

Review of Left Feminisms: Conversations on the personal and political, by Jo Littler (London: Lawrence Wishart. pp.271. £16.

Laura Clancy

Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK

In the first interview in this volume, Nancy Fraser observes to author Jo Littler that because much of left feminist history was (is!) difficult to access, her early feminist experiences felt like starting 'from ground zero' (p.31) and inventing something new. She goes on, 'we made a lot of mistakes by trying to reinvent the wheel, when there were resources available that we didn't know about' (ibid.). Similarly in the last chapter, Sophia Siddiqui notes, 'often we're fighting the same or similar struggles. What can we learn from these histories, what can they teach us, how can they help us in the present day? That's what I'm really interested in' (pp.255-6).

When I was Co-Chair of the Feminist Studies Association (FSA) we, too, found it challenging to manage an organisation when much of its history had been erased. So much feminist work is done voluntarily, meaning that boxes of files disappear in people's homes and offices over decades. People working voluntarily don't necessarily have time to archive and organise, nor is there freely available (because feminist organisations are also often underfunded) physical space to store mounting documents. We decided to pursue an archiving project, collecting oral histories with previous Chairs, and managed to unearth some boxes and USB sticks of old materials. As Sophia Siddiqui also observes in *Left Feminisms*, what stood out most was that many of the same conversations we were having in our FSA quarterly meetings in 2019-2021 were being had twenty and thirty years earlier in previous quarterly meetings. The same left feminist concerns, the same search for answers and solutions. It was clear to us that a project of archiving would provide much needed context and intergenerational memory to feminist activism and debate, so that we can learn from each other and, try at least, to move the conversation along.

This feels like the ethos of *Left Feminisms*, and indeed Littler presents it as a 'resource for thinking'. Comprising 14 interviews with key left feminist academics and activists completed

over a decade, the book has the sense of archiving developed and developing feminist debates. From ecology, debt, trans inclusionary feminism, the environmental crisis, right-wing populism, neoliberalism, coloniality, the welfare state, care, COVID-19, the state of the university, and many more, the book covers a plethora of left feminist concerns and their histories.

The theme drawing the diverse authors together is left feminisms, which Littler defines as those feminisms that 'understand capitalist exploitation and sexist oppression to be interrelated' (p.9). After fading away during the 1990s-2000s era of liberal free-market postfeminism, Littler makes a case for the resurgence of left feminist concerns, which she situates as arising out of, and in opposition to, the recent turn towards the right. Global grassroots action, the growing trade union movement, and politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez show, she argues, how left feminism is being reinvented as a way to speak back to right-wing movements that are embedded in misogyny, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and classism. Being attentive to how capitalism structures sexism, and vice versa, is more important than ever in a world where increasingly the political ethos seems to be divide and conquer, and any intersectional and institutional critique is shorn from public debate. The activist potential of left feminism comes out in the interviews. Many of them have a sense of a call to action, from Akwugo Emejulu's appeal 'we need people everywhere', to Lynne Segal's 'the audacity is to dare to hope when there seems so little reason to hope'.

Although she is somewhat less hopeful about the future, Wendy Brown's interview feels like a particular highlight in terms of tackling the conjuncture we find ourselves in. The interview took place in 2018, at the height of Donald Trump's presidency in the USA and the negotiations over Brexit in the UK, and Brown reflects on the erosion of democracy, right-wing nationalism, neoliberalism, and political theory. She argues 'we need grit, responsibility and determination instead of hope' (p.98), emphasising the extent of the crisis we find ourselves in. Local transformation is the answer, she says: small steps by local communities that, in combination, will all contribute to global revolution. Sophia Siddiqui, the only interviewee who is not (or has not been) an academic, also makes really important contributions, in particular about the uses of intersectionality theory. She argues the term

could be 'stretched' to challenge the role of the wider system of capitalism in intersectional oppression.

Although Siddiqui is the only non-academic interviewed, the book emphasises breaking down the boundaries between academia and activism. Many interviewees say they identify as both, or that their relationship to these categories has changed over the years, as the academy has become more corporatised and therefore activism from within is harder to achieve. Some discuss how they use their feminist writing as a form of protest: publishing open access or in journalistic presses to broaden their audiences and share ideas. *Left Feminisms* itself is written in an accessible, conversational format, with Littler asking probing and engaged questions to embody the feminist reader, asking what the reader would want to know. Others, like Akwugo Emejulu, discuss how their attitude to their academic work frames their feminist praxis. From mentoring to modelling healthy working habits, Emejulu notes how these everyday forms of protest can disrupt the churning wheels of the hyper-individualist, neoliberal university and ensure, as she says, that not all academics are 'assholes'.

Left Feminisms shows us the importance of archiving feminist debate. The interviewees do not all agree with each other, far from it. But the book shows the vital role of engaged debate to the ongoing process of feminist scholarship and activism. It is a book that can be returned to again and again to try and make sense of the conjuncture, how we got here, and how we can move past it.