

Socialist Feminism

“I do not know of any other book that so effectively explains socialist feminism and brings it into conversation with global social movements. There is a twenty-first-century timeliness and urgency to Afary’s cogent and expansive case. Attendant to structures of capitalist accumulation and alienation, she considers how they are playing out in a global pandemic, planetary climate crisis, the oppression of Black lives, and the appropriation of reproductive labour. At a time when feminism is under fire, Afary has given us a powerful teaching tool!”

—Rosemary Hennessy, author of *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* and *In the Company of Radical Women Writers*

“Frieda Afary is brilliant in this powerfully relevant critique of authoritarianism, capitalism, sexism, racism, and other forms of tranny. She methodically unpacks the historically complicated plethora of gender, race, and class theories to show us the way toward a contemporary approach to socialist feminism that is revolutionary. Afary presents a radical vision that challenges us all to think more critically toward reimagining and recentering the world of womyn and a world without prisons. Her analysis centers racial justice that is anti-heteropatriarchy, anti-oppressive, anti-sexist, and transformative.”

—Romarilyn Ralston, Black feminist abolitionist and Executive Director of Project Rebound, California State University, Fullerton

“I highly recommend this very readable yet highly rigorous retelling and refiguring of socialist feminism. Afary’s claim that humanism is far more flexible than the version that was dismissed in the 1980s is provocative and compelling. The book engages poststructural theory, as well as race and sexuality, and will be useful for scholar-activists in thinking through some of the most vexing questions posed by socialist feminism.”

—Judith Grant, Emerita Professor, Ohio University and co-editor of *New Political Science: A Journal of Politics and Culture*

“When many of us are feeling discouraged with the state of our countries and of the world, Frieda Afary’s timely book shows the way to understanding, consciousness, and activism. This book can help prepare young people to improve societies. As the grandmother of two African-American females, I am profoundly grateful for this amazing volume.”

—Mary Elaine Hegland, Professor of Anthropology, Santa Clara University

“Frieda Afary has dared to challenge the world of intellectuals to define a new action paradigm. How do women protect themselves? Afary debunks the distortions in the ‘self to other’ relationships, and critically analyses the conditions leading us toward peril and destruction. Whether you read this book all at once or in small settings with friends, you will be better prepared to live within the 21st century.”

—Wonda Powell, Emerita Professor of History, Los Angeles Southwest College

Socialist Feminism

A New Approach

Frieda Afary

PLUTO  PRESS

First published 2022 by Pluto Press
New Wing, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA
and Pluto Press Inc.
1930 Village Center Circle, Ste. 3-384, Las Vegas, NV 89134

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Frieda Afary 2022

The right of Frieda Afary to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4775 2 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4773 8 Paperback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4777 6 PDF
ISBN 978 0 7453 4776 9 EPUB

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
Introduction: Rethinking Socialist Feminism to Find a Pathway Out of Authoritarian Capitalism and Develop a Humanist Alternative	1
1. The Pandemic, the #MeToo Movement, and Contradictory Developments in Gender Relations	10
2. Distinctive Features of Authoritarian Capitalism/Imperialism Today and the New Challenges of Black Lives Matter and Global Uprisings	29
3. Women, Reproductive Labor, and Capital Accumulation: Theories of Social Reproduction	53
4. Alienated Labor and How It Relates to Gender Oppression	70
5. Black Feminism and Intersectionality	83
6. Queer Theories	100
7. Theorizing a Socialist Humanist and Feminist Alternative to Capitalism	119
8. Overcoming Domination: Reconceptualizing the Self-Other Relationship	146
Conclusion: Socialist Feminist Revolutionary Organizing in the Twenty-First Century	168
<i>Notes</i>	176
<i>Bibliography</i>	186
<i>Index</i>	219

Introduction: Rethinking Socialist Feminism to Find a Pathway Out of Authoritarian Capitalism and Develop a Humanist Alternative

This book begins by situating the context in which we live today: the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on women, children, and gender dynamics, the rise of the #MeToo Movement, contradictory developments in gender relations, the distinctive features of authoritarianism and capitalism/imperialism in the twenty-first century, the challenges of Black Lives Matter and global uprisings against authoritarianism, imperialist invasion/war and ecological catastrophe. Having an understanding of all these developments can help us engage in a rethinking of socialist feminism in order to find a direction forward, combat authoritarianism, militarism, and conceptualize an enriched emancipatory socialism with transformed gender relations at its heart. The many facts examined in this book show that the challenges we face are both objective and subjective, involving deep structures of class divisions, racism, sexism, heterosexism, as well as alienation. The assault on women, people of color, and people who do not *fit* into the gender binary has been ceaseless and is intensifying with the COVID-19 pandemic.

These developments compel us to re-examine and rethink socialist feminism's philosophical foundations and offer a humanist alternative to capitalist-racist-homophobic patriarchy in its twenty-first-century manifestations. In order to help develop such an alternative viewpoint, I will critically examine four foundational socialist feminist theories of gender oppression: (1) theories of social reproduction, (2) theories of alienation, (3) intersectionality, and (4) queer identities. I will then examine socialist feminist efforts to conceptualize an alternative to patriarchal and homophobic, as well as racist, capitalist, and imperialist forms of domination which continue to perpetuate the oppression of women and also destroy our ecosystem. Through a process of examina-

tion and discovery, this book hopes to draw out lessons from and for socialist feminist revolutionary theorizing, organizing, and international solidarity today.

The socialist feminism that I am advocating in these pages is informed by Social Reproduction Theory, Marxist-Humanism, Black Feminism, and Queer Theories. I attempt to offer a more expansive concept of socialist feminism that has been enriched by reflecting on these conceptual frameworks and the new challenges we are facing.

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I was born in an Iranian-Jewish family in Tehran, Iran. My parents and my extended family considered themselves modern. However, looking back at our lives, I recall how conservative and patriarchal they were when it came to women in our society. During my adolescence in the 1970s, nearly all the families in our upper middle-class neighborhood were concerned with how to raise modern educated daughters. Yet young women were expected to remain committed to the strict modesty rules of our society that confined a woman's life to having a husband and children, and often required her to endure domestic violence. One of the glaring contradictions which I faced during my adolescence was the division between the growing modernization of the urban middle and upper middle class and the deep poverty of the working classes and the newly arriving rural population who lived in shanty towns. Another contradiction was the contrast between living in a multicultural environment, with Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Baha'i neighbors and classmates, and noticing that the stench of anti-Semitism and anti-Baha'ism was never far below the surface. The greatest problem was the reality of dictatorship. The whole population was living under the Pahlavi regime which paid lip service to modernity and liberalism but was highly authoritarian. At school, our teachers and administrators were constantly worried about the secret police and concerned about books that we might read. So many books were forbidden. Many youth were arrested and beaten up simply for reading forbidden books.

In 1978, shortly before a full-blown revolution emerged in Iran, my family emigrated to the United States. The revolution had a great impact on me, however. It involved students, women, workers, peasants, and professionals, many representing different national minorities. But it also

INTRODUCTION

included large segments of clerics and bazaar merchants who wished to turn the clock back on the modest social and cultural gains that had been made during the twentieth century. Both leftist and Islamic fundamentalist organizations vied for leadership of the revolution. Soon the latter forces decisively prevailed and the revolution turned into a brutal misogynistic and theocratic monstrosity that destroyed the Iranian Left, turned the clock back on the gains which urban middle-class women and religious minorities had made, and led to the migration of millions from the country.

Paradoxically, prior to its decimation, much of the Left had supported Ayatollah Khomeini as an “anti-U.S. imperialist” figure and insisted that everyone should unite under his banner since U.S. imperialism was “the main enemy.” This support for Khomeini was so strong that the Left refused to challenge how the followers of Khomeini were trampling on the rights of women, as well as those of religious and national minorities, such as the Kurds. Most leftists refused to support the March 8, 1979 women’s demonstrations against the Islamic fundamentalist takeover of the revolution, even though many of the women who organized and participated in these and other demonstrations were leftists themselves and were chanting, “we didn’t make a revolution to go backward” (J. Afary, 2009).

The deep contradictions of the Iranian revolution made me search for explanations. In the United States, I started attending meetings of leftists who opposed Khomeini and the theocracy in Iran. An encounter with the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya on the Iranian revolution piqued my interest. Dunayevskaya was a feminist and founder of the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism in the United States. She strongly supported the March 8, 1979 Iranian women’s demonstrations and pointed to the important role that Iranian women had played throughout Iran’s modern history, starting with the 1906–11 Iranian Constitutional Revolution. She challenged the Iranian Left for its lack of comprehension of the critical moment they faced. She also addressed the possibility of creating a different society and explored the vision of a total transformation of human relations with new gender relations as its measure (Dunayevskaya, 1981). At a time when the Iranian Left looked either to the Soviet Union or Maoist China as saviors, Dunayevskaya called these regimes totalitarian state capitalists. She was asking Middle Eastern revolutionaries to reach out and learn about the depths of the Black struggle and the

contributions of Africans and African Americans to emancipatory thought. She especially drew inspiration from nineteenth-century U.S. abolitionists.

My encounter with her intersectional Marxism encouraged me to read extensively about the Black struggle in the United States and the global history of feminist struggles. It also marked the beginning of my formal study of philosophy at university and my search for global international solidarity. All of these experiences helped me become a more critical thinker and a social activist. However, my formal study of philosophy in general, and feminist philosophy in particular, left me dissatisfied. I felt that in the case of Western philosophy, most academics were not interested in the experiences and ideas of people from the Global South. In the case of feminist philosophy, theorizing was often compartmentalized from international solidarity, and local perspectives were separated from global views.

During the past four decades, my study of philosophy, translations of philosophical texts into Persian, and translations of articles by Iranian dissidents, including feminist and labor activists, along with my experiences as an Iranian American activist, socialist feminist and public librarian, have all been an attempt to break these binaries. These experiences have also encouraged me to explore the question of a humanist alternative to capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism for the twenty-first century.

I hold on to the humanist designation because the #MeToo and the Black Lives Matter Movements and current global uprisings and protests against the rise of authoritarianism all show that despite the rise of populism and authoritarianism and the destructive impact of social media and disinformation on the human mind around the world, humans still have the *potential* for independent thinking and reasoning, in order to challenge dominant systems and to develop alternatives. These movements are crying out to be heard, comprehended, and further developed.

I hold on to the humanist designation, because, in the twenty-first century, we need an alternative to capitalism that challenges all forms of domination and transcends the oppressive models of the former USSR and Maoist China, as well as more recent claims to socialism as in Venezuela.¹

WHY SOCIALIST FEMINISM?

This book argues that a critical re-examination and rethinking of socialist feminist thought and activism during the past century can help us find a way forward to reverse the global authoritarianism, and thereby, direct the conversation toward a deep transformation of human relations. Gender oppression today is the result of the intertwining of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. None of these factors is autonomous. Rather, capitalism embodies both patriarchy and racism, forms of oppression that predate capitalism, which it uses for its benefit. At the same time, it is not sufficient to speak of capitalism as simply a mode of unequal wealth distribution, private property of the means of production, and market mechanisms. Capitalism is a system opposed to human self-determination and to nature. To the extent that it promotes individual freedom, it is an alienated, selfish, and utilitarian individualism that promotes the production of value but stands in opposition to collective emancipation and critical thinking. It objectifies and commodifies women and has consistently opposed women's control over their own bodies. Capitalism affects and alienates the mind and body and human relations in insidious ways that are not simply caused by private property and the market. Its alienated mode of labor affects all human relations and most deeply intimate and sexual relations. Socialist feminism addresses these questions.

Alternatives to capitalism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not created automatically and spontaneously. They require rootedness in history, philosophy, political economy, critical thinking, and national and international organization. That is why this book engages in critically analyzing twentieth- and twenty-first-century socialist feminist thinkers and their theories of oppression and emancipation as the basis for new global socialist feminist theorizing and organizing today. Each of the conceptual frameworks taken up in this book provides a *lens* (a term borrowed from Lise Vogel's (2014) *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*) for analyzing the particular oppression that women face as women. Each framework can enrich the other by posing questions about limitations or unaddressed issues. Each also opens the door to asking deeper questions about how to develop an alternative to capitalism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Toward that end, let's examine the structure of the book.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapters 1 and 2 explore the following question: What is new in the era of global authoritarianism, the #MeToo Movement, Black Lives Matter, and global uprisings?

Chapter 1, titled “The Pandemic, the #MeToo Movement, and Contradictory Developments in Gender Relations,” explores how the COVID-19 pandemic is destroying decades of gains made by women around the world. At the same time, the #MeToo Movement which emerged as a global movement in 2017 has been growing against sexual violence and femicide and offers unique challenges from socialist feminist and abolitionist perspectives. I will examine contradictory developments in gender relations since the 1980s because we cannot move forward without full awareness of this new and contradictory objective reality.

Chapter 2, titled “Distinctive Features of Authoritarian Capitalism/Imperialism Today and the New Challenges of Black Lives Matter and Global Uprisings,” begins with a Marxian explanation of why capitalism leads to authoritarianism. This chapter singles out the distinctive features of capitalist authoritarianism and multi-polar imperialism in the twenty-first century from a new form of state capitalism to mass incarceration and a high-tech assault on the mind. It also singles out some of the unique features and challenges of recent movements and uprisings against authoritarianism, imperialist invasion/war, ecological catastrophe. These include Black Lives Matter, uprisings or mass protests in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Belarus, Nigeria, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Chile, Myanmar, India, Palestine, as well as the popular resistance within Ukraine against Russia’s genocidal invasion.² In many of these protests, women have been in the forefront. The chapter ends with lessons that I have drawn from the 2011 Syrian uprising and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. These lessons pinpoint both the failure of the Arab leadership of the Syrian uprising to address class, gender, ethnic discrimination, and the reductive anti-capitalism of the Occupy Movement that often could not be distinguished from anti-globalist populism. Such a reductive anti-capitalism on the part of the Occupy Movement also led to a narrow anti-imperialism that only singled out Western imperialism and its allies while ignoring or siding with other global and regional imperialist powers such as Russia and Iran which helped to crush the Syrian uprising.

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 discuss socialist feminist theories of gender oppression.

Chapter 3, titled “Women, Reproductive Labor, and Capital Accumulation: Theories of Social Reproduction,” begins with a brief summary of the main theories of social reproduction from 1969 to today. Social reproduction looks at the everyday life of people under capitalism, paying special attention to reproductive labor and women’s lives. It examines pregnancy, childcare, family life, health care, and education, as well as the manner in which capitalism uses the concepts of gender, race, and sexuality to further its exploitation and social oppression. This chapter examines works by Margaret Benston, Silvia Federici, Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Lise Vogel as well as more recent contributions to this discussion by Martha Gimenez, Tithi Bhattacharya, Susan Ferguson, and critiques by Angela Davis and Michelle Barrett. I attempt to shed light on some of their arguments by returning to the categories of value and surplus value, productive labor and accumulation of capital which they have borrowed from Marx’s *Capital*, and by re-examining these categories. I also critically evaluate their arguments and attempt to draw out their assumptions and logical conclusions in order to find out to what extent their proposed suggestions can answer the questions and problems of today.

Chapter 4, titled “Alienated Labor and How It Relates to Gender Oppression,” examines the view that gender oppression, under capitalism, is rooted in alienated labor. I begin by reviewing Marx’s concept of alienated labor as it relates to gender in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and *Capital*. I argue that Marx gave us signposts that illuminate the relationship between a capitalist mode of production and the specific oppression that women suffer—as women and not simply as workers. The chapter will then examine the ways in which various socialist feminists have explored or touched on the connections between gender oppression and Marx’s critique of alienated labor. These socialist feminists include Angela Davis, Raya Dunayevskaya, Heather Brown, Ann Foreman, Nancy Holmstrom, Judith Grant, Marcia Klotz, Silvia Federici, and Gayatri Spivak. I end by arguing that a theory of gender oppression that is rooted in Marx’s concept of alienated labor can illuminate questions raised by the #MeToo Movement today and the increased prevalence of sexual abuse and assault.

Chapter 5, titled, “Black Feminism and Intersectionality,” draws out some key contributions of Black feminist intersectional thinkers and how their work can help redefine socialist feminism for the twenty-first century. First, it takes up the different articulations of Black feminist intersectional thought, beginning with the *Combahee River Collective Statement* and moving forward through the work of Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Tracy Sharpley-Whiting, and Joy James. Then, it will briefly examine the ways in which Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have extended intersectionality to contemporary Prison Abolitionist Feminism. It acknowledges the importance of Beth Richie, Mariame Kaba, and Romarilyn Ralston’s work on transformative and restorative justice, and the role of Black women in the leadership of the Black Lives Matter Movement, as well as challenges raised by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. The chapter concludes by engaging with Ashley Bohrer’s (2020) *Marxism and Intersectionality*. I will not examine intersectionality from the oft-repeated standpoint of socialists who argue that it does not see class exploitation as primary. Instead, my examination of intersectional thinkers aims to shed light on their view that oppression cannot be reduced to exploitation.

Chapter 6, on “Queer Theories,” critically examines queer theories developed by Judith Butler, Rosemary Hennessey, and Holy Lewis. It also draws on the ideas of Nancy Holmstrom, Judith Grant, Marcia Klotz, and Heather Brown on the ways in which Marx’s concept of human nature can help provide a fruitful ground for queer theory. I ask whether it is possible to develop a socialist feminist concept of sexual identity that is fluid but still relies on humanist conceptions of reason, universality, and solidarity. Toward that end, various critiques posed by Allison Weir, Nancy Fraser, Teresa Ebert and Sheena C. Howard’s (2014) *Black Queer Identity Matrix* and her challenge to any replication of patriarchal gender norms in LGBTQ relationships are taken up.

Chapters 7 and 8 provide an in-depth analysis of socialist feminist alternatives to capitalism and relations of domination.

Chapter 7, titled, “Theorizing a Socialist Humanist and Feminist Alternative to Capitalism,” begins by examining the ways in which works by Nancy Fraser, Ann Ferguson, Patricia Hill Collins, Maria Mies, Silvia Federici, and Kathi Weeks have attempted to pose a vision of an alternative to capitalism. The topic of ecofeminism is highlighted through a discussion of the ideas of Maria Mies. I also address some of the limita-

INTRODUCTION

tions of these works and ask whether a return to Marx can help socialist feminists develop an alternative to alienated human relations. Here I turn to insights from Audre Lorde who will be extremely relevant to our discussion. This chapter also briefly examines Raya Dunayevskaya's analyses of the former USSR and Maoist China as state capitalist societies in order to show us why we cannot consider what took place in the USSR and Maoist China as examples of socialism. I end with further questions and ideas about what theorizing a socialist humanist alternative to capitalism might mean today.

Chapter 8, titled "Overcoming Domination: Reconceptualizing the Self-Other Relationship," asks whether the dynamic of self-other always has to be about domination. How have socialist feminists analyzed this issue and sought to offer alternatives? I discuss the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Jessica Benjamin on the roots of domination, and then critically examine the ideas of Allison Weir, Raya Dunayevskaya, Frantz Fanon, and Audre Lorde on overcoming domination. The latter four thinkers all share a dialectical and humanist framework, and in the case of Weir, Dunayevskaya, and Fanon, they explicitly draw on Hegelian dialectics.

The Conclusion sums up the book and proposes ideas for organizing in the following areas: An opposition to war and imperialist invasion that does not limit itself to one pole of capital only; Building on the potential of the global #MeToo Movement to challenge capitalism's commodification and reification of human relations; Connecting the current global struggles and uprisings against authoritarianism, imperialist invasion/war, with the Black Lives Matter and Prison Abolitionist Movement in the United States; Articulating a humanist alternative to capitalism's destruction of humanity and nature, and to all forms of domination.

This book is the product of four decades of study and social activism. I have translated and published some of the aforementioned authors in Persian. I have corresponded with some of them, developed syllabi and curricula for classes and workshops, worked with scholar and activist colleagues from various parts of the world, organized meetings and conferences in public and community libraries with grassroots movements, produced and edited collaborative papers and published book reviews in the process of writing this book. Every chapter of this book has been a journey of discovery for me. I hope it will also be a journey of discovery for the readers.