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Reviews

Feminism, Marxism: Marriage or Divorce?

- Reviews section -

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Cinzia Arruzza's *Dangerous Liaisons* is an ambitious attempt to give a brief history of the interrelation between the 18th to 20th century women's, labor and left anti-capitalist movements in the UK and Europe, and the theoretical debates in that same period about the interconnection between male and class domination and exploitation.

For those of us who have been left feminist activists from the 1960s forward, it is also a trip down memory lane to see the debates outlined between Marxist-feminist vs. socialist-feminist positions in the materialist feminist camp (as well as those of liberal and radical feminists).

While it makes sense from an activist point of view to try to understand theory in the light of historical political praxis, the book is far better at giving us an insightful history of the turbulent relation between self-defined feminist movements and anti-capitalist labor movements than in providing plausible Marxist-feminist theoretical answers to the question of how to understand power relations between gender and class. A serious shortcoming is the short shrift given to the historical and theoretical importance of institutional racism as a power relation between women, as well as one that cannot be reduced to class in most countries, particularly in the United States with its history of slavery.

In her first two chapters Arruzza provides a brief history of the relation between some 18th to 20th century women's and workers' movements. She discusses feminist activists and women's movements, and how left parties in Europe and the United States as well as the communist governments of the USSR and China dealt with policy questions related to "the woman question," i.e. women's liberation.

Arruzza argues that during the first wave of feminism, a split developed between what working-class feminists called bourgeois, or liberal feminism, and class-struggle feminism.

During the first wave women's movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouge, and Emma and Christina Pankhurst were liberal feminists who emphasized access to education and to civil and political rights for women, goals that were priorities for upper- and middle-class women, while ignoring working class demands for living wages, safe working conditions and democratic control over the developing capitalist workplace.

Although the liberal feminist current was important in its demand for basic citizen rights for women, such as the rights to property and divorce, by the end of the 19th century both the British and U.S. mainstream women's movements focused their efforts on getting women the right to vote.

Radical Feminisms

Arruzza discusses the importance of Clara Zetkin and her work with the German Social Democratic party, not only in getting the party to support the right of voting for women, but also challenging discriminatory laws against women and in favor of eliminating night work. Zetkin was also instrumental in establishing the importance of separate spaces for working women to discuss women's issues and in moving the Socialist International to establish International Women's Day in 1910.

Arruzza also gives a good account of the feminist advances of the early phases of the Russian and Chinese Communist revolutions, as well as the setbacks to women's liberation by Stalinism in the USSR and the combination of agrarian sexual conservatism and cultural patriarchy in the male-led Chinese Communist Party.

The anti-feminist influence of Stalinism on the Third International and therefore on European communist parties cannot be overemphasized. It is depressing to read how, with the aim of strengthening the traditional family, not only the USSR but also the French, Italian and Spanish communist parties supported the outlawing of abortion (that had earlier been permitted in the USSR and France), and divorce (in Italy), encouraged women to leave industrial wage labor to return to unpaid domestic work, and even supported the banning of women soldiers from the formerly integrated army in Republican Spain.

The emphasis on the idea that "The Personal is Political" of autonomous Western second wave feminist movements can be understood in part as a response to this male chauvinist background of traditional and left parties and social movements. Arruzza discusses the internal critique by white feminist activists of sexism within the U.S. Black Power movement, and the development of separatist feminist politics in the United States, France, Italy and the UK.

She points out that on the left in France, three different political tendencies arose that were later to influence feminist movements in Italy and the UK.

The Politics of Difference is characteristic of these first two radical feminist tendencies, the psychoanalytic feminist group (Psych et Po) and the materialist feminist group headed by Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy.

While the Psych et Po group tended to argue that male dominance/patriarchy is deeply embedded in the symbolic structures of most human societies past and present because of both biological/existential and psychological differences, the materialist feminists held that patriarchy is founded in the family economy where men exploit women's labor, so that it is not capitalism but men who are the "main enemy" (the title of Delphy's influential essay of 1970).

These groups were opposed by the class struggle feminists within mixed left parties and groups, who tried to work with autonomous feminists to form coalitions around specific issues such as abortion rights and child care facilities while still maintaining that capitalism is the main enemy of the working class.

Exploring the Debates

With these historical chapters Arruzza sets the stage for the theoretical debate about the relation between gender and class. Chapters three and four revisit these debates that occurred in the so-called "second wave" Western feminism of the 1960s through 1980s that divided the autonomous women's movement into various camps, loosely termed liberal, radical and socialist-feminists. Arruzza concentrates on the bifurcation between those who see class struggle against capitalism as primary and the women's struggle as occurring within this (e.g. the "wages for housework" feminists); or instead conceived of the struggle against male domination(patriarchy) as a separate struggle (socialist- and lesbian materialist feminists).

In these chapters Arruzza takes a shortcut that needs to be critiqued – that is, she neglects to theorize the social and historical basis of institutional racism as it complicates the relation between gender and class power.

The history of white supremacy as a strategy by Western capitalist imperialists in subjugating the territories of the

New World of America and the peoples of Africa is much more fully handled from a Marxist-feminist perspective by Silvia Federici, one of the early “wages for housework” feminists. It is difficult to understand why Arruzza does not include Federici and her account of racism as it connects to the control of women’s reproductive power in the interests of capitalism – although her book is cited in the end section labeled “Further Reading.”

When she turns to theoretical debates in chapter three, Arruzza first takes up the Origins debate between those radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone, who hold that male domination is based on the biological differences between men and women in reproduction, vs. Marxist-feminists (Evelyn Reed, Eleanor Leacock, Stephanie Coontz) who like Engels support some version of the position that patriarchy emerges through a transition from matriarchal to patriarchal kinship relations, which also marks a transition from communal non-class hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural class societies.

Although she seems to favor the latter view, she also warns against the type of economic reductionism that has been used by economic class-first leftists which puts gender domination as secondary to economic class exploitation. This “class without gender” politics is precisely what has allowed sexist hierarchies to continue in the left and labor movements.

On the other hand, the Marxist “wages for housework” feminists and the dual systems socialist-feminists (“gender without class” feminists) who view gender domination as a special kind of economic domination are also critiqued by Arruzza.

She rejects the argument that domestic work is unpaid productive labor that produces surplus value for the capitalists by reproducing labor power, because this labor, not being exchanged in a market, is outside the scope of theories of necessary vs. surplus labor. But those materialist feminists like Christine Delphy (and Heidi Hartmann), who argue that women’s unpaid labor as well as their sexual favors are involved in an exploitative exchange with men in a separate system of patriarchal production of people, are also rejected when they conclude that all women regardless of economic class are in a separate sex-class opposed to men who exploit their domestic and caring labor as well as their sexuality.

Arruzza considers but ultimately finds inadequate those radical psychoanalytic and queer feminist alternatives based either on a French and Italian feminist politics of bodily difference that creates the possibility of revaluing a feminine symbolic imaginary (Irigaray, Kristeva, Muraro) or of performing gender in a queer way so as to undermine the gender binary, and hence heteronormativity, the base for male domination of women’s sexuality (Judith Butler).

Arruzza’s rejection of all these positions leaves us somewhat up in the air as to a better theoretical approach to the intersection of race, class and gender dominations.

Queer Union?

When we turn to the last chapter – titled “A queer union between Marxism and feminism?” – we expect to get an answer. It is clearly Arruzza’s aim to suggest that such a union is possible, yet it is hard to decide whether she has done that in this book.

In this chapter Arruzza discusses Heidi Hartmann’s dual systems theory that capitalism and patriarchy are both semi-autonomous, historically changing systems that influence each other, as well as the debate between Iris Young and Nancy Fraser about whether there is a way to have a unified Marxist analysis of both the political economy and

cultural ideology of our present system of capitalist patriarchy.

Arruzza seems critical of Hartmann but only offers the sketchy critique offered by Young of that type of dual systems theory. On the other hand, she is sympathetic toward Fraser's view that there is a way to see workers' struggles in capitalism as struggles for redistribution, while women's, racialized populations and LGBTI struggles are primarily about recognition (as different but equally valuable citizens) and only secondarily about redistribution of material goods.

In my view, the serious political issue left unanswered at the end of the book is how all this theoretical debate has brought us any further toward a unified theory of the intersections of race, class and gender domination that will serve as a base for a coalition of forces against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

I tried to address these interconnections in my tri-systems theory of how these social dominations interconnect (Ferguson 1991). Kimberly Crenshaw as an African-American law professor has also shown (1993) how the rights of women of color are overlooked in the operation of race, class and gender intersectionality in legal cases and social movements dealing with violence against women.

Maybe we are left with the position stated in 1980 by the Black Feminist Combahee River Collective, and also present in the 1970s U.S. autonomous women's movement socialist-feminist collectives inspired by the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (1972): We can't be free till everyone else is!

The view that domination systems are interlocking psychologically, economically, and politically, and therefore that we need to be allies in fighting all oppressions to challenge the logic of superior and inferior, is also well expressed by Black lesbian-feminist Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* (1984).

Although all our oppressions have somewhat different historical economic and political roots, the fact that they are all present in our contemporary white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchal societies requires a solidarity intersectional analysis and coalitional politics.

Arruzza's book goes some way toward providing the complicated analysis of each intersection of this power combination. Although she falls short on her analysis of the power relations involved in race and sexuality, her analysis can be supplemented to include this. It thus can be seen as a necessary first step toward the 21st century Marxist-feminist-anti-racist-queer analysis we require for more fruitful coalitions for social justice.

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