

Interview - Liza Featherstone

Written by E-International Relations

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Liza Featherstone is a contributing writer to *The Nation*, journalism professor at NYU and Columbia's School of International Public Affairs, and author of *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Workers' Rights at Wal-Mart* and *False Choices: The Faux Feminism of Hillary Rodham Clinton*. Lisa's work has been widely published; her recent articles include Feminism at the Polls in *Dissent* magazine and Elite, White Feminism Gave us Trump: It Needs to Die for the Verso blog.

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your work as a journalist?

I think the biggest debates right now center around how to reconcile access to information with the need for journalists and other media professionals to be paid for their good work. Readers want everything for free now, but as Astra Taylor argued in her powerful 2014 book *The People's Platform*, our labor can't be free.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Well, I was raised by very progressive liberals, so I was always aware that there was injustice in the world. But I think that I became more radical when I was in my late teens and twenties for a couple of reasons. I entered the workforce, and I read Marxist feminist theorists like Michele Barrett and left feminist writers like Katha Pollitt. As well, when I became a journalist I was often reporting on labor issues, which put me in touch both with the realities of other people's work lives, and with activists and thinkers who knew how to make sense of such realities.

You identify as a socialist feminist. Could you describe socialist feminist politics and explain its approach to problems that liberal feminism neglects?

Socialist feminism is premised on the idea that gender oppression and capitalism are intertwined, and that both patriarchy and capitalism are material forces in women's lives. Socialist feminists assume that while everyone would benefit from a more egalitarian economic system, women would benefit even more. Liberal feminism assumes that "sexism" can be fixed without deeper systemic change. Of course, some aspects of it can be — people can get more enlightened in their attitudes — but this approach misses the extent to which gender equality is perpetuated by our economic system.

According to the recent Harvard University Survey, 51% of young adults between 18 and 29 do not support capitalism. What do you think are the reasons for this shift in thinking?

I think it is because capitalism around the globe has not been delivering mass prosperity, and it has also been brutal to the planet, leaving young people uncertain about the future, and looking for alternatives.

Brexit and Donald Trump's election have been landmark victories for the extreme right globally. How can the Left gain momentum and advance social justice and equality?

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Well, I wish I knew! But seriously, I think we win by fighting to improve the material lives of ordinary people. This iteration of capitalism — austerity, increasing exploitation and a shamelessly indifferent elite— is socially divisive and makes people stressed, fearful and resentful. That only fuels the far right. Donald Trump won in part because a significant number of people didn't think Hillary Clinton could help solve any of their problems. Trump won't either, of course, but we can't win just by saying that: we have to push an agenda of redistribution. I don't just mean that we win the presidency that way, I mean that we will build the left — and ultimately take power — by fighting for such an agenda, in the form of higher wages, free college, single payer healthcare (in the US where we don't have this) — and winning.

You coauthored *Students Against Sweatshops*, which explains how student activism can challenge exploitative working conditions. Why is student activism important in opposing these structures?

Student activism is so important because college itself is an important socializing force. Years ago the journalist Chris Hayes wrote about how with the decline of unions in the US, colleges were the only organizations left that significantly counter the political/ideological effect of churches, which is mostly conservative. While college courses help, student activists themselves also help socialize their fellow students into seeing the world outside of a mainstream or conservative frame. Student activism is also important because students have power: they often have privileges (cultural as well as economic) that other activists may lack, and they have some leverage over institutions that wield significant economic weight in the world and in the case of elite colleges, loads and loads of social capital.

What is the key to a lasting transformation of the political system?

I don't know, honestly. Some people believe it will never happen. But look what kinds of change we have seen in our world. I live in New York City. In colonial times, one fifth of New Yorkers were slaves. By the late nineteenth century, the institution of slavery had been abolished. That's a huge change in the economic and political system and a massive feat of expropriation (meaning, taking people's property from them). It took a lot of activism and courage and the threat of violent slave uprisings here and abroad, a Civil War (and, some scholars argue, changes in the economy that would have happened anyway — but that's a huge debate!). But I think we have to do our best to make things better for people in the present system, while also looking for opportunities to exploit its vulnerabilities over the long term.

How do you translate activism into your work as a journalist and teacher?

Well, I think journalism is a form of activism in many ways, because social change requires information, analysis and new kinds of narrative. Sometimes journalism is less valuable than organizing, sometimes more so, but they both need each other to make any difference. I'm a little cautious about drawing too much of a connection between teaching and activism both because there is such a right wing witch hunt against radical professors right now, and because I genuinely do feel that I encourage students to develop their own politics, even, and perhaps especially, when their politics are quite different from my own. But I will say that I think a lot about the state of the world when I am teaching, and about how badly the world needs global citizens who have these skills: thinking critically, interviewing, reading, storytelling. We can't solve any of our problems without such people.

What is the most important advice you could give to young aspiring journalists?

Notice what preoccupies you when you're trying to "work." What do you "waste" time reading and thinking about? This tangent, or distraction, might be your next beat.

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This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffmann. Alvina is an Associate Features editor at E-IR.