

# BOOK REVIEWS

## A READ ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN CHINA THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF MARRIAGE AND REAL-ESTATE WEALTH

*Leta Hong Fincher: Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China. Zed Books Ltd, 2014, 208 pages. Price: 218 DKK.*

*Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* is a book that comes at an opportune moment. It resonates with the present-day debates on the Chinese media about (single) women. A glimpse of the public discourse in China, such as the newly arising term “leftover women”, which is widely used to describe an urban, professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single, marks out many gender issues circulating in contemporary Chinese society. While celebrated for their educational and professional attainment, urban young women are derogated “leftover” for their unmarried status. Manifested as a concern of ticking time, there is a palpable sense of anxiety among women across the country, involving the tensions created between paradoxical gender expectations circulating in the Chinese society. From this, issues such as gender expectation, domestic violence and property ownership are invoked.

In light of this, Leta Hong Fincher, an American journalist and Ph.D. in Sociology at Tsinghua University, develops an original and interesting thesis. Anchored within a political economy framework, Fincher debunks the myth of “leftover women” by fixing her perspective on real-estate wealth and gender as a key relationship that links individuals, communities, and the state in a shared, though often contested, bond. Based on an ethnographic study on urban, educated, middle-class women from cities across China along with a synthesis of historical literature, Fincher displays contemporary Chinese women’s plight, and presents the development of existing gender issues in China. This encompasses Chinese women’s rights

through history, new interpretations of Marriage Law, domestic violence as well as LGBTQ rights.

She argues that the state-sponsored media campaign about “leftover women” is part of a broad resurgence of gender inequality in post-socialist reform China. From this argument, she postulates that “leftover women”, as a category of women and a campaign, is concocted by the government to achieve its socio-economic goals, which increasingly go against those of women. Gender discriminatory norms, in this sense, are seen exacerbated by China’s one-party state with a massive propaganda apparatus (Fincher 2014: 3-4). Hence, gender inequalities in China have become even more acute.

I do think, as does Fincher, the social environment that besets women in present-day China is not so optimistic. As many have suggested, there seems to be a throwback of women’s rights in post-socialist reform China (Li 1988; Liu 2007). Chinese women’s rights are still, to a great extent, being confined by the patriarchal state’s ideal of citizenry, strong propaganda apparatus, as well as its incomplete legal system (Hesketh, Lu and Xing, 2005; Stoltz, Svensson and et.al. 2010). Nonetheless, images of powerful and autonomous women do too come through in existing literatures. A changing gender relation in “private life” is widely noticed in anthropological studies in the past decades, such as discussed by Yan Yuanxiang, the increase of “wife-dominated” household found in Xiajia, a farming community in Heilongjiang, northeast China (Stafford 2008; Yan 2003). Similar changes are also observed in urban cases, such as middle-class families in Shanghai (Shen 2011). These cases are seen partly account for the rising position of Chinese women, particularly in relation to marriage transactions and family property (ibid; Stafford 2008; Yan 2003). Such contradictory observations make the victimized urban Chinese women portrayed in Fincher’s book seem somewhat unilateral, and could be led to by the following reasons.

First, Fincher’s analysis seems to arise from a rigid understanding of feminism as something opposed to patriarchy, in which what is at stake is merely the gender factor, namely the comparison of males and females, but nothing else. To raise an example, in order to exemplify the existing gender discrimination over women in present-day China, the analysis of LGBTQ people’s existential situations is included as one of the important aspects, of which she compares two different reactions from parents, invoked to their homosexual child’s plead for help on buying real-estate. She identifies the contrast of the results happened to the son and the daughter as a manifestation of the persistent son-preference in Chinese family, while shying away from commenting on intersecting aspects, such as, family backgrounds, parents’ perception of sexuality, as well as the mere fact that the parents are not all informed by their children’s sexuality in these cases, which could have given rise to alternative explanations.

Second, the unilateral voice presented in Fincher’s study also has much to do with her lack of methodological reflection through the analysis. For example, many of the presented cases regarding domestic violence are collected through a Weibo account (China’s version of twitter) Fincher set up, which could have been seen as an emotional outlet and an alternative channel for her informants to seek for help. Problems can also be found in her lack of specification on important conceptions, such as middle-class. These issues altogether may delimit a certain group of women and make these voices less representative as Fincher has asserted in the book.

Fincher may also have over-politicized the phenomenon of “leftover women.” She adamantly insists that the prevalence of “leftover women” is the sheer work of the state media. She constantly refers to the year 2007, when the word “leftover women” was officially admitted into the Chinese lexicon, as the divide of women’s attitudes towards their property, albeit the fact that women may not even be aware of the state’s recognition of

“leftover women” (Wang 2014). Moreover, if looking into the evolution of the concept in the public discourse, one might find it widespread in various kinds of discourses as well as deeply accommodated through the contemporary Chinese history and culture (Honig and Hershatter 1988).

Along these lines, Fincher’s intention of bringing attentions to gender inequalities in China is very much undermined by her dismiss of multiple realities in life, lack of methodological consideration, as well as normative writing. Placed under scrutiny, the stories told in Fincher’s book seems more the telling of a delicate interplay of discursive power and embodied cultural practices, rather than a zero-sum game of liberation versus control between the state and the citizen as asserted.

Having said that, Fincher’s choice of using property purchase as an entry of analysis is a clever one, as it addresses gender issues that are often concealed from the daily routines, among which the inter-linkage between private life, community and state is revealed. Her analysis is indicative in helping readers who are unfamiliar with the Chinese context to understand how gender inequality is a complex issue that goes through the strata of the society, and how it could be generated in the interplay of family, market and law system. This being the case, I do recommend this book for its detailed accounts of empirical materials and its potentiality to arouse further discussions on gender equality in China.

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## NEGOTIATING NORMATIVITIES IN CHINESE QUEER COMMUNITIES

*Engebretsen, Elisabeth L.: Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography. New York and London: Routledge, 2014, 194 pages. Price 356 DKK.*

In the first book-length ethnographic study of female same-sex subjectivity, intimacy and community in mainland China, *Queer Women in Urban China*, anthropologist Elisabeth Engebretsen discovers that many *lalas*, or Chinese lesbians, have a strong desire to be ‘normal’. They aspire to lead a life as normal as possible as their heterosexual counterparts; they reject or remain reluctant about identity categories such as lesbian or homosexuality; they refer not to come out to their families and participate in identity-based activism in public spaces; many of them choose to get married to straight or gay men

and hold elaborate wedding ceremonies just to make their families happy. In many parts of the world where sexual minorities celebrate their freedom to be different and refuse to lead a double life, lalas' attitude to normativity seems quite odd. Conventional understanding based on the tradition/modernity dichotomy is rather unhelpful here as it places nations and cultures in a linear and progressive timeline where the west is privileged and other experiences are rendered 'inauthentic' and 'backward'. The essentialist position that China is so different that Chinese queer culture is bound to be different from western paradigms, is hardly convincing in a transnational world, where the local and the global are increasingly interlinked with each other. Cautioning against the two positions in popular discourse and in academic theorisations of non-western sexualities, Engebretsen takes us to Beijing's lala community in its vibrant (trans)formation and to listen to the fascinating stories told by local lalas. The result is an empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated critical analysis of Chinese queer women's experiences from a queer feminist anthropologist's perspective.

The objective of the book is to demonstrate how lalas negotiate normativity in their everyday lives and organised activism, as well as how lala subjectivity, social norms and strategies of negotiation are changing over time in a fast-changing Chinese society. For Engebretsen, lala is a social category instead of an individual sexual identity similar to 'lesbian'; it is 'a contested site where women are working out new meanings of selfhood, sexuality and gender' through negotiations with social norms (p. 154). In Engebretsen's account, lalas understand their subjectivities through a clearly gendered distinction; they both stick to the T/P (masculine/feminine) gender norms and at the same time play queerly with them (chapter 2). In order to maintain family bonds and comply with social expectations, many lalas choose to remain closeted to their families and, in doing so, keep lala love and community life away from the family sphere.

Although the six chapters deal with different issues concerning lala subjectivity, intimacy and community, they all address the question of how lalas comply with, negotiate and sometimes challenge social norms including gender norms, norms to be respectable citizens in a postsocialist society, family, kinship and other forms of social relationships. The solution that Engebretsen offers is a Judith Butler one: social norms are persistent, but they are by no means static. Through everyday enactment of these norms, lalas are redefining and changing the norms, although this is a slow process. The argument neither overemphasises social structure nor valorises individual agency: it considers the resilience of the social structure in shaping individual understandings of the self, but does not see social structures as static and pervasive; it addresses individual choices, strategies for identity management and community engagement but does not sound voluntaristic. The lala lives, emotions and experiences in the author's account are fraught with hopes, despairs and the nitty-gritties of the everyday, in the historical context of a country in its rapid social transformations and with tremendous uncertainties unfolding toward its future.

*Queer Women in Urban China* is a timely contribution to the field of queer studies, which has produced many interesting works but, at the same time, suffers from increasingly sharp critiques: queer theory is often accused of being Euro-American-centric; it remains ignorant of, and sometimes arrogant about, the lives and experiences of sexual minorities from other parts of the world; it is male-centric and at times marginalises queer women and people of other genders; it is over-theoretical and fails to account for people's lived experiences and contribute to organised activism that makes social changes possible; it is largely characterised by anti-social and anti-normative politics: being queer is antithetic to traditional institutions, relationships and norms such as family, marriage, kinship and social respectability. A grounded and critical ethnographic research

into lala lives in China effectively brings these issues and critiques together: this project is both transnational and postcolonial; it is both feminist and queer; the author is both researcher and active participant in lala community activism; the question of how lalas relate to social norms engages critically with discussions on queer subjectivity, relationality, temporality, space, intimacy and affect in contemporary queer theory.

Engebretsen's fieldwork primarily took place in Beijing from 2004 to 2006, which seems to be an optimistic moment for lala identity and community formation. However, given the vast geographical differences within China and the rapid changes that take place in Chinese society, we may ponder what the argument may look like if the fieldwork is done at a different location or in a different timeframe. Ethnographic research into same-sex intimacies in other Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Chengdu and Shenyang demonstrates different, as well as similar, dynamics and certain local variations in comparison to Beijing. However, as the first book on queer women in urban China this book raises important questions about and offers valuable insights into what it means to be queer in a non-western context, how one negotiates social norms in a society that undergoes rapid changes, but where social norms still take a strong hold. As a well-trained anthropologist, Engebretsen has demonstrated acute attention to details in the everyday and subtle changes in human emotions. She knows how to tell stories, and she tells them in interesting ways. Written in lucid language, this book combines 'thick' descriptions of lala everyday lives with nuanced critical analysis. It makes an important contribution to queer studies, China studies and urban anthropology. The book will be of interest to anyone interested in gender, sexuality and China, and will hopefully offer inspirations for those who are struggling with fitting into social norms (and those who cannot).

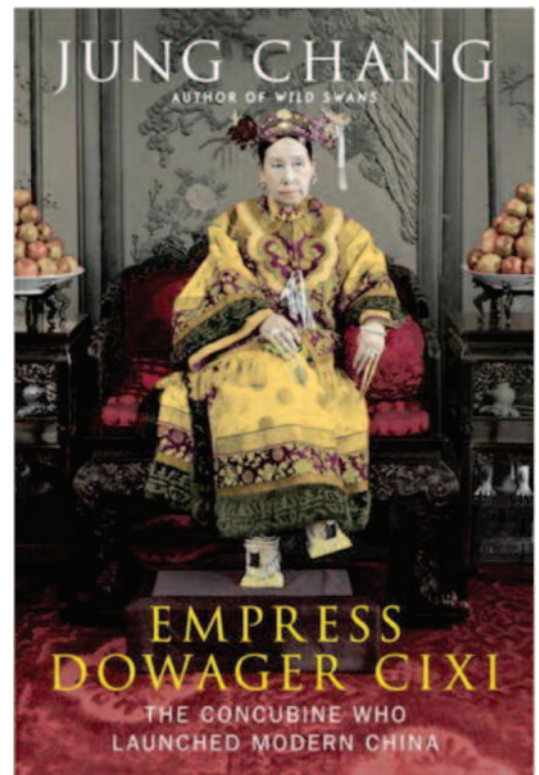
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## CIXI – “THE ONLY MAN IN CHINA!”

*Jung Chang: Empress Dowager Cixi. The concubine who launched modern China.*

*Alfred A. Knops. New York, 2013. 436 pages. Price: 115 DKK.*

In this door-stopper of over 400 pages, Jung Chang, acclaimed author of *Wild Swans*, the modern classic about three generations of women in 20<sup>th</sup> century China, has embarked on an exciting new project. This is the biography of an impressive Manchu



*The cover photo shows how Cixi managed to transcend former boundaries of court culture by means of new technologies – not least by using artists and photographers who were instructed to make the self-obsessed woman look more youthful! Contemporaries described Cixi not as beautiful but as someone with “poise”, her most arresting feature being “her brilliant and expressive eyes”, which were able to “transfix” people.*

woman, who rose from the position of a junior concubine in the harem of emperor Xianfeng to become the proxy ruler of China in the last decades of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). As a 16-year-old, the girl who would become empress dowager Cixi (1835-1908), or Tzu-Hsi in Chinese, was selected as a lower-rank concubine for the new emperor Xianfeng. Her status changed when she gave birth to the emperor's only son, and became number two in the hierarchy of the emperor's wives. On the death of her husband in 1861 the young Cixi seized power in a palace coup that allowed her to serve as regent for her son and relatives. At first she governed through her only son, emperor Tongzhi, and after his early decease, through her two adopted children, emperor Guangzu and the last emperor Puyi, who abdicated in 1911 with the fall of the Qing dynasty.

Jung Chang takes us on a journey through the later decades of the Chinese empire, when Cixi managed to be the *de facto* ruler of China in a turbulent period of internal unrest, involving the opium war with Britain in the 1850s and the war with Japan in the 1890s, which resulted in substantial losses for China. The explicit aim of the biography is to redress the image of the dowager empress Cixi, who has been portrayed for many years as a primary cause of all the evils of China and to this day is blamed for its humiliation and decline.

Two related events towards the end of the Qing period proved to be definite in the demonization of Cixi. The first was her ardent resistance to the political and constitutional reforms of the late 1890s. The second was her fatal support for the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, an extremely violent xenophobic and anti-Christian uprising, which saw summary executions and attacks on The Legation Quarter of Beijing. The riots ended with the Western Allied occupation of The Forbidden City and the flight of Cixi and her court from Beijing in 1900. Yet, like a phoenix from the ashes, she managed to return to Beijing in 1902 and to restore her reputation among

the foreign powers. And so, as the end of her life and of the empire drew closer, she launched many of the reforms that she had earlier opposed; modernizing industry and urban infrastructure, reforming the legal system and state administration, repairing foreign relations, promoting education – including women's education – and abandoning traditional foot-binding. All this feeds into Jung Shang's main aim; to present Cixi as a great modernizer of early modern China. Thus the central narrative of the biography seeks to tell a new and more encompassing story than previously told about the dowager empress and her time.

The cover photo of the book, taken in 1904, offers a vivid example of how Cixi managed to transcend former boundaries of court culture by means of new technologies. Set alongside some of the more vivid chapters of the book, the photo opens our eyes and minds to the fascinating gendered aesthetics of a Chinese empire rife with symbols and lavish adornments. The colour picture shows Cixi sitting in the Double Dragon throne chair, which was habitually reserved for the male emperor. Her face seems plain, since the etiquette surrounding widowhood prevented her from wearing make-up – Manchu court ladies usually painted their faces a startling white and pink with a patch of red on their lower lip to produce a small cherry-like mouth. Her hair is, in fact, a black toupee placed over her own thin patch and fixed in a complicated Manchu style, which she herself adorned with ornaments and fresh flowers. The colour of her dress is yellow, as prescribed by her dowager role, according to which she could not wear brilliant and more significant colours such as red. Manchu women did not bind their feet, and here the footwear is a pair of spectacular square-toed and embroidered satin shoes covered with small pearls, leaving bare only the centimetres high soles; such shoes were quite unlike the sharply cut model worn by Han women with bonded feet.

Furthermore, an interesting current of court masculinity can be traced throughout

the book. Future emperors were usually socialized in what has been called Wu masculinity, which included the reading of Chinese classics, the writing of essays and poetry, calligraphy and the like. Cixi's son, who died young, was, according to Chang, apparently a bisexual who enjoyed opera and Beijing nightlife more than state affairs. And the subsequent emperor Guangxu, who was raised as a model Confucian monarch, is described as a pious soul who regarded fun as sinful and expressed concerns for poor villagers and peasants. Physically he was tiny and thin with a whispering voice and the doctors, who kept an obsessive eye on Guangxu's bodily health and bodily liquids, noticed his "castration by Heaven" and his inability to have conventional sex. Pearl, his favourite concubine, was a cross dresser who used a man's hairstyle with a ponytail down her back, a man's hat, a riding waistcoat and black satin boots. These soft and unconventional masculinities, marked as they are by introverted and non-heteronormative lifestyles, seem to be in marked contrast to the forceful, even demasculating, methods and mentality exhibited by Cixi. High-ranking Chinese men of this period apparently did not accommodate western ideas of power and masculinity and were deemed unmanly by contemporary Western observers. This is an issue that could well have been elaborated on, but it is only asserted by Jung Chang.

Both the official and the unofficial nicknames of the dowager empress reveal a strong-minded masculine femininity. It is a telling fact that she named herself the 'old Buddha' and was approached by the minor emperor as the Royal Father. Western diplomats both feared and adored her; the British minister called her "the old cat", while a French claimed that Cixi was "le seul homme de la Chine!", the only male in China. In its finest passages, the biography presents the grammar of an imperial culture grounded in Confucian values and complicated court etiquettes. This was a culture marked by strict spatial, gendered and hierarchical boundaries,

which limited the presence and visibility of women. During audiences Cixi would sit behind the throne, concealed behind a yellow silk screen. As a female empress she was not allowed to see or be seen by her officials; nor was she allowed in the front courtyard of the Forbidden City, the symbolic heart of the Empire. Nevertheless she managed to blur and soften the strict boundaries and to head an empire for half a century. For a comparative outlook, it is interesting that Cixi's reign fell in the same period as that of Queen Victoria of the British Empire, whose legacy of conservatism is currently undergoing revision by researchers and film makers. The question is whether this book will lead to a similar new and more nuanced understanding of Cixi and her time?

While there may be some appeal in the idea of assigning to the empress dowager a significant and so far misread and stereotyped role in these vital years of Chinese history, there are problems with the way in which the project is conducted. The biography reverses the existing history but does so with a tendency towards bias and idealisation and in a "lazy" way that avoid confrontation with other historical accounts and more careful, source-based representations and transparent judgements. As a reader, one is left contemplating the contours of a powerful Machiavelian woman – a Chinese female dragon with a seemingly unconstrained will to power. From this perspective Cixi's embarking on modernization projects and reforms can be seen as a determination to keep the empire on track, no matter the high price entailed by the killings and extermination of foe and friend alike. We are left with the image of a conservative modernizer, who made the best of many situations, but who lacked humanity and who clung to a vanishing empire rather than embracing long-term perspectives and resolutions for China in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## RETHINKING GENDER JUSTICE – A TRANSNATIONAL APPROACH

*Nancy Fraser: Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Verso. London – New York. 2013. 224 pages. Price: 210 DKK.

Nancy Fraser, Loeb Professor in Philosophy and Politics at The New School for Social Research, New York, is a leading scholar in critical theory as well as in feminist and gender research. *Fortunes of Feminism* is a collection of Fraser's work from 1985-2010. The 10 chapters have all been published in *Justice Interruptus*; two articles have only appeared in French.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore great to have a collection of some of her best articles, but the question is what gender researchers can learn from this book? To me, the final chapter: "Between Marketization and Social Protection: Resolving the Feminist Ambivalence" is one reason for feminists to be concerned about Fraser's new theoretical and political approach. Here Fraser uses Karl Polanyi's classical book: *The Great Transformation* (1944) as inspiration to rethink the character of the present political-economic crisis, social justice and the emancipatory potentials of feminism.

The ambitious aim of the book is to contribute to feminism's theoretical and political project in a globalized world. The title: *Fortunes of Feminism*, the prologue and the book's structure as a drama in three acts all refer to Fraser's interpretation of the evolution of the feminist movement and its ambivalences and potentials in the contemporary crisis.

*The first act of the drama*, "Feminism Insurgent: Radicalizing Critique in the Era of Social Democracy", addresses the societal shift to Post-War Social Democracy and the growth of second-wave feminism. It contains four classical texts written between 1985 and 1994. Here Fraser analyses the success of the feminist and new social movements in the

1960s and 70s as an integrated part of New Left Radicalism. They contributed to the shift in critical theory and gender theory from class to a gender sensitive concept of social justice. All articles share an optimistic vision that it is indeed possible for the feminist movement to change the world, dissolve male domination and disrupt gender hierarchies.

*Act two of the drama* "Feminism Tamed: From Redistribution to Recognition in the Age of Identity", contain three chapters, which address the growth of neoliberalism and the theoretical shift from 'redistribution' to 'recognition' followed by a growing concern with identity politics. Here Fraser's main argument is that the focus on identity politics converges with a growth of market-fundamentalism. As an alternative, she proposes a two-dimensional approach to gender-injustice in economics and culture combining redistribution and recognition.

*The third act of the drama*, "Feminism Resurgent? Confronting Capitalist Crisis in the Neoliberal Era", addresses the present economic crisis. It contains three chapters that aim to develop a gender sensitive approach able to understand the fundamental character of the crisis and contribute to develop perspectives for an emancipatory solution to the crisis. The first shows how globalization changes the grammar for the demands about social justice. Demands about *what of justice* becomes a debate about *who* can be considered as members of the community, and *what* the relevant community should be. Social justice is not only concerned with the content of the demands but is increasingly concerned with the frames. Fraser argues that a theory about justice must be three-dimensional and she adds political representation as a third dimension next to economic redistribution and cultural recognition. The second illustrates how many of the ideas that were once emancipatory have become ambivalent.



As mentioned, the final chapter is in my reading the most innovative chapter. Here the main point is that neo-liberalism is in itself in crisis, and it is thus necessary to conceptualize the multidimensional character of the crisis as a de-stabilizing of the financial sector, environment and social reproduction. Fraser proposes a new theoretical approach aimed at breaking the dangerous alliance between neo-capitalism and the liberating radical energies inspired by Polanyi's analysis of the previous crises of capitalism as a 'crisis of social reproduction', which refers to a crisis for solidarity and social cohesion. Fraser uses Polanyi to understand the contemporary crisis as a new big transformation characterized by the struggle between marketization and social protection. She finds, however, that Polanyi's framework needs to be revised, because it neglects the harms that may emerge from social protection. Social forces protecting social cohesion often defend hierarchies and exclude 'outsiders'. In order to overcome these weaknesses, Fraser transforms Polanyi's dual movement to a triple movement adding *emancipation* as the third pole of social struggle, which aims at overcoming domination in both 'society' and the 'economy'. This move creates a broad concept of emancipation, which not only include feminists but all radicalized, colonialized and indigenous people – for whom wage work was a promise of liberation from traditional authorities. The triple movement aims to criticize the ambivalence in social protection, which often rests upon domination and hierarchies, and it discloses the ambivalence of emancipation, which may strengthen the market by dissolving hierarchies and domination.

#### CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The transnational approach aims to provide the means for the feminist struggle for gender justice. It is at the same time a challenge to the previous feminist model for justice

premised on 'methodological nationalism' which views the world through the eyes of the nation state. The book contains a revision of Fraser's old models of social justice and adds a new transnational element, a 'meta-political injustice', which conceptualizes the importance of transnational problems of injustice, i.e. for global poverty. Fraser names the second meta-political injustice 'misframing', which limits justice to the nation state.

The revised theory of social justice aims to address trans-border injustices and inequities. This is in many ways an attractive approach. The question remains whether this transnational and post-colonial perspective is possible and desirable? Fraser's analysis should be read as an interpretation of the potentials and contemporary problems of second-wave feminism, with an optimistic message that it is indeed possible to create a new synthesis between radical democracy and social justice. Fraser's message is that feminists must give up the dangerous alliance with the market and instead form new alliances with other social forces defending social cohesion. One question is whether the critique of the dangerous alliance between capitalism and feminism fits mainly with the liberal US feminists? Another question is, whether there is still one feminist movement fighting together for social justice, or whether there are today many feminisms with different interpretations of gender justice?

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#### NOTES

1. Chapter 6 'Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition: A two-dimensional approach to Gender Justice' was published in *Actuel Marx*, and the final chapter 10 'Between Marketization and Social Protection: Resolving the Feminist Ambivalence' was published in *Revue de l'OFCE*.