

# SWIMMING UPSTREAM AND RADICALLY CHANGING THE SOCIAL WORLD: FEMINISM!

DISCUSSION WITH ANN SNITOW BY KATEŘINA LIŠKOVÁ.

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## ON THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT, SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE LEGACY (AND FUTURE) OF FEMINIST SENSIBILITIES IN THE USA

**KL: We find ourselves in times of protest against conservative agendas dominating the public discourse. When do you think the conservatives started to reign in America?**

AS: The hegemony of right wing discourse took over the country in the 1980s. It took only a few years for the whole discourse of America to shift way right and to displace the center to the right. It started with the Reagan election for president in 1980. He put out something called the Family Protection Act that cut after school programs, welfare programs, education programs. Essentially, it attempted to undermine anything that allowed you to leave the family for more than two minutes. The family was supposed to become the exclusive site of social reproduction and the Family Protection Act meant you would have no other platform of protection. However, Reagan could not pass it in 1980, because there was a lot of liberal sentiment around, left over from the 70s. So he used the strategy of piecemeal adoption and got almost all of it passed in subsequent years.

### **What has the progressives' response been?**

We have been fighting and pushing against. And losing battles with the very well organized right. They were located in local schools, in churches – they were really brilliantly organized. And the left had no infrastructure like that.

**So now, after a very long time, it feels as if a movement is building up and that's a great thing. Last time this happened was in the late 90s...**

... Seattle?

### **Seattle, exactly.**

Seattle made us hopeful. It is clear there have been years and decades of grassroots organizing. We don't get a movement like Occupy Wall Street without dozens of years of real work. What is new now, I think, is the inclusiveness. It's not possible anymore to think it is just those poor people, or just those black people or just those discontented women. The economy is now destroying everyone and the slogan "We are the 99%" captures it really well and is galvanizing people who were not in the game before.

### **The question is: why did it take so long?**

The oligarchy of the super-rich running this country is outrageous. And they are very good at controlling and obscuring the real issues. The concentration of wealth has been an ongoing trend and democracy got distorted as a result. But there is always a genuine democratic possibility – that's why Obama was elected in 2008. It is always a possibility that a large group of people will elect somebody progressive who is committed to undo some of this. America used to be based on a broad productive base and the idea that many people can share the wealth and the prospects of self-governance. That was a fantasy, never a reality. But now people cannot have that fantasy any more. They can see that their interests are not represented any more.

### **In which ways do you think this connects to feminist organizing that you have been involved in since the 60s?**

The radical part of the feminist movement came out of the Left. Inspired by it, radical feminists imagined a different social order. Liberal feminists, on the other hand, focused on the issues of gender equity: to get more women in politics, in the media, etc. These two powerful branches of feminism have forever changed the whole culture – you can't really get the genie back into the bottle. Then the backlash started in the 80s and the movement has become more and more straightened, more and more limited. So we ended up repeating over and over: "we want abortion rights again, we want abortion rights again". When you are doing that, it nibbles you down and depresses your larger desires. You are on the defensive all the time and it brings about a different kind of politics. It is similar to the situation of the women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All they wanted got boiled down to: the vote, the vote, the vote. But you need a mobilization that asks for so much more in order for the vote to mean something. So with the constant fighting back against the backlash, many feminists became lawyers. And they started talking about human rights. This had not been a category of earlier radical women's organizing at all. And then the human rights discourse became the only acceptable discourse to use in an increasingly right-wing world. "Human rights" is a very general concept that can be powerful in the time of reaction. But it does not necessarily include the radical thinking that animated radical feminism. Feminism talked about restructuring social relations, an entirely different political framing from human rights. In other words, things were pushed back, got atomized – and yet they continued. I want to make very clear that in spite of all the retreats, ac-

tivism continued. Feminism is very powerful. It went into many locations, it altered institutions, it institutionalized itself in various ways in spite of all this defensiveness and backlash. It has probably had the most staying power of any movement from the 60s.

**Could the feminist imaginary broaden again with the current organizing around the Occupy movement?**

Yes and no. There are two kinds of groups down in Zuccotti Park. There are people for whom feminism is a given, and the people who grew up in a situation where feminism was no longer being discussed in their classroom or family. So they have not heard about it, or only superficially. The latter group just unselfconsciously lives in a world which has been transformed by feminism and they do not know what feminism did to make their world so different. And these two groups of people are very interesting. There is a kind of self-consciousness about gender injustice that would not have been possible in 1965. But feminism as a radical movement and connected to Occupy aspirations? That recognition comes and goes.

**So again, the Occupy movement has been building on the previous movement. Do you feel it is connected?**

I feel it can be connected, that it can be a place where feminist consciousness can be raised. This new movement is very rich and promising because the young people who are the motor of it have been exposed to gender questions in various levels of conscious or unconscious contact. But there are problems. One student told me there is a problem of tokenism – women are encouraged to speak at the general assembly. But nobody listens and when it's over, the boys do the talking and make the decisions. And she said it is the same for people of color.

**It sounds like it used to be before feminism and other liberation movements ever came! Women not speaking or being heard at meetings, non-white people being excluded...**

Yes, that is terrifying. But on the other hand, the very fact that there is this large group of people who recognize this problem and name it is the result of those previous movements. In 1965, I can tell you, we could never have known that's what was happening, we didn't have the consciousness. So now at least, there is a struggle, a feminist critique of Occupy. I have no idea what is going to happen with Occupy Wall Street. Will it be the same thing as Seattle, wonderfully important and a great but too brief a moment of rebellion? Or will it actually keep growing and lead us to real change? Will it make people in positions of power realize they cannot get away with everything? Will they have to put back certain regulatory laws, give people more unemployment insurance, figure out how to get more jobs? I hope that they are forced by such a big populous movement to change.

**Some of the Occupy supporters I have spoken to say they want radical social change and do not care too much about "cosmetic" improvements like changes in taxation policies etc. Essentially they are not impressed by Obama and the Democrats; it is too little for them.**

I think it is very dangerous to say "we are outside politics." People may want to be outsiders who push new ideas and who are more radical than any established group, all of this is fine, but the idea that you have no stakes in who wins the election? That is suicide.

**The Occupy movement is so varied that there are also union organizers, supporters of Democrats, etc. With movement this inclusive it is a question whose voice will be heard.**

We were very relieved when the unions started to arrive because there is no way that the unions are going to tell their people it doesn't matter who gets elected. They know it matters a huge amount. So the more organized labor gets involved the better and the more active feminists get involved the better. And a year from now in November I hope they go to the polls to vote. I understand that people are disillusioned with Obama. He really has disappointed us in many ways. But there are many ways in which he is still the best thing we've got. And the idea that we wouldn't vote for him and somebody else got elected... oh, it's insane. Many people say they are disappointed with Obama so they are just going to stay at home. But that would be fatal too because the right is so well organized in getting the vote out that you cannot stay at home. And nobody is saying that that vote commits you to being for all of Obama's policies.

**You can always criticize him.**

Constantly. We are yelling and screaming every minute.

**And he seems to be hearing some of it.**

Well, it is helping him. Occupy Wall Street is helping Obama. Because it puts something to the left of him. He can say "I'm a centrist." And he really needed that. He needed people active to the left of him so that he could say "there are hundreds of thousands of people out there who say that they want the rich to pay taxes, what can I do with that? Let the rich pay some taxes."

**Well and where is feminism in all this?**

It's a worry. You know feminism is not a stand-alone activity; it has to be a part of other things for it to be effective. There are always ideas shared with other progressive groups so you need to figure out who your allies are. So will feminists be able to put their ideas into the mix of what is being demanded? Or will they have to do what they did in the 60s and separate? Because that is what we did, what we had to do – since we were never heard, we had to become separatists. But

I have some hope that Occupy can include feminism and that feminists won't have to storm out in disgust like last time.

**Feminist separatism is always baffling to people. This is where most people get the idea that feminists are man-haters and lunatics...**

I have to talk about these misconceptions all the time. People are always saying to me "you were a separatist movement" and I say "not at all, we started out with men and it was impossible." We were never heard, we were completely left out of the discussion. The only way to change it was the enormous angry act of pulling away from male authority. So separatism was a unified ideology. The need for it was a tragic reality.

**At some point there might be the need to create your own vocabulary. The imaginary just needs to be built because it does not exist.**

That is a question about Occupy Wall Street – will the feminist imaginary enter? Will feminism be a living element in formulating new sensibilities? That remains to be seen.

## ON "EXPORTING" FEMINISM TO THE EAST

**Since it is so difficult to have feminism heard and to have it more visible in the movement, how much more difficult it must have been in the early 1990s when you got to Eastern Europe where there was no movement at that time? And hasn't been since, really, definitely not a feminist movement. How difficult has it been to actually build feminist sensitivities in societies where there was no movement to carry it? How does it look in retrospect?**

Your world seemed so different from my world then. For example, the depoliticization that had happened in your world. After 40 years of communism, nobody wanted anything to do with politics. Politics was disgusting to people. Part of what I thought I was doing was introducing the kind of politics that had to do with people demanding the kind of life they wanted. It was Joanna Regulska who codified this question and a bunch of us organized around it: what is the political? What do we want political activism to include?

**Feminism is very good at expanding the notion of the political. How did the "personal is political" resonate in early post-communist realities?**

What your everyday life looks like, what your relationship is to the public sphere – these questions are very important for liberation. But these questions were forbidden under communism, and after 1989 they were seen as tainted and dangerous – bad territory. A lot of people felt that the private had never been private enough, they felt themselves to be invaded by the state and they wanted the private to be a separate safe zone where they could express themselves, have a future, have relationships... and they didn't want the private to become public. So right away American feminists and

women in Central Europe were having these interesting and painful conversations about what is public, what is private, what should be politicized, what shouldn't be, what do we want to call political, what parts of life do we want to have on the table to discuss as a political question. And it turned out to be a huge problem. Differences of opinion but also differences about the strategies of getting what you want.

**Do you feel that women in Eastern Europe not only did not want to make their private lives public, but moreover, they did not understand why you wanted to change the understanding of the public/private divide?**

People just thought I didn't understand their world, and I think that was partly true. But I also think there was a fear of the public sphere that came straight from the history that people had lived through. It is not that they didn't understand me; it is that they really had a different experience in a different reality and they felt that they needed to act out of their own reality. They were arguing: "Under communism in many ways we were already in the public sphere. Much more than you have ever dreamt of being. At the same time, the public sphere was completely corrupt and nobody wanted it and we still don't want it. And we needed to build a richer life in the private sphere." And that line of argument makes sense to me. On the other hand, the private life should not mean permission to dominate women without public recourse. The private that involves women as servants is the private I will never agree to.

**Did you notice any specificities in Czechoslovakia compared to the rest of the region? Were Czech and Slovak women any different from other Eastern European women?**

I observed that Czech women were terribly worried about men. And I was fascinated by this and have been following this train of thought for 20 years. I hope I have come to understand what they were worrying about and why. Under communism there was this terrible general humiliation and it was the men who were the most humiliated. The men who were not in the Party were disempowered. There was a massive sense of servitude and lack of any agency. Of course, everybody was disempowered but men felt it more strongly because they expected that power. So it took a long time to build feminist sensitivities that would enfranchise all and also insist that we do not want a happy man dominating us again. It involved rethinking gender at the core. When everything in a society is changing, all rules and institutions are being reset, it is especially hard to demand that people disturb their anchor – the family. But I believe it is more important to renegotiate the relationships between men and women than to huddle around the old campfire.

**Do you think it has changed in the Czech Republic or in Eastern Europe? Do people still buy into the idea**



**of undoing the humiliation of men by keeping them above women? Do women still think by lagging behind we can make men satisfied and “we can be somehow happy too?”**

Well, that building up man strategy certainly doesn't work. We are talking about a fundamental reorganization of social relations. Feminist are dreamers in this way but some of their desires have actually materialized.

**How far do you think you've gotten in the United States?**

People still perceive “men” and “women” as solid entities and keep holding onto that comfortable certainty. But there is no such thing as a stable category of “men” and “women”, even if we wanted such stability. But changing the perception is a slow process. We have to ask what it is about gender organization that makes people so profoundly attached to it. What makes them love it so much? There is a kind of poetry that is organized around gender and around the family, and people don't want to lose that. Still gender relations have changed fundamentally in the U.S. These things change slowly. Over the years, I have become more respectful of the fear of loss. People are afraid of what they could lose.

**The European Union has been trying to put policies in place that would re-balance one's public and private life. It is called harmonizing work-life balance**

It sounds a bit suspect. Are they talking about everyone or primarily women? “We will help women balance so they can secure everybody else.” No. This is not the revolution I had in mind. I want the change to be more fundamental. We should rethink how much a person should work, what the meaning of work is, what your share is of the dirty work of the world, what intimacy is and how much space it should have, how people should help each other... These are questions that were discussed in the early communist period.

**And communism is gone and we seem to be stuck with a pervasive neoliberal world order. Do you think feminism has been complicit in upholding that order, as Nancy Fraser suggested in her recent article?**

When you are trying to hang on to the values of your movement in a defensive backlash period, you compromise. You say “I'm not thinking about the meaning of life now and what happiness is. I'm making sure that women are not beaten by men.” So then you are working with the police. Domestic violence has been a serious problem but there is nothing in tackling it that disrupts the neoliberal order. If you are trying hard to keep abortion accessible, it does not help us fight neoliberal values. Moreover, you can frame your pro-abortion fight in terms of buying a service. And it sounds very neoliberal. So I wouldn't use the word complicit but I would say in trying to uphold what we thought we could keep we did not find a structural way of fighting against neoliberalism. You could blame feminism for that

but then of course it's true for the left generally. We were swimming upstream.

**So do you think it takes a drastic change in material conditions – similar to what happened now with the economic crisis – that makes the anti-neoliberal claims resonate throughout society? Because there certainly were people, left wing academics, activists, who were criticizing capitalism but it did not trigger a major response.**

You know, on some days you have to just say that Marx was right.

**Thank you, Karl!**

The question remains: is this a beginning of a new democratic surge or is this Weimar?

**That is exactly what we have been thinking about. In Eastern Europe, there is no discernible movement and the Occupy has not really caught on there for various reasons. And what we have been witnessing for the last year or so is relapse into conservatism and xenophobia. People are scared of the worsening economic situation and their reaction is retreating into families and invoking traditional values. People say and do things that even a couple of years ago would be unthinkable. Take the Czech president for example. He recently called for the army to be stationed alongside the borders of the Czech Republic to “protect the integrity of the country according to the Constitution against the European Union and globalization.” So the soldiers are supposed to stand there and fire into globalization?**

You said an interesting thing here that I wanted to follow up. You said that the Occupy Wall Street hasn't caught on “for various reasons.” What reasons do you think these are?

**I think here the 99 % discourse resonated and people started to identify themselves with that. In the Czech Republic, people still refuse to identify with the losers in the big capitalist game. And there are the numbers. With the exception of Poland, we are many small countries with our various languages. So the organizing is limited to the linguistic milieu and thus curbed within the borders of a given nation state. In the Czech Republic, there definitely are people organizing against neoliberalism. The unions have become more active, ProAlt was created as a reaction to the last election which brought a right wing government eager to curtail the welfare state, education, health care. But our small numbers account for the lack of visibility and impact.**

It has been similar with us. For a very long time people continued to identify with successful people who do not want to be pushed around by the government, who want

to be able to make money, who can be rich... the American dream. The idea that market is rational and would expand to include and enrich more and more people was the imaginary for a really long time. And only now do people realize that it is a lie. That this is not how things are organized. Or that anybody can get rich.

**“We all can be part of the one percent.” That captures the nonsense very well.**

The neoliberal ethos of success suggesting that the world is flat, you can go anywhere and do anything is destructive. Not only in our countries. In the Global South, neoliberal forces brought along oppression, exploitation and misery to people. And you cannot keep yourself separate from it. The impulse to entrench the border and stop globalization from coming is hopeless. And tragic.

### **ON FEMINISM AND HAPPINESS**

**We have wandered off feminism... But at the same time not really.**

No, not really. There is this wonderful line by Adrienne Rich “with whom do you cast your lot?” And I believe feminism should be part of the critique of neoliberalism. It should be

part of the struggle for equality of all people, including the renegotiation of public and private. The answer is not forthcoming in one little lump of truth.

### **What is feminism to you? And what it should be?**

For me, feminism has been a way to imagine happiness. To me the great feminism is the feminism that keeps thinking, keeps re-positioning itself, keeps trying to figure out what people really want, why they want it. It opens public conversation about what is human happiness. When you are active in a political movement like feminism, you believe that through social action a more humane, decent and just space can be created. And you will never stop. It is not something that you finally achieve; you will always have to be doing it. In this sense, feminism is a struggle, always changing and vital but also unending. So in a way, I can understand people saying “oh, excuse me, I think I will spend my life some other way” (*laughter*). Feminism has changed the world and we have also changed. For me, at least, feminism has been worth a lifetime of engagement.

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