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# FEMINISM AND NEOLIBERALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

**F**EMINIST LEGACIES ARE coming under increasing scrutiny in many parts of the world today.<sup>1</sup> In Britain, a recent report asks whether gender justice has so far been just a ‘middle-class story of progress’, with gains at the top matched by indifference to the plight of the majority of women.<sup>2</sup> In Latin America, Africa and much of South and Southeast Asia, ambiguous advances for women’s agendas seem inadequate in view of the devastation wrought by structural adjustment programmes. More pointedly, there is a growing concern about the convergence between certain forms of feminism and the agendas of neoliberal capitalism. Hester Eisenstein was among the first to analyse what she described as the ‘dangerous liaison’ between contemporary capitalism and a now-dominant liberal feminism. Nancy Fraser has suggested that second-wave feminism has ‘unwittingly’ supplied a key ingredient for the new spirit of neoliberal capitalism, by setting aside questions of material equality and political-economic redistribution in favour of struggles for the recognition of identity and difference. In a response to Fraser, Meg Luxton and Joan Sangster also single out liberal feminism, rather than second-wave feminism in general, arguing that its compatibility with neoliberalism is explicit and structural, not based on a ‘subterranean affinity’ between the two, as Fraser had suggested.<sup>3</sup>

This contribution aims to examine the problematic of feminism and neoliberalism in the context of actually existing—historicized and culturally distinct—forms of capitalism, taking the specific experiences of Latin American feminism as its object of investigation. The unfolding of capitalist development and the diffusion of feminist ideas are not

self-evident processes whose outcomes can be taken for granted, as implicitly assumed in the debate so far. While certain general tendencies can be grounded in the logic of contemporary capitalism, this does not justify a ‘one-size-fits-all’ account. The distinctive dynamics of neoliberal capitalism play out within historically determined social contexts, generating a multiplicity of localized forms which have in turn undergone their own contradictory evolution, moving from experimental to consolidated or mature articulations—and facing different processes of contestation along the way. Similarly, to adopt a simple, diffusionist explanation of feminist advance occludes the plurality of women’s experiences and serves to dull the potential of a critical feminist theory for our times. What follows, then, will explore the adequacy of Fraser’s explanation, in particular, within this framework, taking my research in Chile as its empirical *point d’appui*.

### *A universal model?*

Fraser’s argument in ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’ is based on a three-fold periodization: a post-war era of ‘state-organized capitalist society’, a neoliberal epoch from the 1980s to 2008 and, hopefully, a new post-crisis era of renewed radicalization. This schema, she underlines, applies not only to the Fordist welfare states of the OECD countries but also to the ex-colonial developmentalist states of what was then called the Third World, which aimed ‘to jump-start national

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was published as ‘Die Spezifik lateinamerikanischer Feminismen im Kontext neoliberaler Regulierung’, *Das Argument* 308, 3, 2014; a draft was presented at the Freie Universität, Berlin, in December 2013. I am grateful to Kathya Araujo, Debra Bergoffen, Tony Calcagno, Julia Roth, Ina Kerner, Pradeep Bandyopadhyay and Malcolm Blincow for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> Tess Lanning, ‘Great Expectations: Exploring the Promises of Gender Equality’, Institute for Public Policy Research, 31 March 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Hester Eisenstein, ‘A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization’, *Science and Society*, vol. 69, no. 3, July 2005, and *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Labour and Ideas to Exploit the World*, New York 2009; Nancy Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, NLR 56, March–April 2009, and *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, London and New York 2013; Meg Luxton and Joan Sangster, ‘Feminism, co-optation and the problems of amnesia: a response to Nancy Fraser’, *Socialist Register*, vol. 49, 2013, p. 289. In the same issue of *Socialist Register*, Johanna Brenner and Nancy Holstrom offer a survey of some contemporary socialist-feminist practices, ‘Socialist-Feminist Strategy Today’.

economic growth by means of import-substitution policies, infrastructural investment, nationalization of key industries and public spending on education'.<sup>4</sup> Second-wave feminism, Fraser argues, emerged out of the anti-imperialist New Left and the global anti-Vietnam War ferment of the late sixties, as a challenge to the male-dominated nature of this 'state-organized' capitalism. During this first period, the feminist movement targeted four interlinked dimensions of the ruling social order: its 'economism', or blindness to non-distributive forms of injustice (family, sexual, racialized); its androcentrism, structured by the gendered division of labour, the family wage and devalorization of care work; its bureaucratic *étatisme*, challenged in the name of democratization and popular control; and finally its 'Westphalianism', in the sense of the existing inter-state order. Across all these dimensions, Fraser argues, second-wave feminism fought for a systemic transformation that would be at once economic, cultural and political; it didn't seek simply to replace the family wage with a two-earner family, but to revalue care-giving on an egalitarian basis; it didn't want to free markets from state control but to democratize state and economic power.

The main reason why second-wave feminism nevertheless went on to thrive in the era of neoliberal capitalism from the 1980s onwards, Fraser suggests, was that these goals were 'resignified'. Feminism's critique of economism devolved into a one-sided emphasis on culture and identity, unmoored from anti-capitalism; its assault on the androcentric concept of the male breadwinner was recuperated by the 'new economy', which welcomed female employment as furthering the trend towards a flexibilized, low-wage workforce and normalized the two-earner family. Feminism's critique of bureaucracy could align itself with the neoliberal attack on the state and the promotion of NGOs; its internationalism fitted well with the machinery of 'global governance', committed though this was to neoliberal restructuring. Fraser did not target specific feminist currents or practices but rather the 'subtle shift' in the valence of feminist ideas: once frankly emancipatory, under neoliberalism these had become 'fraught with ambiguity' and susceptible to serving the legitimation needs of capitalism.

How applicable is this model to Latin America? Here, the capitalist state of the seventies was not the depoliticized bureaucracy that

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<sup>4</sup> Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', p. 100.

Fraser describes but more often a brutal military dictatorship, heavily gendered, aiming at the physical eradication of left opposition and defending starkly unequal property relations. The feminist movements of the seventies emerged in the course of revolutionary struggles against harshly repressive regimes: military juntas seized power in Brazil from 1964, in Bolivia from 1971, in Uruguay and Chile from 1973 and in Argentina from 1976, instituting technocratic dictatorships that used torture, disappearances and murder to eliminate the left, destroy the trade unions and demobilize civil society. Nor was Latin America's import-substitution developmentalism ever fully Fordist; the family wage—male breadwinner, female homemaker—remained the privilege of a tiny minority of skilled workers, even in Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela. In contrast to the post-war OECD 'housewife', a majority of Latin American women worked—on the land or as domestic servants—while the women of the elite were liberated from housework by their maids. It was the failure of developmentalism—not least in the absence of redistributive land reform—to mitigate poverty and inequality in the region that underlay the militancy of the sixties, which the military dictatorships aimed to crush.

An obvious criticism to be made of Fraser's account is that the homogeneous 'second-wave feminism' of her telling never existed; the women's movements of the seventies were always multi-stranded, indeed often sharply divided.<sup>5</sup> Latin America's experience helps to complicate the picture further. The feminist movements that emerged in the region were not merely imitative of US experiences; often they involved reconfigurations of pre-existing currents—socialist, anarchist, Catholic, liberal—with traditions of activism, research and cultural interventions stretching back to the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Latin America is of course itself an abstraction, a short-hand for a wide variety of experiences and sub-regional trends. Yet while the new movements were shaped by the heterogeneous social and cultural make-up of the different countries, they also developed shared characteristics and dynamics.

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<sup>5</sup> See Luxton and Sangster, 'Feminism, co-optation and the problems of amnesia', pp. 293–4.

<sup>6</sup> Early Latin American feminisms varied just as widely, with anarchism a major influence in Mexico and Argentina, and suffrage movements in Brazil and Chile. The first regional feminist congress was held in Buenos Aires in 1910: Alejandra Restrepo and Ximena Bustamante, *10 Encuentros Feministas Latinoamericanos y del Caribe: Apuntes para una historia en movimiento*, Mexico City 2009, pp. 9–10.

An important layer of feminists came from the revolutionary movements that had sprung up in the sixties, in response both to economic inequality and to US imperialist interventions, with the Cuban revolution undoubtedly a central inspiration. These groups recruited a new generation of highly educated women, who were not content with being helpmates of male revolutionaries. While women remained a minority as formal members of Communist parties and other militant organizations, they were centrally involved in a wide range of activities. These young militants of the revolutionary left became 'the fiery feminists of the 1970s',<sup>7</sup> often engaged in a 'double militancy', active both in left parties and in women's groups.

Yet perhaps equally important in the long run was the upsurge of Catholic activism. Latin Americanist feminist narratives largely insist on a secular reading of women's activism, yet the continent's history of social mobilization makes clear that Catholic thought and practice were significant from the late fifties on. This took its most radical form in liberation theology, which influenced a new generation of lay Catholics, as well as young nuns and priests. Calls for action on behalf of the poor from the 1968 Episcopal Conference in Medellín spoke of popular education as a tool for change and 'consciousness raising' as a means of liberation, calling for 'the awakening and organization of the popular sectors of society' to press for social projects.<sup>8</sup> For all its contradictions, this would prove an important dimension for inter-class solidarity—no least in the social mobilizations of the indigenous movements. Far more than in Europe and North America, feminist agitation in Latin America during this period was characterized by the integration of intellectuals and middle-class activists in struggles for basic rights and equality, under repressive regimes. Socialist and radical feminists were joined by 'popular feminists', working-class women in Church or neighbourhood associations, organizing against the dictatorships.

Literacy teaching and the self-emancipatory pedagogy popularized by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire played a central role in Latin American feminists' solidarity work in this period, as it did for the militant left

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<sup>7</sup> Francesca Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice*, Hanover, NH 1991, pp. 145–8.

<sup>8</sup> Renato Poblete, 'From Medellín to Puebla: Notes for Reflection', in Daniel Levine, ed., *Churches and Politics in Latin America*, Beverly Hills, CA 1979.

more generally—and, indeed, for liberation theology. The methodologies of critical popular education were adapted by movement activists and combined with a basic feminist curriculum—issues might include women’s sexuality, law, parent–child relations, personal development—for use in educational work with women in rural and poor urban areas. Indeed Freirian pedagogic techniques would become the *lingua franca* for the gender development projects undertaken by feminist NGOs in the eighties; they continue to be used throughout the region to reach women in rural areas, including those in indigenous communities. In 1981 Latin American feminists established a continent-wide network for women’s popular education, REPEM (Red de Educación Popular Entre Mujeres de América Latina y el Caribe), committed to the social, political and economic advancement of women through critical pedagogy.

Fraser argues that the gendered division of labour, at work and at home, was the central target for seventies feminists, North and South. Perhaps the most important idea for Latin American feminism, however, was that of personal autonomy, both material and psychological. Writer Carlos Monsiváis alluded to this key concept of the Latin American feminist lexicon when he stated that ‘the thesis of feminism is present in the conduct of women’ in Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

Autonomy was a crucial notion, both in the workshops aimed at fostering feminist consciousness and self-development among poor and working-class women that sprang up across the continent in the seventies and eighties, and in debates at the national and regional gatherings, the Encuentros Feministas Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, which met regularly from 1981.<sup>10</sup> The discourse elaborated there centred on the call for women to become autonomous actors in their own right, ‘beings for themselves’, liberated from forms of femininity centred on motherhood that reduced them to ‘beings for others’ and locked them into a subordinate role. These positions were associated with a new kind of committed feminist militancy, a *militancia comprometida*, which emerged from the feminist activism of women on the left. Yet the critique of motherhood as a major impediment to women’s autonomy—the emphasis on creating one’s own space, not just physically but also emotionally and psychologically, by breaking with traditional femininity—typically advanced

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<sup>9</sup> Marta Lamas, *Feminismo: Transmisiones y retransmisiones*, Madrid 2006, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Restrepo and Bustamante, 10 *Encuentros Feministas*, p. 15.

by young, university-educated feminists, ran counter to the maternalist positions of Church-led groups, which often mobilized women as mothers. For many black and indigenous women, too, motherhood would continue to constitute an important space for making claims. ‘We, the women of Chiapas, are no longer willing to give birth in order to feed your armies, nor to justify violence and wars. Nor will we go on furnishing cheap labour for neoliberal firms’, declared a meeting of 500 women in San Cristóbal de las Casas.<sup>11</sup>

Latin American feminist practices thus remained entangled with hierarchical social relations, solidarity often taking the form of a pedagogic relation in which educated activists aimed to help ‘other’ women to gain their own autonomy. Inevitably, this risked reproducing structural inequalities of class and race, and conflicts between various strands of feminism were integral from the start, as were attempts to render visible the racist and class-based exclusions of the movement. At the 1983 Encuentro Feminista in Lima, black and indigenous women ran a workshop on racism that called for the issue to be included in all subsequent *encuentros*. When the question of race was sidelined at the 1993 Encuentro in El Salvador, indigenous and Afro-Latin American women fought for it to be put back onto the agenda at the 1996 Encuentro in Cartagena, Chile, where the workshop on *El lado oscuro y discriminado del feminismo en el Ser y Hacer feminista*—‘the dark and discriminated-against side of feminist being and practice’—brought their voices forcefully into the debate.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Latin American feminisms were always marked by the broader social, political and economic dynamics of the region. These were the contexts in which the often contradictory encounters with feminist ideas from the North took shape.

### *Southern neoliberalism*

What of the second stage in Fraser’s argument—the metamorphoses of feminism under neoliberalism? Fraser distinguishes between First

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<sup>11</sup> Mercedes Olivera, ‘El movimiento independiente de mujeres de Chiapas y su lucha contra el neoliberalismo’, Spanish Special Issue: *Feminismos Disidentes en América Latina y el Caribe*, *Nouvelles Questions Féministes: Revue Internationale Francophone*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Restrepo and Bustamante, 10 *Encuentros Feministas*, pp. 19–20, 33, 38. The Cartagena workshop also discussed the experiences of lesbian feminists, a constant theme from the earliest *encuentros* onwards.

and Third World implementations of neoliberalism, the latter being ‘imposed at the gunpoint of debt’, as international financial institutions enforced structural adjustment programmes, compelling states to divest assets and slash state spending. Chile, of course, followed a different path, being the laboratory for the earliest neoliberal experiments under the military dictatorship of Pinochet; thereafter the model spread from the far right to nationalist governments—in Bolivia, the IMF’s programme was implemented in the eighties by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, which had led the popular revolution of 1952 that nationalized the mines—and centre-left ones.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, neoliberal policies were implemented by post-dictatorship regimes. This simultaneous transition to neoliberalism and to liberal democracy in most of Latin America had a clear political meaning: the victory of democratization, for which the left had fought, also signalled the defeat of left alternatives to capitalist social relations. At stake here were **both the geopolitics of the region**—in particular the direct and indirect interventions of the United States—and the global triumph of the West in the Cold War, the collapse of actually existing socialism leading to a wider loss of legitimacy or practicality for the post-capitalist imaginary. It was in this context that female emancipation came to be reframed in terms of market participation.

For, as Fraser notes, feminism has thrived in the era of neoliberalism; it has gone from being ‘a radical countercultural movement’ towards becoming ‘a mass social phenomenon’, transforming social understandings and reshaping commonsense views of family, work and dignity.<sup>14</sup> In fact, neoliberalism has been a thoroughly gendered phenomenon. Women’s participation in the wage economy in historically unprecedented numbers has been a cornerstone of labour flexibilization strategies. They have also been the focus of renewed gender-normative regulative efforts

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<sup>13</sup> As Emir Sader observes, in countries like Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, parties with roots in anti-neoliberal social movements ‘have begun to express resistance to neoliberalism in the political arena’, but ‘have not put post-neoliberal policies into practice. They have remained within the model, tempering it with compensatory social policies’: ‘Post-neoliberalism in Latin America’, *Development Dialogue*, vol. 51, January 2009, p. 177. For a thoughtful reflection on women and the Bolivarian process in Venezuela—continuing problems of violence and sexism, despite some legal and social advances and a rise in women’s self-esteem—see the interview with Yanahir Reyes, ‘Women and Chavismo’, *NACLA*, Summer 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, pp. 107–8.



by the state, to 'ready' those who are not already in the labour market for employability, constituting them as a pool of potential workers. Feminist legacies have featured prominently in these policies. Both ends of the spectrum, as Fraser puts it, are enrolled in the 'feminist romance':

At one end, the female cadres of the professional middle classes, determined to crack the glass ceiling; at the other end, the female temps, part-timers, low-wage service employees, domestics, sex workers, migrants, EPZ workers and microcredit borrowers, seeking not only income and material security, but also dignity, self-betterment and liberation from traditional authority. At both ends, the dream of women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation.<sup>15</sup>

How and why did feminists become embroiled in the project of neoliberalism? In Fraser's account, the rise of neoliberalism dramatically changed the terrain on which feminism operated; the effect was 'to resignify' feminist ideals—a term borrowed from Judith Butler.<sup>16</sup> Aspirations that had had a clear emancipatory charge assumed a more ambiguous meaning in the neoliberal era; they took on a new valence. This resonates strongly with the Latin American experience. In particular, the key feminist concept of women's material and psychological autonomy, realized through pedagogic practices of empowerment, **now plays a crucial role** in Latin America for the cultural project of neoliberalism. It has been embedded in the social programmes targeting the poor, run by the state bureaucracies and their subcontracted NGOs.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, *desarrollo personal*—personal development—is an explicit training requirement of Chilean and Colombian anti-poverty programmes which aim to promote a new feminine identity, challenging an ostensibly passive subjectivity, equated with a permanent orientation towards others, for example as mothers or homemakers. This institutionalization of the feminist pursuit of autonomy, or 'empowerment', has undoubtedly created new space for women—while also ensnaring them anew in oppressive

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<sup>15</sup> Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', p. 108; see also Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, London 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Freire's pedagogic techniques have always been a politically ambivalent tool, used not only for solidarity work but also taken up by governments as part of their own projects of social integration. Thus Freire was hired by the Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964–70) in Chile to provide technical support for its agrarian reform programme.

and often exploitative relations. The type of autonomy provided by the neoliberal model of the two-wage family and ‘flexible’ working comes at a cost: emancipation serves to fuel the engine of capitalist accumulation, as Fraser notes, while the work of care-giving still largely falls on women’s shoulders.<sup>18</sup>

This expectation is built into the region’s ‘conditional cash transfer’ programmes, anti-poverty mechanisms which supposedly target ‘families’ but really focus on women. Under the auspices of Brazil’s Bolsa Família, Mexico’s Oportunidades or Chile’s Programa Puente and Chile Solidario, women receive cash bonuses on condition that they ensure their families fulfil programme requirements in areas like schooling, health care and employability.<sup>19</sup> Like the micro-finance schemes that accompany them, these conditional cash transfer programmes appeal to women’s sense of ‘responsibility’—both their fiscal sobriety and, underpinning it, their overall concern for their families’ and households’ emotional and material well-being—even as the burden of women’s work has been intensified.<sup>20</sup> As techniques for the ‘conduct of conduct’, they harness women’s desires for autonomy and self-transformation to what Jacques Donzelot has referred to as the ‘responsibilization’ of society, under the new imperative of female empowerment. What is novel is that social risk is devolved directly on to women living in precarious conditions, hinging on an appeal to female emancipation.

The language of contention has thus been transformed into a tool of regulation: ‘autonomy’ and ‘equality’ are now redefined through a liberal discourse of individual rights that is focused on empowerment through the market, with women nudged towards greater entanglement as producers, borrowers and consumers. This call for responsibility is, at the same time, contradictory: the appeal to women as autonomous individuals in liberal citizenship is intertwined with traditional assumptions about their role as mothers—the expectation that they will not only continue to bear responsibility for the well-being of their families but

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<sup>18</sup> See UNDP Human Development Report, *The Rise of the South*, New York 2013.

<sup>19</sup> For a comparative critical overview of Latin America’s much celebrated CCT programmes, see Lena Lavinas, ‘21st-Century Welfare’, NLR 84, Nov–Dec 2013. A recent OECD survey of Chile casts doubts on the effectiveness of conditional, as opposed to direct, cash transfers in reducing levels of extreme poverty: OECD Economic Surveys, Chile 2012, chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup> Sylvia Chant, ‘Re-thinking the “feminization of poverty” in relation to aggregate gender indices’, *Journal of Human Development*, vol. 7, no. 2, July 2006.

will assume the further burden of overseeing the successful social integration of the economically marginal, bringing the family along in a journey of self-improvement. Given the real conditions of intensifying economic and social precarity, these gender-sensitive anti-poverty programmes justified in terms of self-empowerment and inclusion in practice also operate as mechanisms for exclusion. In particular, the ‘responsibilization’ of women in Latin America has gone hand-in-hand with a dramatic rise in the criminalization of poverty—and of male poverty in particular—through the police and courts, and increasingly privatized prison systems. Men made redundant by the restructuring of capitalism are disproportionately the targets of coercive strategies of containment.<sup>21</sup> Once again, Chile is exemplary, for it has one of the highest levels of incarceration in the region relative to the overall population, with a new system of private prisons built under the Concertación governments of socialists Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet.

### *Agents?*

Missing from Fraser’s account of the resignification of feminist ideals under neoliberalism, however, is any concept of political agency. Her discussion relies heavily on the passive mode: feminism (singular) has ‘been recuperated’ by neoliberalism, or ‘drawn into’ a liaison with it, or ‘is used’ to legitimate marketization and state retrenchment.<sup>22</sup> Yet the rise of an institutionalized feminism involved not merely the transformation of ideas but the active movement of bodies, practices and discourses, from the spaces of the political opposition to the agencies of government, including policy-oriented think-tanks and research centres. These processes were by no means restricted to Latin America, although the phenomenon was very visible there. The nineties saw the consolidation of a ‘feminism of the possible’ in the region, hitching a pragmatic liberal women’s politics to the broader agenda of cautious democratization, operating within the limits set by local and international capitalist relations. This shift, boosted by lavishly funded programmes of neoliberal institutional modernization, enabled some women to become the

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Markus-Michael Müller, ‘The rise of the penal state in Latin America’, *Contemporary Justice Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, March 2012; L. Dammert and M. F. T. Malone, ‘Does it take a village? Policing strategies and fear of crime in Latin America’, *Latin American Policies and Society*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 2006; P. Chevigny, ‘The populism of fear: politics of crime in the Americas’, *Punishment and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, pp. 109, 112.

dominant voices of feminism and the legitimate interlocutors of government and transnational agencies, while others were rendered marginal, or silent. It determined who would become the intermediaries for UN-based efforts to promote a transnational agenda of women's equality, premised on the deployment of 'gender' as a technical concept and framed in the language of liberal human rights. It helped to define who would be the 'winners' and who the 'losers' in the transformation that Sonia Alvarez has described as the NGOization of Latin American feminisms<sup>23</sup>—a process in which activists-turned-bureaucrats leveraged their feminist knowledge into policy expertise, while erstwhile poorer sisters were recruited as clients for social programmes which cast them as empowered subjects of rights to be accessed in the marketplace.

Thus in Chile, for example, a proposal for women's workshops run by neighbourhood groups from La Granja, a working-class suburb on the southern periphery of Santiago, was refused a grant by the Municipal Women's Bureau because the women involved lacked professional qualifications. Since the nineties there has been a revolving door between SERNAM's offices, well-established NGOs and university gender studies departments, often competing for the heavily conditional foreign-aid grants that the government directs into gender-related social projects, designed to alleviate the misery caused by its own neoliberal policies.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sonia Alvarez, 'Advocating Feminism: The Latin American NGO boom', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 1, no. 2, September 1999.

<sup>24</sup> SERNAM: Servicio Nacional de la Mujer, established in 1991 as a ministerial-level government agency with regional and municipal offices. What follows draws on my research over the past three decades on popular women's organizations in Santiago de Chile, where I have witnessed from below, so to speak, the institutionalization of feminism and the transformation of discourses and practices of emancipation into resources for neoliberal restructuring. This location offers a rather different take on the official story about the necessary evolution of feminism into a pragmatic pursuit of gender justice; instead, a story becomes visible of inclusions and exclusions, of loss of voice and, above all, of the transformation of sisters into clients. It also mirrors the larger cultural-political transformations of the country—a distancing from critical thought and from the values of solidarity and collectivity, as the Chilean writer Raquel Olea has put it. For further detail on the trajectory of feminist practice in Chile, see my 'Empowering "Consumer Citizens" or Governing Poor Female Subjects? The Institutionalization of "Self-Development" in the Chilean Policy Field', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2007; and 'New Subjects of Rights? Women's Movements and the Construction of Citizenship in the "New Democracies"', in Sonia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar, eds, *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Cultures*, Boulder, CO 1998.

The emphasis of these projects in the ‘new’ democracy has been on measurable ‘outcomes’, rather than general consciousness-raising. The winners have been those who could demonstrate their specialist knowledge, for the benefit of foreign donors (Scandinavian aid agencies, American foundations, German party institutes, UK-based international NGOs and the like). The losers have been working-class activists lacking project-writing skills or credentials; women in the poorer neighbourhoods, the *poblaciones*, may not even have known they existed.

In line with the donors’ demands, SERNAM projects were tightly targeted on specific groups of women: privileging female-headed households or the self-employed, for example, and therefore causing tensions and anger among those who were excluded. Rather than creating collective spaces where women could articulate their own demands, as the autonomous feminist movement tried to do under the dictatorship, these institutionalized gender-development projects tended to treat women as isolated individuals, with problems that can be solved through forms of differential clientelization. In the last twenty-five years of gender-sensitive social policy, this pattern of exclusion and clientelization has become entrenched. This is not simply a case of feminist ideals being ‘resignified’, but of feminist practitioners actively seeking out the patronage of neoliberal powers.

### *Contestation*

While Fraser suggests that the women’s movement shifted *en bloc* to neoliberal positions, the rise of this ‘feminism of the possible’ in Latin America was fiercely contested at successive regional *encuentros*, as Alejandra Restrepo and Ximena Bustamante make clear. There were sharp divisions at the 1993 Encuentro Feminista in El Salvador over OECD proposals for funding developing countries’ attendance at the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing. Many were fiercely opposed to the proposal that the USAID bureaucracy would identify and fund five sets of NGOs to act as local entities from Mexico, Central America, the Andean countries, Brazil and the Southern Cone, focusing on the denominated theme of ‘violence and political participation’. The UN’s regional NGO coordinator for Beijing—she would be given a Unifem prize there—argued that feminists should celebrate the opportunity to inflect government documents and be heard in an influential international forum. Others argued that Latin Americans should meet

democratically to select their own themes and representatives.<sup>25</sup> The debate between ‘autonomous’ and ‘institutionalized’ feminists intensified at the 1996 Encuentro Feminista in Cartagena. At the gathering in the Dominican Republic in 1999 there were heated arguments about NGOization and the funding of the Encuentro Feminista itself (by Oxfam, Unifem, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the Global Foundation, among others). Autonomous feminists argued that the movement should return to its critical and subversive roots—‘With the politics of the possible we may have a share of power, but that power can be an illusion.’ In Costa Rica three years later, the Dominican feminist Magaly Pineda’s defence of *maquilas*, on the grounds that they offered women economic independence, was roundly attacked by Honduran worker Daisy Flores: ‘*Maquilas* are places of torture and don’t signify an alternative of dignified work for women.’ The Encuentro’s final declaration attacked ‘donor’ governments that simultaneously waged wars and imposed neoliberal policies reinforcing a world of violence and misery.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, some feminists’ values had not been resignified.

The Latin American critique of feminism’s ‘liaison’ with neoliberalism certainly bears comparison with that of the Anglosphere. From Brazil, Mary Garcia Castro pointed out over a decade ago that ‘gender and feminism have ceased to be adversaries of the authorities and have become their darlings, the subject of official speeches, policies, and statistics—things that smack of authoritarianism and social perversity as far as the living conditions of the poor and the working class are concerned’:

When social movements that have been known for their spontaneity, flexibility, and democracy and the opportunity they have provided for grassroots participation and direct action become institutionalized they do not thereby become a new ‘Third Estate’, an element of popular representation within the existing power structure. They may become types of power, dependent on funding from international agencies, tending toward bureaucratic rigidity, and competing with one another. Like other institutions they are vulnerable to all the vices of bureaucracies, including the use of their power for private ends.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Restrepo and Bustamante, *10 Encuentros Feministas*, pp. 33–34. The UN NGO coordinator, Virginia Vargas, would later take a more critical position. Such evolutions lie beyond the scope of Restrepo and Bustamante’s work.

<sup>26</sup> Restrepo and Bustamante, *10 Encuentros Feministas*, pp. 37, 43, 45, 49–50.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Garcia Castro, ‘Engendering Powers in Neoliberal Times in Latin America: Reflections from the Left on Feminisms and Feminisms’, *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 28, no. 6, November 2001.

Sonia Alvarez, herself a former Programme Officer for the Ford Foundation in Rio de Janeiro, has analysed the local and international pressures that block feminist NGOs from pushing beyond ‘the narrow parameters of Latin America’s actually existing democracies’, arguing that ‘gender’ has become part of the lexicon of technical planning, a power-neutral indicator of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ rather than a power-laden field of unequal relations between women and men. Maruja Barrig has covered similar ground in her investigation of Latin American feminism’s ‘discontents’. The move to the corridors of power, she writes of pragmatist feminism in Peru, inevitably meant eschewing critiques of capitalism and social class.<sup>28</sup>

Most importantly, perhaps, the ameliorative policies of the liberal-feminist agenda in Latin America have proved incapable of challenging the widening class/race-based differences among women in the region. Recent capitalist developments, especially the increased presence of extractive industries and agribusiness, with their devastating effects on rural communities and the environment, have exacerbated the divides between different groups of women in the region and broadened the gulf between winners and losers. As the effects of dispossessive capitalism are felt in rural and urban areas alike, voices from the social margins have articulated their own visions and raised their own demands. For ‘popular’ feminists, as for many Afro-descended and indigenous women, claims for gender justice arise from their own material positions. Their struggles have never lost sight of the critique of political economy. ‘We are well aware that the poverty and violence that have so deeply affected our living conditions and our dignity as women, as well as that of our families, are tightly linked to the dismantling of the peasant economy’, write the feminists of the *Movimiento Independiente de Mujeres* in Chiapas:

Growing government support for foreign investment in agro-industry, bio-prospecting, “green” tourism, oil and energy generation has affected women by increasing their precarity and enforcing their fear of being hit, with their families, by evictions, expropriations, forced sales . . .<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Alvarez, ‘Advocating Feminism’; Maruja Barrig, ‘Los malestares del feminismo latinoamericano: una nueva lectura’, 2013, available on the *Mujeres En Red* website, and ‘La Persistencia de la Memoria: Feminismo y Estado en el Perú de los 90’, in Aldo Panfichi, ed., *Sociedad civil, esfera pública y democratización en América Latina: Andes y Cono Sur*, Mexico City 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Olivera, ‘El Movimiento Independiente de Mujeres’.

This politics cannot be grasped by Fraser's notion of a shift from redistribution to recognition, as the focus of feminist struggles; nor, for that matter, does it correspond to Maxine Molyneux's once influential categories of 'practical' versus 'strategic' feminist interests.<sup>30</sup> The fate of Latin American feminisms in the twenty-first century cannot be divorced from the broader dynamics structuring the social, economic and racial inequalities of the region. A renewed critical feminism, capable of contributing to a larger emancipatory project, will need to undertake a searching examination of the record of the dominant liberal feminism over the past twenty-five years. It is in this context that we need to locate the troubling convergence between projects for women's emancipation and neoliberal capitalism.

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<sup>30</sup> Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', pp. 108–9; Maxine Molyneux, 'Mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda: Progreso/Oportunidades, Mexico's conditional transfer programme', *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 40, no. 4, August 1986.