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Feminism for the 99%: Towards a populist feminism?

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Can Feminism for the 99% succeed as a new kind of populism?

As they seek to find a place in and/or confront the contemporary populist zeitgeist, feminists supporting intersectional justice-claims face very real, destabilising and contradictory challenges. Intersectional feminists recognise race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status as interlocking systems of oppression, and pay attention to the ways in which these particular intersections generate agency and solidarity for different kinds of women. Populism, on the other hand, is a political strategy that seeks to articulate popular grievances in a way that can unify a 'sovereign people' against corrupt and self-serving political, economic and cultural elites. It is less interested in recognising difference within its construction of the people.

The new wave of populist politics that is sweeping across both Europe and the United States - from Britain's vote to leave the European Union, to Donald Trump's successful US presidential campaign, to Viktor Orban's brutal and illiberal democratic practices in Hungary - is currently destabilising 'politics as usual' and ushering in a new political order, and this has had disastrous consequences for the most marginalised, particularly women of colour. Recently, however, a new movement has emerged, Feminism for the 99%, which seeks to co-opt the languages and practices of populist politics. In this short article, I briefly look at the ways in which this new mobilisation attempts to connect feminism and populism, in its attempt to build transnational solidarity for racial and gender justice.

As I have previously argued, populism is poison for feminist politics. In both theory and practice it is anathema to the aims and goals of a feminism that seeks redistributive and intersectional justice. Its discursive construction of a homogenised and reified 'people', its promotion of a crude majoritarianism, and its (mostly) uncritical support for popular belief systems, means that it is incredibly difficult to build feminist politics and a feminist collective identity with and through traditional populist practices. For example, in our project on minority women's activism in anti-austerity movements in Britain and France (which often also operated as populist spaces), Leah Bassel and I found that minority women activists were excluded from these protest spaces when they sought to advance anti-austerity critiques that took seriously the racialised and gendered effects of the cuts and privatisations of the welfare states in each country. There could be no space for analyses and actions that centred race and gender since these supposedly 'controversial issues' could potentially fracture the unified 'people'. Bice Maiguashca, Jonathan Dean and Dan Keith found similar issues at play in Occupy in Britain, where feminist and anti-racist politics were allocated a supporting role in affirming an affective disposition for interpersonal relations in protest spaces, but did not seem to inform either protest strategy or the political education of activists.

The hostility of populism to intersectional ideas and practices (or to merely single-strand issues of racial or gender justice) is unsurprising given that there is an unacknowledged ethno-nationalism embedded in many populist movements, whether or not they are

consciously based on xenophobic sentiments. ‘The people’ in populist politics are constituted as stewards of the nation, defending themselves and their institutions from destructive and treasonous elite power. The familiar political slogans of ‘Taking Back Control’, ‘I Want My Country Back’ and ‘Make America Great Again’ position the people as true patriots seeking to restore past national glories and build a brighter future for ‘us’. The populist project cannot accommodate subversive intersectional positions that undermine these national mythologies and spotlight the imperial, white supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal foundations of the nation.

A feminist politics that ignores white supremacy and imperialism can, however, quite easily be put to work for populist ends. A feminism that simply seeks equality between women and men, and not the transformation of the social and economic order, can be encompassed within a populist politics. For example, in the name of ‘liberty’ and the ‘will of the people’, we have seen white feminists in France supporting the hijab and the (now overturned) burkini ban; white feminists in Germany supporting the surveillance and over-policing of migrants and refugees after the Cologne railway station attacks in 2016; and white feminists in Britain supporting Theresa May even as she continues her crackdown on migrants through her ‘hostile environment’ policy.

Feminism for the 99% (F99), however, seeks to creatively challenge the apparent impossibility of intertwining feminism with populism - by subverting the constituent elements of populism. Mobilised to action in response to the election of Trump and the worldwide Women’s March in January 2017, and drawing inspiration from an already existing decolonial feminist politics in the Global South, F99’s aim is to cultivate this ‘new wave of militant feminist struggle’.5 F99 rejects ‘lean-in feminism’ - the individualistic, corporate-inspired version of feminism that seeks women’s inclusion in institutions rather than the transformation of these institutions - and campaigns against ‘the casualisation of labour, wage inequality ... homophobia, transphobia and xenophobic immigration policies’. It seeks to build ‘a new internationalist feminist movement with an expanded agenda - at once anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-heterosexist and anti-neoliberal’. The goal is ‘a grassroots, anti- capitalist feminism’.

The agenda of F99 is striking in that it seeks to occupy populism by turning some of its key tenets on their head. It seizes on the idea of majoritarianism and expands it into transnational solidarity. F99’s majoritarianism, rather than referring to the numerical white majority and its supposedly homogenous interests in the Global North, interpellates all women in the Global South and North in order to build collective consciousness, identity and action. By paying attention to women who are disproportionately concentrated in poverty and low-paid work, F99 seeks to build a majority of the dispossessed. By starting from the experiences of the most marginalised - women of colour, migrant women and women in precarious work, who must negotiate predatory capitalism, sexism and racism - F99 undermines populism’s latent ethno-nationalism. From these shared experiences of intersectional inequality and discrimination, it grounds its politics in transnational movements that are attempting to challenge structural domination: anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-racism and anti-transphobia.
F99 also attempts to co-opt the language of Occupy. As Keeanga-Yamatta Taylor argues: ‘The problems experienced by women are rooted in an economic system that privileges the

1% over the 99%'.6 The reasons behind women's relative poverty are not simply economic questions, however: 'they are related to an economic arrangement that relies on the free labour of women to ... reproduce itself as a political system'. Through this intervention, F99 attempts to challenge de-raced and de-gendered understandings of how capitalism operates, and makes foundational an analysis and politics rooted in countering the dynamics of racial capitalism and exploitative reproductive labour. A key practice of realising these ideals was F99's organising of the Women's Strike to mark International Women's Day in 2017, and to ground this populist feminist action in the history of materialist struggles for gender justice.

There is some debate, however, as to whether F99 is actually populist. In my view it is, because it fundamentally reshapes the idea of 'the people' and popular grievance. Using a capacious and differentiated idea of 'the people' which transcends national borders, F99 attempts to unify and call to action an anti-capitalist, anti- racist and anti-imperialist feminist movement for justice against elites. As June Jordan reminds us:
We are the people ... As Black women, we are most of the people, any people you care to talk about. And therefore, nothing that is good for the people is good unless it is good for me, as I determine myself. So, although I remain aware of the dangers of populist politics, I recognise that F99 offers a novel response that harnesses the potential of popular grievance and cultivates a renewed solidarity politics for feminist activism across the globe.

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Notes

1. A. Emejulu, 'Can "the People" Be Feminists? Analysing the Fate of Feminist Justice Claims in Populist Grassroots Movements in the United States', Interface: Special Issue on Feminism, Women's Movements and Women in Movements, 3 (2), 2011.
2. A. Emejulu and L. Bassel, 'Minority Women, Activism and Austerity', Race & Class 57 (2) 2015; L. Bassel and A. Emejulu, Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain, Policy Press 2017.
3. For a detailed discussion of these dynamics see 'Can "the People" Be Feminists?.
4. B. Maiguashca. J.M. Dean and D. Keith, 'Pulling together in a crisis? Anarchism, feminism and the limits of left-wing convergence in austerity Britain', Capital and Class, 40 (1), 2016.
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