

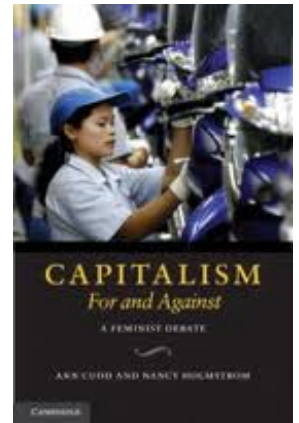
Book Review: Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate

Elizabeth Cotton is disappointed by a book that seems to have lost contact with the world around it, and feels it could have contributed much more to the debate around gender and employment relations.

Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate. Ann Cud and Nancy Holmstrom. [Cambridge University Press](#). January 2011.

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While the title is a dead give-away and a somewhat accurate description of the book's content, it does seem out of place for a mainstream book published in 2011. Today anyone in London wearing a black hoodie is defined as an [anarcho-syndicalist](#) (since when did anyone you know understand what that meant?) and 14 year old schoolgirls have become radicalised, making us older feminists weep with joy. I also note that for the first time in many years philosophy is actually cool. While studying philosophy I spent my entire 20s being blanked at parties (OK there could have been another explanation for that, but no need), but I now hear from the philosophy students at Middlesex University that it's actually rather cool. So you would think that a book about feminism and capitalism, written as a conversation between two great female philosophers, would be of the moment.



Regretfully, this book does not seem to reflect any reality. I'm as much a pedant as the next feminist, but the book devotes far too much space to defining its terms. What is "capitalism"? Does it exist? What alternatives are there? These are questions which many readers will have explored before, and I doubt that they will feel the need to explore again. The book is peppered with quotation marks about "capitalism" and "so-called socialism", as if any informed reader might be in any doubt that they exist and hugely influence the lives of women. This was surprisingly disconcerting and it was difficult to understand why there was still a question about how to define capitalism by page 291 of a 360 page book.

The sections of the book trying to define capitalism through an institutional perspective fail to include the key literature (such as [Whitley, Hall & Soskice](#)) and with it an understanding of welfare capitalism and different business systems within western Europe. This meant that the book did not really have anything profound to say about the form of capitalism that we live with in Europe. For example, despite the former Soviet Union offering us some important insight into the impact of the introduction of market economies on women, very little data or reference is made to it.

Nor does it make use of the experience of women to the degree of richness that it could in answering the question about the impact of capitalism on women. The data in the book is heavily reliant on mortality rates and some, small, data on quality of life. But it makes no mention of women's experiences in the workplace, and the mainly precarious work arrangements that they work under. You could argue that one of the most important impacts of this form of capitalism and the deregulation that it is pushed through is that women are singularly and particularly unprotected and underpaid at work.

Similarly, for a book about capitalism, private sector companies are almost entirely absent. Is there nothing to say about capitalists in this book? In particular, the sections about regulation really would be helped by tapping into the literature about voluntarism, self-regulation and international labour standards to link the theory to what is actually happening in the global economy.

It is not clear who the audience for this book might be. If it is for students then this book does not ask the right questions, nor does it make links to the important research that is going on in the field of employment relations, human rights, corporate social responsibility and political economy.

Unfortunately this is a book that has somehow lost contact with the world around it. If you want to know if capitalism is good for women, then just ask one: we live in a time when you do not need to be a member of the Socialist Workers Party to answer this question.

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