

Report from the Third International Marxist Feminist Conference

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In October 2018 members of the Feminist Dissent editorial collective attended the 3rd International Marxist Feminist conference in Lund, Sweden. The idea of a Marxist Feminist International was proposed in 2015 by the acclaimed German feminist writer and teacher Frigga Haug, with the first conference taking place in Berlin in 2015, and the second in Vienna in 2016. Haug made the call of these international meetings ‘in the face of the deep crises of capitalism, with all the safety valves unscrewed so that each crisis is merely an intensification of the previous one; with crises increasingly affecting the everyday lives and living conditions making planning more precarious for an increasing number of women left alone with a double burden to carry...[In such a moment] it was high time also for the Marxist-Feminist forces to meet on the global level, just as capitalism and the crises it produced had become global’ (Haug, 2018).

The focus of this year’s conference was the theme of ‘Reproduction’. Feminist theory has turned in recent years to re-evaluating the concept of social reproduction. This is seen as a riposte to dominant economic structures under neo-liberalism that devalue women’s work of care, domestic work and reproduction and value productive labour exclusively. This issue has become a crucial area of activism and theorising for Marxist feminists as the dismantling and marketisation of social welfare in the context of neo-liberal globalisation has had a hugely disproportionate



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impact on women, both as users of services that have been cut or hugely reduced, and as employees of those services which once offered secure employment with pensions and other social rights. The slashing of these services, particularly in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis and the austerity regimes that were instituted in its wake, forces women to spend more time in unpaid care work within the family accompanied by insecure low-paid care work in the labour market. It is in this sense that the crisis of contemporary neoliberal capitalism has thoroughly demonstrated the Marxist feminist theses about the relations of gender being at the same time the relations of production. This body of work represents an important shift away from seeing patriarchal dynamics as a function of capitalism's class driven imperatives (as Engels and later Marxists saw them) and capitalism and patriarchy as 'dual systems'.

While this focus on 'reproduction' has been extremely valuable in pointing to the centrality of gender within capitalism, one of the areas that has been neglected and even avoided within this body of work has been the rise of religious fundamentalism. The refusal to engage with this arises out of a generalised attack on secularism by Left academic feminists, epitomised by the work of Joan Scott, Saba Mahmood and a whole range of work influenced by feminist post-structuralist theory. This work constructs a binary between secularism, presented as an Enlightenment ideology imposed on the everyday piety of women (who may or may not be affiliated to fundamentalist parties and organisations) as part of a colonial project, and religious faith as weapons of the weak. While these arguments are extremely popular within the academy in the West particularly, this work completely ignores the very material impact of the rise of fundamentalism and the impact of this on the dynamics of familial work, on women's labour force participation, on welfare provision (now frequently outsourced by the state to faith based charities) and on

women's legal rights (where personal and family law are handed over by the state to religious bodies such as 'sharia courts' for Muslim women).

The argument *Feminist Dissent* members presented at the conference was that the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the US, Latin America and Eastern Europe, Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and Hindu, Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism in South Asia, as well as in diasporic populations across the developed capitalist world, must be taken seriously by the Left and by feminists. The focus of our presentation concerned the way fundamentalist influence, both institutional and ideological, is essentially a project of social reproduction that reconstructs the family as a site of divinely mandated gender and sexual roles. We are now seeing these arguments promoted by religious leaderships who often have the ear of government across a whole range of social policy areas, but particularly education, which is an absolutely central locus of influence as far as religious fundamentalists are concerned. We noted that when it comes to tackling this issue of fundamentalism amongst minority communities in the West the Left and feminist forces are confused and often adopt cultural relativist arguments that grant legitimacy to the most reactionary forces in the name of anti-racism. What this ignores is the highly detrimental impact that fundamentalism has on women's lives which come to be defined and controlled, often through violence, by retrograde conceptions of gender roles. Many of these movements are engaged in a massive rewriting and flattening of history to normalise the most conservative conceptions of gendered religious identity, which as well as being highly misogynistic also aim to roll back the limited gains for acceptance made by lesbians, gays and bisexuals within those communities.

The participants at the conference were primarily northern European and German; a fact which influenced the perception of the ideas put forward by the UK based *Feminist Dissent*. This is significant because in these

countries the process whereby multiculturalism has morphed into multi-faithism (Dhaliwal and Patel, 2012) is less advanced, as is the destruction of state-based welfare services compared to the UK. In this sense, audience members at the *Feminist Dissent* panel were receptive to these arguments, but at the same time were both unfamiliar and to an extent apprehensive about them, particularly at a time when neo-Nazis and anti-Muslim white supremacist groupings had made such significant electoral advances, not least in Sweden itself. Our response to this was to note the fact that fundamentalist movements need also to be understood as movements of the extreme Right, and which we argued were in fact different branches of the same authoritarian neo-patriarchal world view. There is a politics growing as a consequence of the despair and frustration caused by the crisis of neoliberal capitalism and the complicity of social democratic parties in the destruction of social safety nets. Overall this was a highly valuable experience for us, and one which really demonstrated the resonance our analysis offers in other contexts.

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