

What's at stake in contemporary feminist theory?

A review of current writings on women, gender and feminism

Sonya Andermahr and Mary Davis

Rather than being the terrain of ideology and social relations, gender is something we 'perform, produce, and sustain' through our voluntary (if unconscious) actions. The implications of this manoeuvre have been disastrous for feminism, for the ways in which women's oppression is theorised and the ways in which it can be challenged and overcome.

There has been a flurry of publications on feminism and on women and gender in the past three or four years. This is to be welcomed especially in the light of the pervasive hostile environment in the academic world which has witnessed the extinction of women's studies and the antagonistic cancellation of feminist academics. Thus, this review, although critical of current writings on contemporary feminist theory, is presented in the light of our understanding of this current context which has seen the penetration of the now dominant gender identity ideology into what was once mainstream feminist theory.

This review of current writings on contemporary feminist theory is divided into three sections: Postmodernism and post-Marxism; the new materialism; and popular and radical feminism. The first section dealing with postmodernism includes reinterpretations of socialist feminism and revisions and misunderstandings of Marxism. This section and the following one, on the new materialism, are both influenced by the contentious sex versus gender issue, and most of the writers fundamentally (albeit sometimes unspoken) adopt aspects of queer theory and gender identity ideology. A misinterpretation of intersectionality pervades all of these works. All the literature in these two sections reject a Marxist understanding of women's oppression and the basic precepts of Marxist theory; namely dialectical and historical materialism. This is true of those authors who ostensibly champion materialism but see it only as an antidote to recent theory dominated by the cultural turn that privileges language and discourse. This is far removed from Marxist materialism as a dynamic way of understanding the development of human society.

Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that humankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion (Engels speech at Marx's graveside 1883).

In philosophical terms, Marxist theory represented a full-scale attack on idealism. However, philosophical idealism has undergone a bizarre 21st-century revival in the form of subjective idealism. This finds its current expression in queer theory and its offshoot, gender identity ideology. Seemingly the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley has been resurrected. He asserted that 'all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a mind; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known' -- in other words 'to be is to be perceived'.

This is the philosophy of 'immaterialism' and is diametrically opposed to Marxist materialism, which argues that the material world, perceptible to the senses, has objective reality independent of mind or spirit and that human consciousness is determined by social being and not the other way round.

Authors in our first category, influenced by the philosopher Judith Butler, in a weird paradigm shift, have apparently embraced subjective idealism in that they assert that biological sex can be reimagined as the product of our minds and that that 'women' as a category only exist as a 'juridical subject' (Butler). This is akin to Berkeley's belief that the material world does not exist outside our imagination.

Whereas gender is a product of the human mind, biological sex is not. Gender is an oppressive ideological construct which has forced upon us stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity, the lived reality of which has impeded women's right and class consciousness generally, and hence has obstructed progressive social change. However, biological sex is not an ideological construct. Socialist feminists continue to fight to unshackle our sex from the ideological prison of sexism and misogyny which constrains women and facilitates our oppression and super-exploitation. The sexist gender stereotype imposed on the ideological construct of 'womanhood' should not blind ourselves to the lived experience of being a woman in class society. It is the fact of biological sex which, subjugated by various forms of patriarchy, explains women's oppression and super-exploitation in class society.

Those writers who don't fully embrace immaterialism, but shy away from Marxism, take comfort from their (mis)appropriation of the concept of intersectionality. We say misappropriation because the origin of intersectionality was pioneered by black women fighting against their invisibility in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s. They understood the link between exploitation and oppression and thus articulated their rebellion in class terms. This was cogently expressed by the Combahee River Collective: 'We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women'. When this was further developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw who is credited with inventing the term 'intersectionality', it was not used to refer to multiple identities, but only to address the racist exclusion of black women.

We do not need to embrace the modern misapplied version of intersectionality to realise that people are composed of multiple identities which include race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability etc. Such identities, its proponents claim, intersect to create a whole which is different and far more complex than each of its component parts. But the problem is that intersectionality relegates class to a mere aspect of identity, thus defining it as a subjective choice rather than a material reality, and hence undermining the possibility of collective struggle against the very system which fosters oppression, discrimination, division and exploitation — capitalism. The declassified confusion of the current version of intersectionality theory has morphed into a variant of identity politics, which today has taken on a new guise in the form of its reductionist conclusion: self-identity — a major barrier to class consciousness.

The third tranche of writing which we review under the title of 'popular and radical feminism' is somewhat eclectic. The only common thread is that (with one exception) these are all non-academic writings and therefore accessible to a wider audience. This section includes gender-critical writings as well as anti-racist texts which counter the decades' long invisibility of black women in the feminist theory and practice of white middle-class women. With the exception of Julie Bindel's work, most of the other gender-critical books, although useful and informative, are devoid of a class perspective. The necessary focus on the single, albeit highly important, issue of opposition to gender identity ideology has led to political divisions in the search for allies in its support. As a single issue campaign, this in turn has led to many of its followers to myopic remoteness from the wider struggle for women's liberation.

1. Postmodernism and post-Marxism

Although published over 30 years ago, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is the foundational text for queer theory and trans identity ideology. She questions the category 'woman' as a 'juridical subject' (Lacan) and thus the assumption of the supposed universal basis of feminism. Butler, it is widely recognised, overturned over a hundred years of feminist distinction between biological sex and culturally imposed gender. To be a feminist was to be, precisely, gender critical. Butler fundamentally misinterpreted Simone de Beauvoir's formulation that 'one isn't born but rather becomes a woman' to argue that being a woman is a matter of cultural gender rather than biological sex. Rather than being the terrain of ideology and social relations, gender is something we 'perform, produce, and sustain' through our voluntary (if unconscious) actions. The implications of this manoeuvre have been disastrous for feminism, for the ways in which women's oppression is theorised and the ways in which it can be challenged and overcome. Moreover, Butler exploited the second wave's desire to reject 'biological essentialism' at all costs. The justified attacks on a feminism that was overwhelmingly middle class and white and increasingly academic took its toll on the confidence of feminists to assert a sex-specific political agenda and arguably led to feminism being subsumed in a host of other rights' claims and movements.

This eclecticism can be seen in a recent anthology of feminist criticism, *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, edited by Jennifer Cooke. According to its description, the book looks at the 'most pressing issues in contemporary feminism and collates essays which draw on recent debates within the field of feminist theory. Divided into three parts, the first section, Frontiers, deals with the following issues: transfeminism, the #MeToo movement, Black motherhood, sex worker rights, and celebrity feminism. The second part, Fields, discusses new theoretical developments in disability studies, eco-theory, queer studies, and Marxist feminism; and the third part, Forms, considers literary genres such as feminist dystopias, young adult fiction, feminist manuals, memoir, and poetry. As can be seen by these subheadings, the volume is heavily influenced by postmodern feminism and its incorporation of gender identity politics.

Given the decentring if not complete erasure of socialism in feminist works that followed Butler's postmodern trajectory, it is gratifying to see the recent publication of books that claim affinity with the socialist project. Subtitled A New Approach, Frieda Alfray's *Socialist Feminism* is informed, in her words, by social reproduction theory (SRT), Marxist-humanism, black feminism and queer theories. In this way she attempts to renew socialist feminism by incorporating these other conceptual frameworks. It is difficult to understand how it is possible for these theories to sit alongside each other, especially because SRT's attempt to theorise women's oppression is conceptually opposed to queer theory. Alfray's advocacy of a misconceived notion of Marxist 'human nature' is her way of reconciling these different theories into a humanist version of socialist feminism. Thus, strangely, as an alternative to capitalism, she advocates humanism rather than socialism.

Another text that makes claims to similar theoretical roots is Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke's *Transgender Marxism*. This somewhat impenetrable collection of essays has been hailed as a ground-breaking union of transgender studies and Marxist theory. But despite the fact the authors are justifiably anti-capitalist, the essays show a woefully inadequate grasp of Marxist theory. Apart from the odd quote from the *Eighteenth Brumaire, Capital vol.1* and *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* the only attempts to invoke Marxism are incomprehensible at best and simply incorrect at worst. To the authors Marx is useful because it reorients them away from 'liberal optimism' and encourages them to think with Marx 'in spirit rather than in letter'. With arrogant condescension the editors assert: 'We think with him in order to think against him and beyond his limits'. Thus anyone

looking for a coherent theory of the relation between transgenderism and Marxism is likely to be disappointed.

2. The New Materialism

New materialism arose as a response to the perceived impasse of postmodernism in terms of political agency. Its aim, as the editors of *Material Feminisms* state, 'is to bring the material, specifically the materiality of the human body and the natural world, into the forefront of feminist theory and practice.' Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue that materiality has been a historically contested site for feminist theory, with some varieties of feminism, especially in the academy, distancing themselves from bodies and nature by shifting the grounds of theory to culture, discourse, and language. While acknowledging what they see as the value of postmodern thought to the feminist project, in terms of the deconstruction of binary oppositions that structure Western Enlightenment humanism at the expense of women and others, they argue that postmodernism has not fulfilled its promise as a theoretical grounding for feminism and needs to be replaced with a (re)turn to materialism. However, the character of this new materialism arguably erases women – adult human females -- as the focus of feminism as much as the postmodernist conceptions it seeks to replace.

New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics, while not specifically feminist, is an early contribution to the field featuring several theorists associated with posthumanist feminisms such as Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Rey Chow and Sara Ahmed. The editors, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, lament the eclipse of materialism in recent theory dominated by the cultural turn that privileges language and discourse. However, like Alaimo and Hekman they argue that there can be no straightforward return to 'matter or material experience as naively representational or naturalistic'. The language of idealist postmodernism persists, however, in their central formulation of 'cultural exhaustion' of previous theoretical paradigm and the need for constant reinvention:

In terms of theory itself, finally, we are summoning a new materialism in response to a sense that the radicalism of the dominant discourses which have flourished under the cultural turn is now more or less exhausted. We share the feeling among current among many researchers that the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy.

When examined more closely, it seems that this new materialism, apart from a few brief references and allusions, largely excludes Marxism as an already-existing living dialectical materialism that precisely concerns political economy and what is now called 'biopolitics'.

The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21st-Century Feminist Theory, a recent behemoth of an anthology edited by Robin Truth Goodman, seeks to map the theoretical terrain of feminist theory since the new millennium, incorporating the new methodologies and critical approaches within the humanities. It is divided into three parts: 'The Subject', 'The Text', and 'The World', and each chapter is given a one- or two-word title and is authored by a specialist in the field. Indicative titles in part one include familiar terms familiar over several decades of postmodern theorising – 'Subject', 'Identity', 'Difference' and 'Experience' -- but also include more material categories such as 'Birth' and 'Sex', and show awareness of more recent theoretical and political developments with terms such as 'Affect', 'Intersex/Transgender' and 'Intersectionality', which are influenced by gender identity theory. Part three evinces a carefully thought-out balance of global issues: while foregrounding recent concerns about the 'Environment' and the ubiquitous 'Anthropocene', it features chapters on theoretical 'hot

topics' such as 'Matter', 'Technology', and 'Political Trauma' and significantly, also includes entries on long-standing material concepts such as 'Labor' (sic), 'The Political', 'Commodity' and 'Anti-Imperialism'. It seeks to be all things to all feminists but the entries are often weighed down by convoluted theoretical turns necessitated by the attempt to synthesize 40 years of postmodern theorising with contemporary political demands that feminism adopt a range of claims not solely related to sex.

As John Bellamy Foster has wryly pointed out in relation to this recent 'turn to matter': 'New materialists, coming out of the humanities insist – as if this is a surprising new discovery – that human beings are not separate from the physical world as a whole'. Despite a nod to Marxism, these theorists are heavily influenced by posthumanism which, like the postmodernism that preceded it, represents a fundamentally different project to Marxist historical materialism and is divorced from the latter's philosophy of practice. By illustration Bellamy Foster refers to a recent interview with Rosi Braidotti (one of the main proponents of the new materialism) in which she articulates a distinctly limited and defeatist political vision:

Given the assumed permanency of capitalism, the message of her new 'vital materialism' for feminist, antiracist and other movements is confined to finding ways to 'dissociate and put distance between ourselves' and the 'mistaken consumer models', male violence, and white supremacy, which constitute the worst aspects of contemporary capitalism.

Hardly a programme for socialist revolution.

3. Popular and radical feminism

It is with relief that we turn to popular and radical iterations of feminism in recent years. Julie Bindel's book *Feminism for Women: The Real Route to Liberation* is based, refreshingly enough, in feminist activism rather than academic theory. Bindel argues that feminism is fundamentally about women's liberation and rejects the idea that it has achieved its goals and should prioritise other issues and campaigns. She critiques liberal forms of feminism, which privilege gender over sex and promote the idea of sex work as work. She argues for the defence of women's sex-based rights, single-sex spaces and for grassroots feminism that focuses on misogyny alongside racism and class oppression. While Bindel herself is on the left and her work shows a commendable focus on working-class and black women, it does not attempt to trace the relation of sex oppression to class exploitation and Bindel's vision for the women's movement is one of autonomous and even separatist organisation.

Like Bindel, Holly Lawford-Smith is a radical feminist who centres women in her feminism. In her book, *Gender-Critical Feminism*, Lawford-Smith advocates for a feminism that is female-focused and prioritises issues that impact women as women rather than some other aspect of their identities. An associate professor at Melbourne University, Australia Lawford-Smith has, like Kathleen Stock in the UK, come into conflict with the academic community over her gender critical views. In a densely argued book, Lawford-Smith argues that contemporary gender-critical feminism derives from radical feminism of the second wave but is distinct from it. She argues for the retention of the sex/gender distinction, in which sex is seen as biological and gender is social, as a pre-requisite for feminist politics. The book makes a direct attack on gender identity politics and the idea that gender identity takes precedence over sex.

Lawford-Smith makes a useful distinction between kinds of feminism that see 'gender a system of norms imposed on the basis of sex' and those which see 'gender as a performance or an identity'.

However, she maintains that gender-critical feminism goes beyond arguing against gender identity ideology and is capable of becoming the basis for a revived feminist movement. The book ends with a gender-critical manifesto that she believes could unite such a movement. It lists five sets of female-focused demands: an end to male violence against women and girls; addressing contributors to male violence against women and girls; protecting women's health and bodily autonomy; protecting women's freedom of conscience and freedom of thought; and women's access to and full participation in public life. It remains to be seen whether gender-critical feminism can develop from a single-issue campaign to a mass movement along the lines Lawford-Smith envisages.

A number of works of popular feminism highlighting the persistent and continued sexism and misogyny faced by women have become best sellers since the turn of the decade, prominent among them being Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women*. This book does exactly what it says on the cover: it exposes data bias in a world designed for men – men as the default human. It covers data bias in most areas of human activity including medicine, the workplace, design, public life & everyday life. She shows that the 'gender data gap', although not deliberate, is the product of a mindset intrinsic to patriarchal society and that it has important consequences for women. *Men Who Hate Women*, by Laura Bates is quite literally about men who hate women. Bates reveals the deeply misogynist murky depths of the internet in which incel groups flourish alongside 'men's rights' groups of various hues. Far from being whacky deep web cults, Bates shows how the effectively these misogynist ideas have been transported into the mainstream.

Several books on the rise of transgenderism have reached wide readerships despite – or perhaps because of - the backlash against them. Helen Joyce's *Trans; When Ideology Meets Reality* provides a readable, descriptive and critical survey, illustrated by real life examples, of the penetration of the transgender agenda into public and private life. Yet, Joyce's remedy for this titular clash between ideology and reality appears to be what she calls the 'boring work' of holding institutions to account on policy and procedure, rather than any more radical transformation of society. Addressed to an American audience, Kara Dansky's *The Abolition of Sex* has a universal applicability in that it addresses the 'transgender agenda' and shows how gender identity theory has captured civic institutions, the media and political parties – fuelled by a well-funded industry. Above all, she warns of the threat to women and girls of an agenda that functions to abolish sex.

Subtitled *Why Reality Matters for Feminism*, Kathleen Stock's *Material Girls* offers an analysis and critique of gender identity theory from her analytical philosophy perspective. Stock traces the incremental shaping of gender identity theory over 50 years by medicine, sexology, the law, transgender lobby groups, and trans activism. She informs us that in large parts of the Western world, gender identity theory has now taken such a hold of the popular imagination that 'trans people' are thought of as those who, without any surgery or hormones, or who dress or behave in certain ways, have 'gender identities' which are 'misaligned with the sex "assigned" at birth.' Her meticulous and sober analysis of the key 'concepts' of sex and gender have provoked a well-publicised furore leading to her disgraceful cancellation by the academic establishment, unsupported by her own trade union. Despite the inclusion of 'material' in the title, Stock's book eschews materialism in favour of 'conceptual analysis' in which, strangely, she identifies 'woman' and 'man' as concepts and criticises gender identity theory on the grounds that it proposes 'radically revised understandings' of these existing concepts. If analytical philosophy recommends that we view biological sex as a mere concept, then clearly materialism has been abandoned and we fall into the same trap as the gender identity theorists.

There has been a welcome resurgence of black feminist voices in recent years with the publication of works which seek to extend the tradition of radical abolitionism and black liberation. Akwugo

Emejulu's *Fugitive Feminism* draws on the legacies of Audre Lorde and bell hooks and is a call to arms for black women to determine their own liberation by embracing the status of the 'fugitive'. Emejulu argues that black women have historically been dehumanised – they have been fugitives from the white society that has rejected them. She asks: can a politics of black liberation emerge from fugitive feminism? Her 'manifesto' explores this question.

In 2022, the celebrated Marxist activist Angela Davis co-produced a book with the peremptory title, *Abolition. Feminism. Now*. In it, the authors expose the feminist roots of abolitionist organizing. As they explain, incarceration and policing do not meaningfully decrease patriarchal violence against women, queer, trans, and nonbinary people, but rather contribute to and draw from it. They move beyond what they term 'carceral feminism' – a feminism where violence against women is reduced to a crime and criminalization is the solution. The authors argue that 'building a world without prisons and policing' requires 'building a world free of gender and sexual violence'. That means experimenting with 'collective practices of safety, accountability, and healing untethered from the existing criminal legal system', while simultaneously organizing to provide for the basic human and social needs outside of the conventional family structure. In other words, working to shrink the footprint of the prison industrial complex while growing care, provision, and dispute resolution.

Conclusion

The problem as we see it with many of the foregoing texts is their ultimately liberal, bourgeois character, whether for or against gender identity ideology. In the case of both classic humanism and gender identity ideology, human beings become atomistic individuals 'emptied of all relations, yet endowed with innate rights' (Bellamy Forster). Concealed within this abstract conception of selfhood is class exploitation and race and sex oppression.

Contra the erroneous claims of Gleeson and O'Rourke, among others, our position is not that of mechanistic materialism opposing absolute idealism, but one of dialectical and historical analysis of the social relations that subordinate women in capitalist class society. It should be clear from our review that the concept of gender as a performance, inaugurated by Butler, as something that we do rather than something that is done to us, has continued to influence recent academic work in the field of gender and women's studies. Yet it has been joined by an even more problematic idea: that gender is an identity or feeling that we alone have authority over. Butler, despite giving the subject agency in and through their gender performances, never saw these as entirely voluntaristic and unconstrained by social norms. Gender identity, lacking any definition that is not circular and which does not rely on gender norms and stereotypes, by a strange twist undermines the very basis of Butler's championing of gender nonconformity.

It is in response to this latter idea that the wave of popular texts opposing gender identity ideology have arisen alongside a revived radical feminism. And this is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, the popular feminism genre is limited in terms of its analysis of women's oppression in the same way that Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull's 'Standing for Women' campaign is limited: without an analysis of the class-based nature of women's oppression and an understanding of how capitalist exploitation operates in relation to women's oppression, we will not be able to formulate the analytic tools or create the political movement necessary to overcome women's historic subordination.

For us as Marxist feminists, gender is above all an ideology that naturalises women's oppression and super-exploitation in capitalist class societies. This must be the beginning of our theory and our revolutionary practice.

Works Cited

- Afary, Frieda, *Socialist Feminism: A New Approach* (Pluto Press, 2022)
- Alaimo, Stacy and Susan Hekman eds. *Material Feminisms* (Indiana UP, 2008)
- Bates, Laura: *Men Who Hate Women* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).
- Bellamy Foster, John. 'Marx's Critique of Enlightenment Humanism: A Revolutionary Ecological Perspective'. *Monthly Review*, 1 January, 2023.
- Berkeley, George, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues* (Penguin Classics, 1988)
- Bindel, Julie. *Feminism for Women: The Real Route to Liberation* (Constable, 2021).
- Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990; 1999; 2007)
- Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement' (1977), in Joy Richie and Kate Ronald, eds, *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), pp. 292–300
- Cooke, Jennifer ed. *The New Feminist Literary Studies*. (Cambridge University Press, 2020)
- Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost eds. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010)
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (The New Press, 2017)
- Criado Perez, Caroline: *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (Vintage 2020)
- Dansky, Kara, *The Abolition of Sex: How the 'Transgender' Agenda Harms Women* (Bombardier, 2021)
- Davis, Angela Y., Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, Beth Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Penguin, 2022)
- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Classics, 2015)
- Emejulu, Akwugo, *Fugitive Feminism* (Silver Press, 2022)
- Gleeson, Jules Joanne, and Elle O'Rourke, eds. *Transgender Marxism* (Pluto Press, 2021)
- Goodman, Robin Truth ed. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Twenty-first Century Feminist Theory*. (Bloomsbury, 2019)
- Joyce, Helen: *Trans; When Ideology Meets Reality* (Oneworld, 2021)
- Lawford-Smith, Holly. *Gender-Critical Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 2022)
- Stock, Kathleen, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (Fleet, 2021)