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Marxism and feminism

# Theoretical and practical conclusions of Marxist feminism

- Features - Feminism -

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**With the start of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the multiple dimensions encompassed by the current crisis as well as its solutions have become evident, they do not fit the usual recipes. The discourse around the new normality and the news about how social isolation had lowered the levels of pollution in the air put at the centre of the debate, as had not happened for a long time, the functioning of capitalism today and with it a return to Marx. In my case: a personal debt from a feminist reading.**

In this sense, it is proposed to systematically reflect on the main contributions of feminism to Marxism. The attempt to write this process was due to the fact that in recent years the relationship between these two theories once more developed theoretically from the rise of the feminist movement, within a context of resurgence of neoliberal policies and strengthening of fascist discourses in the region. Likewise, in our continent, these contributions need to be given greater centrality in the development of strategic thinking for an alternative and emancipatory policy; this is the challenge we seek to undertake.

To do this, we begin with a brief historicization of this relationship and will focus on what are considered solid contributions for the theoretical and strategic rearmament process proposed by Democracia Socialista. [1] This means not only those contributions that expand our interpretations on the functioning of capitalism in this historical period, but also the contributions that bring together our thinking on the organizational forms connected to the reality that touch on military, but also on anti-capitalist strategic bases.

## Genealogy. Main Oppression: Gender or Class

The relationship between feminism-Marxism is a very broad and complex debate characterized by encounters and disagreements, which only began to be systematized in the 1970s. In a context of several dictatorships, both in Europe and Latin America, the New Left began to emerge while, in parallel, feminisms burst into life with debates around the politicization of sexuality and the positioning of the personal as political.

In this context, then, the focus is on the feminism-Marxism relationship and the question of the main oppression. Then comes the debate about what gender is. In the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, there was talk about feminine or women's issues, from here arises the definition of gender as a social construction, separate from sex, which is understood as something biological. Its main theoretical reference is Simone de Beauvoir, who is joined by black, Afro-descendant, Latin American and Caribbean feminisms that bring with them the first contributions around intersectionality.

In this way, responding to the question if there is a main oppression, the first elaborations of critical thought of the nineteenth century on female emancipation and class emancipation are recovered. In Engels it was possible to find an approach thinking about the situation of inequality that was the basis of many Marxist theoretical developments that revolved around the question of women. Two of the main Marxist references that I am going to cite are Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai.

Zetkin, from the German Social Democratic Party, devoted herself to the question of women at the international level, affirming in her article, "Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious," that the

specific situation of women is due to their class situation:

“There is a women’s question for the women of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and the Upper Ten Thousand. It assumes a different form according to the class situation of each one of these strata.” [2]

This definition is also borne out in the tactical differentiation of the suffragists, since they considered that the motives that drove bourgeois women were opposed to the motives of working women even though both groups could have coinciding demands.

For her part, Kollontai goes on to deepen and systematize Zetkin’s definition. From the critique of what she will call “bourgeois love”, she regards definitions around love as social constructions and the fact that women’s inequality depends on their greater or lesser participation in production. In her book, “Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle,” she states:

“In the eyes of society the personality of a man can be more easily separated from his actions in the sexual sphere. The personality of a woman is judged almost exclusively in terms of her sexual life. This type of attitude stems from the role that women have played in society over the centuries, and it is only now that a re-evaluation of these attitudes is slowly being achieved, at least in outline. Only a change in the economic role of woman, and her independent involvement in production, can and will bring about the weakening of these mistaken and hypocritical ideas.” [3]

Likewise, Kollontai in “On the History of the Movement of Women Workers in Russia,” speaks of a double genealogy of the women’s movement, which allows it to politically criticize bourgeois feminism while jointly claiming rights in the same movement. [4] This idea, today, helps to understand that feminism is an effective power for carrying out broad and intersectional organizational experiences. In turn, recovering the experience of women workers who did not find representation in the demands of bourgeois feminists due to their class situation implies not losing sight of the fact that it is a heterogeneous mass movement as well as one of political dispute.

The need to reconstruct this current of Marxist, but mainly feminist, thought arises in a context in which the women’s movement begins to develop two central points: the first is the definition of gender as a socially constructed concept separated from the biological question, which allows its content to be historicized and made political and, with that, to be questioned. The second point: sexual liberation and the vindication of the right to pleasure.

At the same time, this other genealogy of the 19th century is very important, because in the middle of the 20th century both the unions and the left-wing parties had a hard time recognising the pressures that their female colleagues suffered, the difficulty of integrating them into their organizations and the necessary specific policies they demanded. And it is the case that the recognition of these issues sometimes appeared declaratively but was not transferred to political practices or the development of critical theories (Arruzza, 2018). Although progress has been made today due to the surging new rise of the feminist movement, which has smashed barriers and left many wounds along the way, these tensions still continue. In Argentina there are extensive works on the relationship and tension of those years. I am going to briefly mention two experiences: those of the PRT [Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores/Revolutionary Workers Party] and that of the PST [Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores/Socialist Workers Party.] [5]

The first, the PRT during the late 1960s and early 1970s, not only had no contact with local or international feminist groups, but also openly rejected feminism as a political movement. However, research found that in the women’s fronts of this party, women managed to politicize their interpersonal relationships and the disadvantaged situation in which they found themselves due to the condition of their gender (Martinez en Trebisacce, 2013).

On the other hand, concerning the experiences of the PST, although it refused specific spaces for women, it maintained a link with local feminist spaces. In turn, the Trotskyist feminists of the time theoretically developed the importance of the autonomy of the body, thus arriving at very interesting programmatic and electoral axes: around the double working day, the decriminalization of abortion and the right to non-reproductive sexual enjoyment (Trebisacce, 2013).

## What is called love, is it work?

In the mid-1970s and 1980s, the relocation of production, the increasing foreign ownership of production and the decrease in government spending at a global level were the first signs of a regime change. With neoliberalism making itself known and the State withdrawing as a coordinator of the system, a process of transformation begins as women enter the labour market, giving rise to the norm of two providers (in a heterogeneous way between the global North and South). [6]

Thus, during this period, Marxist feminists begin to question the necessary conditions for the reproduction of the labour force. Marx is revisited and with him, the theory of value. From maintaining that domestic activities are part of the work process debates arose around the value of this circuit and its relationship with capital accumulation.

These debates give rise to very important analytical frameworks, of which I will mention three. The first says that the tasks carried out by women in the home is work that produces value and, in this case, it is the man who extracts the surplus value. This perspective is developed by materialist and difference feminisms, affirming that the family is a space of class division where gender constitutes a class (Arruzza, 2013). The other current that maintains that domestic work has value is that of the autonomist and workerist feminists, within which Silvia Federici is currently its best-known theoretician. These authors maintain that the one who benefits from women's unpaid work is the State and private enterprise. Finally, the third current is the one that says that the work of reproduction does not produce exchange value, but it does produce use value. This does not diminish its importance, because it maintains the fundamental role of the reproduction circuit in the capitalist structure. [7] Here we can identify the feminists Iris Young and Lise Vogel, who both have useful political approaches to analysing reality.

In response to the autonomist visions, Lise Vogel in her 1983 book *Marxism and the oppression of women: towards a unitary theory*, gives rise to what we know as the theory of social reproduction. *Social Reproduction Theory* [SRT] arises from Vogel's need to resolve some of the problems that she had faced with socialist feminists regarding domestic work in the 1970s. [8] Her goal was to construct a more satisfactory theoretical interpretation for analysing gender subordination.

Lise Vogel goes on to argue that the reproduction of the labour force is not only the normative assumption concerning biological procreation in heterosexual families (Vogel, 2013). The author explains that the social reproduction circuit plays an important role in the dynamics of capital accumulation and that, in capitalist societies, the tension between those who seek to accumulate more profit and those who fight to win better conditions for their own reproduction, turns this circuit into a key field of dispute. According to the sociologist, gender oppression is found in the system itself and in the need for capital to ensure its own reproduction as a system. For this, it needs to control the reproduction of the workforce and therefore regulate the biological reproduction of the workers.

In the author's words, the Marxist view of SRT is a theory of the relationship between production and social reproduction and, as such, is opposed to the idea of separate and independent spheres or parallel systems of oppression that cross-over or intersect at various points. [9] This explanation broadens the readings on capitalism and its global transformations along with how it works. In turn, rescuing Vogel's non-biological explanation of gender

oppression makes it possible to incorporate the queer analyses of the 1990s around the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. [10]

Starting from similar approaches, Iris Young, a theoretical reference point on the capitalism-patriarchy debate at the end of the 1980s, points out that patriarchy and capitalism make up the same system that gives rise to Unitary Theory. [11] Starting from her critique of the dual system formulated by Hartman [12], Young in “Marxism and Feminism, “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory”, begins by highlighting some problems presented by the considerations of two autonomous systems and points out that if patriarchy is conceived as a system or mode of production in itself, coexisting alongside a capitalist mode of production, it loses material weight as an autonomous system of relations of production. Therefore, according to this author, maintaining that patriarchy functions as an autonomous system makes a Marxist economic perspective prevail over the functioning of capitalism.

On the contrary, Young goes on to say that to arrive at a more complete explanation of gender inequality, the relations of domination in a capitalist society cannot be defined separately from those of patriarchal domination which characterize modern society. In this way, the author argues that the forms of gender oppression specific to modernity are intertwined with capitalist social categories, specifically with the separation between production and reproduction. This leads her to recover socialist contributions and introduce the category of division of labour by gender, which in turn allows her to place gender relations and the position of women at the centre of the material analysis of labour relations. The unitary theory that the New York philosopher brings us, allows us to analyse the transformations of the labour market and the different labour projections according to gender and sexuality.

## Feminization of poverty and the redefinition of what we call unemployment

Already in the 1990s, the concept of feminization of poverty or feminization of the labour force stands out. This concept is used in a double sense; on the one hand it refers to more women in the labour market and on the other, it defines certain working conditions that characterize feminized work spaces and that are beginning to spread to others (Cámara and Facet, 2019). This means that while women massively enter salaried work, a process of precariousness of these working conditions arises in parallel. This generates the need to reorganize work times inside and outside the home, in some cases the commodification of care arises amongst those who can pay for that work, or else we see the privatization and overload in the tasks of reproduction amongst those who cannot pay for it.

At the same time, this concept shows how crises and constant reconfigurations necessarily produce more margins of exploitation and plunder thus adding complexity to the idea of poverty. On this point, it is worth incorporating the concept of the global chain of care as a result of these transformations, a reference to the impact of the migration of workers from poor countries to rich ones, where they obtain jobs taking on paid domestic work; and how, in turn, they must transfer their own responsibilities of care to other women (Rodríguez, 2007). Feminist contributions on social reproduction and work help in understanding the dynamics of accumulation, which among other things are built from processes of racialization and gender inequality (Fraser, 2018).

Following this line of thought, feminist economics incorporates into the field of analysis the perspective of the sustainability of life in order to refer to capital-life tension. [13] It is from this tension that it seeks to expose how the system sets the values for socioeconomic functioning under a scenario of exploitation and dispossession, which puts in check the necessary conditions to reproduce people’s lives. It is corporate power (the markets) that with its logic of accumulation tends to attack life instead of guaranteeing it (Orozco, 2014) “ struggles against extractivism in our region being one example. When speaking of sustainability, feminist economists criticize the logic of commercial growth that is imposed on capitalist societies and propose other ways of organising through the decentralization of

markets, which raises the need to prioritize resources for policies that aim to sustain life against capital.

In a context in which debt appears centrally as a mechanism of pressure on states by economic power and international organizations, the insights that have been mentioned contribute to the process transformation of what we know today as work and for the struggles associated with the expansion of the content of unemployment which emerges strongly from the global south and with an internationalist character. These struggles show a recomposition of our class subject, and that feminism, due to its ability to regroup different sectors, constitutes a privileged point of view in analysing the contemporary conditions of exploitation (Montanelli in Carreras, 2019).

Within this perspective of broad interpretation of the functioning of capitalism that includes the circuit of social reproduction, the author Tithi Battacharya refers to the SRT not only as those vital conditions that correspond to the dimension of the domestic, but adds those that depend on the historical and social dimension. To give an example, access to health (essential today due to the pandemic) makes social rights necessary to reproduce our lives, but easy access will depend on the place it occupies in the class struggle. With this dimension of analysis, the author says that social reproduction is not presented in a homogeneous and universal way in capitalist societies, but that, in a given context, it will depend on the relationship of forces.

In tune with this, the economist Amaia Perez Orozco warns of a problem in the concept of care due to an idealization that entails moving forward with life in a system that constantly attacks it. The author calls it the reactionary ethics of care, which requires solving care in invisible and feminized areas of the economy. In this way, what this problem tries to show is the contradiction that turns the current social organization of care into a vector of inequality (Rodriguez, 2020); that, according to Orozco, cannot be resolved under capitalism.

## Final Reflections

After this brief historicization of the main contributions of feminism that I consider key, I share some final reflections that are traversed by the collective debate that takes place between feminists at a cross-border level, theoretical efforts of comrades who have been thinking about these issues in an intersectional way and from the departure of compañeras from the organization. This leads me to want to find answers to the tensions that still exist between feminisms and leftist organizations, tensions that, if abstracted, do a disservice to the construction of an alternative.

In the historical journey, in principle three aspects of feminism can be visualized as significant contributions to the strategic elaborations for the political stage, along with the will to think collectively. The first is a theoretical aspect around social reproduction as a method of analysis, which, as we saw earlier, allows us to intervene in reality with a broad view of capitalism, subject to change and not linear. If we currently start from the framework of a crisis of accumulation of the capitalist system of production, from feminisms we speak of an advance of commercial logic in the field of social reproduction due to, for example, the commodification of water and indebtedness of the household economy. This broad perspective that brings the theory of social reproduction regarding the functioning of capitalism in this stage makes it possible to demonstrate both the infrastructure that sustains collective life and the precariousness and regressive attacks that it supports.

At the same time, this theoretical contribution allows a shift in the Marxist analysis of the crisis, that no longer talks about a separation between economic production and social reproduction, but about understanding the functioning of capitalism as a circuit made up of these two spheres, or, in Fraser's words, each term is co-defined by means of the other. Therefore, what used to be domestic-private becomes public, and it is in this way that we begin to see a politicization of reproductive struggles in social struggle. This approach allows us to understand how the processes of rationalization, heterocis-patriarchal violence and migratory processes have relevance to this stage of capitalism,

linking these oppressions to the structural conflict of the class but without merely reducing it to this, since this perspective nuances the historical responses that the parties and organizations of the socialist left attempted to put forward. When these transformations impact the class struggle, it forces political organizations to spend time thinking about alternative futures that guide our decisions in a present that is being reorganized from the margins.

The second are programmatic proposals based on the political practice of feminism throughout history and that contribute to organizational spaces. In the current struggles we can find workers who go out to demand something more than a decent wage, the struggles of the workers are informed by and linked with struggles against patriarchal violence, against the real estate business, to be able to access decent housing, for food and for the environment, among others. In these struggles, the new forms of expression of the working class are visualized, which is why the slogans of reorganization of work become renewed from feminisms in a time of feminization of the workforce and the feminist strike. At the same time when speaking of care, what is brought to the fore is no longer only a symbolic dimension (give affection, listen to others), but also the necessity to pay attention to the material dimension (the “non-emotional”), such as work-place cleaning services which are outsourced by many State offices, jobs which are low-valued and informal which mostly hide processes of racialization. As we see this the access to greater social rights that aim to improve workers living conditions is not expressed in a homogeneous way; these slogans stress what the class structures are able to since they question the distinction between public-private demanding to leave traditional forms of organization and broaden out the debate.

Another example is the challenge raised by having won the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Law. [14] On the day of its approval, the speeches around the importance of the right of pregnant women to decide opened up an interesting field of dispute regarding what autonomy means in a system governed by power structures that establish which bodies have the right to decide. Feminist and queer claims, which seek to move those who define the economy from the centre, allow us to develop political positions in terms of proximity to and distance from the sustainability of life with respect to the various policies deployed. The latter is a valuable contribution to make claims within a decolonial perspective and expose the inability of current governments to resolve the contradictions that are hidden in institutional discourses.

So far, I have mentioned some elements that can contribute to a strategic elaboration but it is difficult for me not to address some organizational issues, specifically mentioning elements that should be taken into account. The first deals with the militant pedagogical processes that need to be carried out in organizations to end the heterocis-patriarchal privileges expressed in social relations. There is an urgency that we rid ourselves of the idea that it is natural for some political spaces to belong to certain masculinities or patriarchal ways of being built – these tasks involve more than just positive actions. We can also add to this the preparation of programmes that incorporate these contributions, betting on the radicalization of social struggles and strengthening their leap into the political struggle. At the same time, however, I consider that progress cannot be made in this if we are not an active part of these social sectors as they arise today. It is of little use to have resolved aspects of strategy if we do not find ways to carry them out in practice. To conclude, political organizations today seem drowning between their potentialities and the material difficulties they face in order to sustain a political rhythm all of which requires effort and militant stimulation. Thinking about how we organize ourselves implies delving once more into the original reasons for our activity and to rekindling the flame of socialism within ourselves and with others, broadening our perspectives, avoiding conservatism and flailing in autonomies without debate or discussion.

The third and last aspect, in this case of the feminist movement, that I would like to point out is its plural, intersectional and counter-hegemonic character, which allows broad regrouping and political connections with those who find themselves resisting on the margins of the system (spaces historically barely touched by the organizational experiences of the left), those who are protagonists of the latest popular uprisings. This characteristic contributes to our will to create majorities that dispute the power of capital with the capacity to link our Marxist and socialist ideas with other traditions such as those of indigenous peoples, LGBTTTIQ+, environmentalists, etc. Feminisms have shown that in this new wave there is a possibility of a real rupture with capital, with a great capacity for



self-organization and foreshadowing of counter-power. However, it is difficult to find a way out of the crisis in this aspect alone. We are undoubtedly facing immense challenges and feminisms have been opening that possibility of dialogue and the necessary intersection between two solid theories for the construction of an alternative.

In these times of revolts and urgent responses that are insufficient, we have to think about how we organize ourselves, how we again fall in love with the dream that “changing the world is possible”. At times when old monsters appear in cycles that seem to close in on us, the creation of political projects that aim to rebuild popular forces cannot ignore these feminist contributions.

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Translated for *International Viewpoint* by David Fagan

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[1] See the website of [Democracia Socialista](#).

[2] Zetkin, Clara: [Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious](#), October 1896

[3] Kollontai, Alexandra: "[Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle](#)".

[4] In this text from the year 1919, Alexandra takes a historical journey on the political links between working women and suffragists, in the years 1905 and 1906. The author points out that the initiative of the bourgeois women was accompanied by the workers, but the intention of the first to create a "classless women's movement" foundered on a movement of working women who understood that their liberation did not include their bosses.

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[5] The PST was part of an international current linked to the Fourth International which originated in the 1940s and whose main leader was Nahuel Moreno. The PST was a major supporter of the Leninist Trotskyist Tendency (later Faction) within the Fourth International during the 1970s-80s. It broke with the Fourth International as it developed differences with the overwhelming majority of the FI over how to respond to the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979. After an extremely brief and factional fusion with the Lambertist organization internationally and in the wake of Moreno's death in 1987 it splintered into many different parties and groups, several of which are currently in the FIT-U electoral coalition in Argentina.

The PRT, which was also at one stage part of the same Argentine organization as the PST, developed in an increasingly guerrillist direction, forming its own armed wing the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo/Revolutionary Army of the People which carried out revolutionary expropriations along with kidnappings and armed struggle. It left the Fourth International in 1973 with the perspective of regrouping with supporters of Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro—a perspective that was stillborn. As a result of state repression both the PRT and ERP were driven underground and their key leadership and members were murdered by the military. **Translator's note.**

[6] Here we should know what post and decolonial contributions help us to deepen the relationship between the transformations at the global level and the colonial and imperialist logics that predominate in some areas, and that according to some authors such as Ochy Curiel affirm that these logics have changed gender relations which western and white spectators did not even glimpse.

[7] Regarding this debate, I would like to recommend Roswitha Scholz, who at the end of the 1990s has elaborated the theory of value-excision, very solid and with great contributions, which I cannot expand on here but I thoroughly recommend it.

[8] These discussions can be found in "Domestic Labor Revisited" from 2000.

[9] Lise Vogel in "Beyond Intersectionality" from 2018, addresses criticisms that this theory clashes with the intersectional approach, to account for the contrary.

[10] Butler in *Gender Trouble* goes on to say that it is a matrix of interpretation and action on the world orchestrated by the principles of heterosexuality and binary genders. This matrix establishes a causal relationship between sex, gender and sexual desire that supposedly has natural continuity and coherence. Instead, gender is the product of a series of practices that we sustain and that constitute who we are. We are the genders we act out. Genders are neither a sham nor an ultimate truth. Genders are performative. Gender is that which is given to us, but which constitutes us in what we are, on the basis of which we act, feel, think and also rebel.

[11] Young, Iris: "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of Dual System Theory" in *Women and Revolution* edited by Lydia Sargent, South End Press, Boston 1981.

[12] In 1983 Heidi Hartmann published a paper titled "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism." She develops the theory of the two systems, patriarchy and capitalism. Despite the link between the mode of production and the patriarchal system, both function with internal logic and specific laws.

[13] Sustainability of life, a current of feminist economics that explains that the neoliberal and financial policies that promote corporate power imply a reduction of the conditions to sustain life.

[14] Abortion was legalized in Argentina in December 2020, *New York Times*, 30 December 2020 "[Argentina Legalizes Abortion, a Milestone in a Conservative Region](#)". **Translator's note**