Women of Color Critiques of Capitalism and the State

WMST 60
Professor Miller-Young
Week 2
Questions to Consider

• Why are WOCF writers critical of capitalism and the state?
• How do economic, political or social institutions, policies, and discourses affect WOC in the U.S.?
• How do WOCF writers address the everyday personal experience of oppression and resistance?
Feminism in the U.S.

- Social movement, historical activism
- **Epistemology**, mode of analysis or inquiry
- Critique of gender hierarchy, **patriarchy**, that privileges men and subordinates women
- Vision of social justice centering women
- “Personal is political”--The “intimacy of power”-- even “private” experience has political importance
WOC Feminism

- Legacy of activism rooted in racial justice and progressive social movements
- Critique of monolithic sisterhood, exclusion, and prejudice in the women’s movement
- Critique of sexism and heterosexism in racial justice social movements and communities
- Critique of interlocking systems of dominance, including gender, but also race and class
- Influenced by Marxism and anti-colonial struggles
- Vision of justice and freedom addressing the “personal” and intimate operations of race, class, and gender
Systems of Oppression

• Racial subordination, gender hierarchy, and capitalist exploitation are seen as, interlocking, simultaneous, and mutually reinforcing structures of oppression.

How do these systems of power affect WOC?

• Poverty, labor exploitation, unequal access to resources
• Sexualized violence and control
• Immigration policy, Colonialism, Nationalism
• Criminalization
• Globalization, Neoliberalism
“We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation.”

-- Combahee River Collective Statement
Defining Capitalism

- An economic system in which wealth, and the means of producing wealth, are privately owned and controlled rather than publicly or state-owned and controlled.

- In capitalism, the land, labor, capital and all other resources, are owned, operated and traded by private individuals or corporations for the purpose of profit. Investments, production, goods, commodities and services are primarily determined by private interests in a market economy largely free of government intervention.

- Each person owns his or her own labor and therefore is allowed to sell the use of it to employers.
Capitalism & Gender

• U.S. economic interests shape domestic and international policy, and women workers’ everyday lives as they are compelled to work for survival.

• Capitalist economic system shapes public and private life through class system and “free labor” markets.

• Economy is gendered: gendering of work, wealth, capital, finance, & economic policies.

• Capitalism supports patriarchy, by providing a means to privilege for (some) men, while encouraging dependency in women.

• Feminization of Poverty-- women as particularly vulnerable to poverty due to being paid less and working more (including unpaid domestic labor), and as a consequence, less assets and wealth over their lives.
Globalization & Neoliberalism

- Neoliberalism (the dominant form of modern capitalism) includes a basic interest in laissez faire capitalist economics, free trade policies, and the promotion of neo-conservative ideology.

- The expansion of neoliberal policies to the developing, Third World, is a primary feature of globalization.

- For developing countries, neoliberal policies are enforced by international lenders, investors, and Western nations (seen as imperialist).

- Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs): creation of free trade zones, currency devaluation, deregulation, privatization, commercialization of agriculture, cuts in wages and social programs (austerity), suppression of social movements (i.e. union, labor, indigenous and women’s rights movements), militarization, etc.
Globalization, Neoliberalism, & Gender

- Women, traditionally expected to perform household labor, are the majority of low wage workers for multinational corporations.
- Gendered migration separates families, adds load to women.
- Poverty wages, excessive working hours, dangerous conditions, little benefits (like leave time, training, or child care), harassment and intimidation are common for women of color and Third World women working in globalized industries. Few worker protections.
The U.S. & Mexican Women

- Mexican women are harmed by U.S. imperialism, and the politics of the border, since the U.S. took Texas (1836) and the rest of the Mexican territory in the West during the Mexican American War (1845-48).

- Mexican women cross the border for work and family: “farm worker mothers, railroad wives, miners’ daughters,” “backbone of many of the lowest paying, most backbreaking jobs” in the Southwest, agribusiness, food processing, garment, technology, domestic service industries.

- The Border Industrialization Program (1965) set up maquiladoras, export assembly plants of transnational corps or their subsidiaries. Accelerated internal and cross border migration. Now more than 11,000 maquiladoras on the Mexico-U.S. border.
Neoliberalism & Immigration

- With NAFTA, a neoliberal trade agreement, U.S. sought to employ cheap labor in Mexico while preventing Mexican workers from immigrating to the U.S. for work. The U.S. doubled the INS budget and instituted the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.
- 4/10 illegal migrants are from the south, and 85% of the policing is on the U.S.-Mexico border.
- Policies negatively impacts on migrant Mexican women, including criminalization, abuse, labor exploitation, social and economic hardship, and health.
Fighting Back! How Do Women Respond to the Forces of Globalization and Neoliberalism?

- Fuerza Unida (San Antonio), La Mujer Obrera (El Paso), and the Thai and Latino Workers Organizing Committee (L.A.) are examples of women’s activist organizations fighting for better working conditions, wages, and benefits, the right to unionize and collective bargaining for workers, and to expand opportunities to educate and emotionally support immigrant women workers.

- Groups address racial, ethnic, class, and gendered dimensions of labor exploitation and promote a woman-centered, activist consciousness.

- Resist neoliberal globalization policies that exploit working women.

- Emphasize mutual support and solidarity over competition between groups of women workers.