways the

operative, systemic logic of the political economy of their societies (namely, the competitive production of profit) has turned their splendid success into a failure. Women's empowerment through gaining access to the labor market (including political office) has indeed delivered emancipation from patriarchy and economic and social subordination to men. However, this empowerment comes in the form of a surrender to the productivist imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. Neither "leaning in" nor "leaning back" would deliver the emancipation we still crave. Refusing to submit to the competitive production of profit, which has by now permeated all spheres of our existence, is the next road to take. Rather than trying to "have it all," we must change the desired "all." And that would not be bad for the boys, either.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 'Relations', 'structures, and 'systems' are distinct entities which can be repositories of power and dynamics of domination. I speak of the institutionalised order of social practices (society) as a system of structured social relations. At the level of the system, an operative logic, or principle, constitutes the institutionalised social order – this concerns the dynamics of the production of social power before power and privilege is distributed in particular ways. At this level we speak of capitalism and socialism as distinct systems of social relations, and democracy and dictatorships as political systems. In the case of capitalism, the main structure within which social relations take shape is that of the private property of the means of production, itself based on the institutions of private property, the contract, and the market. The operative principle/logic that constitutes the system is that of the competitive production of profit, which might, or might not, ensure economic growth.

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Wolfson, personal interview. March 18, 2015, San Francisco.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne McCormick, personal interview. February 14, 2015, San Francisco.

<sup>4</sup> The republican tradition runs from Aristotle and Cicero, through Rousseau and the political ideals of the American Revolution, to contemporary theorists of "communitarian democracy." The younger liberal tradition runs from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant, to contemporary liberal philosophers.

<sup>5</sup> Summarizing the majority opinion, Justice Brown declared, "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority" (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537).

<sup>6</sup> "The most avid proponents of the post-War Amendments undoubtedly intended them to remove all legal distinctions among 'all persons born or naturalized in the United States.' ... Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. ... To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in

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the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al. 347 US 483).

<sup>7</sup> Marx himself denounced economic reductionism as a “materialist doctrine.” The standpoint of what he calls “new materialism” he develops is “human society, or social humanity.” The focal point of his ontology is historically situated, “sensuous human activity, practice,” as in his account, “all social life is essentially practical” (1978 [1845]). Marx never subsumes the practical nature of social existence into a purely economic activity—this was done by his later interpreters, thereby incurring great damage to Marxian critique. To pay proper attention to the “mode of production of material life conditions” (1978 [1859]) and the relations people enter in the course of the social reproduction of their existence, as Marx did, by no means suggests reducing social existence to economic production, what Marx calls “material production of life.” In fact, the paradigm shift discussed by Benhabib and Cornell (1987) does restore the original Marxian focus on historically situated human practice with all its ideational and material dimensions.