

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3718>



Gender and Capitalism

# Remarks on Gender

- Features - Sexual politics -

Publication date: Tuesday 11 November 2014

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**This is a translation of a series of remarks that were originally published in Italian for the Communia Network [website](#) as "riflessioni de generi," and subsequently in French (translated by Sylvia Nerina) for [Avanti](#). The four instalments appeared over the course of a few months for a primarily Italian audience. The individual remarks have been combined into one article, and the author has made some necessary changes to the text for the English-language version. It was translated from the French by Patrick King with assistance from the author.**

# 1 PATRIARCHY AND/OR CAPITALISM: REOPENING THE DEBATE

It is standard to find references to "patriarchy" and "patriarchal relations" in feminist texts, tracts, or documents. Patriarchy is often used to show how gender oppression and inequality are not sporadic or exceptional occurrences. On the contrary, these are issues which traverse all of society, and are fundamentally reproduced through mechanisms that cannot be explained at the individual level.

In short, we often use the term patriarchy to underscore that gender oppression is a phenomenon not reducible to interpersonal relations, but rather has a more societal character and consistency. However, things become a bit more complicated if we want to be more precise about what exactly is meant by "patriarchy" and "patriarchal system." And this move becomes even more complex when we begin to ask about the precise relationship between patriarchy and capitalism.

## The Question

For a brief period, from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the question of the structural relationship between patriarchy and capitalism was the subject of a heated debate among theorists and partisans of a materialist current of thought as well as Marxist-feminists. The fundamental questions which were posed revolved around two axes: 1) is patriarchy an autonomous system in relation to capitalism? 2) is it correct to use the term "patriarchy" to designate gender oppression and inequality?

Although it produced very interesting work, this debate gradually became more and more unfashionable. This occurred in tandem with the retreat of critiques of capitalism, while other currents of feminist thought asserted themselves. These new modes of thought often did not go beyond the liberal horizon of the times – they sometimes essentialized relations between men and women and de-historicized gender, or they avoided questions of capitalism and class – but at the same time, they developed useful concepts for the deconstruction of gender (such as queer theory in the 1990s).

Of course, to go out of fashion does not necessarily mean to disappear. In the past decade, many feminist theorists have continued to work on these questions, at the risk of seeming out of touch with the times, vestiges of a tedious past. They were certainly right to persevere: during a time of economic and social crisis, we are currently bringing partial but much-needed attention back to the structural relation between gender oppression and capitalism.

Over these last few years, empirical analyses or descriptions of phenomena or specific questions have certainly not been lacking, such as the feminization of work; the impact of neoliberal politics on women's living and workplace conditions; the intersection of gender, racial, and class oppression; or the relation between the different constructions of sexual identity and capitalist regimes of accumulation. However, it is one thing to "describe" a phenomenon or a group of social phenomena, where the link between capitalism and gender oppression is more or less evident. It is another to give a "theoretical" explanation of the reason for this structural relation that can be identified within these phenomena and their mode of functioning. It is therefore crucial to ask if there is an "organizing principle" which explains this link.

In order to be both clear and concise on this point, I will try to summarize the most interesting theses on these matters that have been suggested until now. In the following remarks, I will analyze and question these different theses separately. To uphold a degree of intellectual honesty and to avoid any misunderstandings, I stress that my reconstruction of different points of view is not impartial. My own view is found in the third thesis below.

## Three Theses

**First Thesis: "Dual or Triple Systems Theory."** We can put the original version of this thesis in the following terms: Gender and sexual relations constitute an autonomous system which combines with capitalism and reshapes class relations, while being at the same time modified by capitalism in a process of reciprocal interaction. The most up-to-date version of this theory includes racial relations, also considered as a system of autonomous social relations interconnected with gender and class relations.

Within materialist feminist circles, these reflections are usually associated with the notion that gender and racial relations are systems of oppression as much as relations of exploitation. In general, these theses have an understanding of class relations as defined solely in economic terms. It is only via the interaction with patriarchy and the system of racial domination that they acquire an extra-economic character as well. A variation of this thesis is to see gender relations as a system of ideological and cultural relations derived from older modes of production and social formations, independent of capitalism. These older relations then interact with capitalist social relations, giving the latter their gendered dimension.

**Second Thesis: "Indifferent Capitalism."** Gender oppression and inequality are the remnants of previous social formations and modes of production, when patriarchy directly organized production and determined a strict sexual division of labor. Capitalism is itself indifferent to gender relations and can overcome them to such a degree that patriarchy as a system has been dissolved in the advanced capitalist countries, while family relations have been restructured in quite radical ways. In sum, capitalism has an essentially opportunistic relation with gender inequality: it utilizes what it finds to be beneficial in existing gender relations, and destroys what becomes an obstacle. This view is articulated in various versions. Some claim that within capitalism women have benefited from a degree of emancipation unknown in other kinds of society, and this would demonstrate that capitalism as such is not a structural obstacle to women's liberation. Others maintain that we should carefully distinguish the logical and historical levels: logically, capitalism does not specifically need gender inequality, and could get rid of it; historically, things are not so simple.

**Third Thesis: The "Unitary Thesis."** According to this theory, in capitalist countries, a patriarchal system that is autonomous from capitalism no longer exists. Patriarchal relations continue to exist, but without being part of a separate system. To deny that patriarchy is an autonomous system under capitalism is not to deny that gender oppression really exists, permeating both social and interpersonal relations. In other words, this thesis does not reduce every aspect of oppression to simply a mechanistic or direct consequence of capitalism, nor does it seek to offer an explanation solely in economic terms.

In short, the unitary theory is not reductionist or economic, and it does not underestimate the centrality of gender oppression. Proponents of the “unitary theory” disagree with the idea that today patriarchy would be a system of rules and mechanisms that autonomously reproduce themselves. At the same time, they insist on the need to consider capitalism not as a set of purely economic laws, but rather as a complex and articulated social order, an order that at its core consists of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation.

From this point of view, the task today is to understand how the dynamic of capital accumulation continues to produce, reproduce, transform, and renew hierarchical and oppressive relations, without expressing these mechanisms in strictly economic or automatic terms.

## II. ONE, TWO, THREE SYSTEMS?

In 1970, Christine Delphy wrote an article called “The Main Enemy,”(available [here](#)) in which she theorized the existence of a patriarchal mode of production, its relation to, as well as its non-correspondence with, the capitalist mode of production, and the definition of housewives as a class, in the strictly economic sense of the term.

Nine years later, Heidi Hartmann published her own article, “The Unhappy Marriages of Marxism and Feminism,”(available [here](#)) in which she argued for the thesis that patriarchy and capitalism are two autonomous systems, but also historically interconnected. For Hartmann, capitalist laws of accumulation are indifferent to the sex of labor-power, and if there arises a need for capitalism to create hierarchical relations in the division of labor, racism and patriarchy determine the distribution of the hierarchical positions and the specific way these are utilized.

This thesis eventually took on the name of “Dual Systems Theory.” In her 1990 book *Theorizing Patriarchy* (available [here](#)), Sylvia Walby reformulated the dual systems theory by adding a third, the racial system, and also sought to understand patriarchy as a variable system of social relations composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in wage labor and salaried labor, patriarchal relations in the State, male violence, patriarchal relations in the sphere of sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions. These six structures reciprocally condition each other while remaining autonomous: they can also be either private or public. More recently, Danièle Kergoat has theorized the “consubstantiality” of patriarchal, race, and class relations; these are three systems of relations based on exploitation and domination which intersect and are of the same substance (exploitation and domination), while being distinct, like the three persons of the Holy Trinity. (See this [article](#).)

This brief survey of authors and essays is only one example of the different ways in which the intersection of the patriarchal system and capitalist system has been theorized, and the ways in which one system is distinguished from the other. There are others, too, but for limits of space I am forced to limit my analysis to these examples, which are among the most clear while remaining the most systematic and complex. As I have already shown, the difficulty with this debate concerns the definition of patriarchy. There is not a uniform definition, but more of a set of propositions, some of which are compatible with each other, while others are contradictory. Since I cannot analyze all of these definitions, I propose, for now, to focus on the concept of the patriarchal system, understood as a system of relations, both material and cultural, of domination and exploitation of women by men. This is a system with its own logic that is at same time malleable to historical changes, in an ongoing relation with capitalism.

Before analyzing the problems presented by this theoretical approach, we should define exploitation and make some distinctions. From the point of view of class relations, exploitation is defined as a process or mechanism of the expropriation of a surplus produced by a producing class for the benefit of another class. This can happen either through automatic mechanisms such as the wage, or the violent expropriation of the others’ labor – this was the case with the *corvée*, by which the feudal lords constrained the serfs through imposed authority and violent coercion.

Capitalist exploitation, in the Marxist sense, is a specific form of exploitation that consists in the extraction of the surplus-value produced by the worker for the benefit of the capitalist. Generally, in order to talk about capitalist exploitation, there must exist generalized commodity production, abstract labor, socially necessary labor time, value, and the wage-form.

I am clearly leaving out other hypotheses, such as those based on the real subsumption of society in its totality, as defended by the workerist and post-workerist traditions. Confronting this view and its consequences for understanding gender relations would take up another article. In loosely defined terms: the extraction of surplus-value for Marx is the secret of capital, in the sense that it constitutes the origin of socially produced wealth and its modes of distribution.

Exploitation as the extraction of surplus-value is not the only form of exploitation within capitalist society: to be simplistic, we can say that an employee in an unproductive sector (in value terms) is also exploited through the extraction of surplus-labor. And the wage-rate, living conditions, and workplace conditions of a shopkeeper can of course be worse than that of a factory worker. In addition, beyond the slightly economistic tendencies of past misunderstandings and debates, it is important to note that from a political point of view, the distinction between productive and unproductive workers (in terms of value or surplus-value production) is practically irrelevant. Strictly speaking, the mechanisms and forms of organization and division of the labor process are much more important.

Let us return now to the dual systems theory and to the problem of patriarchy.

### **First Problem**

If we define patriarchy as a system of exploitation, it logically follows that there is an exploiting group and an exploited group or, better, an expropriating class and an expropriated class. Who makes up these classes? The answers can be: all women and all men, or only some women and some men (in the example cited by Delphy, housewives and the adult male members of their families). If we talk about patriarchy as a system of exploitation in the “public” sphere, the notion can arise in which the State is the exploiter or expropriator. The “workerist feminists” applied the notion of capitalist exploitation to domestic labor, but according to their view, the true expropriator of domestic labor is capital, which would imply that patriarchy is not in fact an autonomous system of exploitation.

In the case of Delphy’s work, the thesis that housewives are a class and their immediate male family members (in particular their husbands) are the exploiting class is not fully articulated, but also taken to its most far-reaching consequences. In logical terms, the consequence of her position would be that the spouse of a migrant worker belongs to the same social class as the wife of a capitalist: they both produce use-values (in one case care work pure and simple, in the other, the work of “representation” of a certain social status, organizing meetings and receptions, for example) and are both in an exploitative relation of a servile nature, that is to say, working in exchange for the financial security provided by their husbands.

In “The Main Enemy,” Delphy insists that being a member of the patriarchal class is a more important fact than being part of the capitalist class. It would follow that the solidarity between the wife of a capitalist and the wife of the migrant worker must take precedence over the class solidarity between the wife of the migrant worker and the other members of her husband’s class (or, and this is more optimism than anything else, it must take precedence over the class solidarity of the wife of the capitalist and her country club friends). In the end, Delphy’s actual political practice stands in contradiction with the logical consequences of her theory, which makes its analytical limits even more apparent.

Furthermore, if we define men and women (in one version or another) as two classes — one the exploiters, the other the exploited — we inevitably come to the conclusion that there is an irreconcilable antagonism between classes

whose interests are in reciprocal contradiction. But, if Delphy is wrong, should we then deny that men profit and take advantage of women's unpaid work? No, because this would be a symmetrical error, unfortunately made by many Marxists who have taken this reasoning to the opposite extreme. It is clearly better and more convenient to have someone cook you a hot meal in the evening than to have to deal with the dishes yourself after a long day of work. It is quite "natural," then, that men tend to try and hold on to this privilege. In short, it is undeniable that there are relations of domination and social hierarchy based on gender and that men, including those of lower classes, benefit from them.

However, this should not be taken to mean that there is a class antagonism. We could rather make the following hypothesis: in a capitalist society, the complete or partial "privatization" of care work, that is, its concentration within the family (whatever the type of family, and including single-parent households), the lack of large-scale socialization of this care work, through the state or other forms, all this determines the workload that must be maintained within the private sphere, outside of both the market and institutions. The relations of gender oppression and domination determine the mode and scale in which this workload is to be distributed, giving way to an unequal division: women work more while men work less. But there is no appropriation of a "surplus."

Is there evidence to the contrary? A simple thought experiment will do. A man would lose nothing, in terms of workload, if the distribution of care work were completely socialized instead of being performed by his wife. In structural terms, there would be no antagonistic or irreconcilable interests. Of course, this does not mean that he is conscious of this problem, as it may well be that he is so integrated into sexist culture that he has developed some severe form of narcissism based on his presumed male superiority, which leads him to naturally oppose any attempts to socialize care work, or the emancipation of his wife. The capitalist, on the other hand, has something to lose in the socialization of the means of production; it is not just about his convictions about the way the world works and his place in it, but also the massive profits he happily expropriates from the workers.

### **Second Problem**

The second problem concerns the fact that those who insist that patriarchal relations today make up an independent system within advanced capitalist societies must face the thorny problem of determining its driving force: why does this system continually reproduce itself? Why does it persist? If it is an independent system, the reason must be internal and not external. Capitalism, for example, is a mode of production and a system of social relations, with an identifiable logic: according to Marx, it is a process of the valorization of value. Certainly, to have identified this process as the driving force or motor of capitalism does not say everything that needs to be said about capitalism: this would be analogous to thinking that the explanation of the anatomy of the heart and its functions would suffice to explain the whole anatomy of the human body. Capitalism is an ensemble of complex processes and relations. However, understanding what its heart is and how it works is a fundamental analytic necessity.

Where patriarchal relations play a direct role in the organization of the relations of production (who produces and how, who appropriates, how the reproduction of these conditions of production is organized), identifying the driving force of the patriarchal system is simpler. This is the case with agrarian societies, for example, where the patriarchal family directly forms the unity of the production with the means of subsistence. Yet this is more complicated in capitalist society, where patriarchal relations do not directly organize production, but play a role in the division of labor, and the family is relegated to the private sphere of reproduction.

Faced with this question, either one agrees with Delphy and other materialist feminists in seeing contemporary patriarchy as a specific mode of production, but would then have to face all the challenges I noted above, especially the intractable problem of who, in this conception, would make up the exploiting and exploited classes; or one simply has to abandon the view that patriarchy is a distinct mode of production, at least in the conventional sense of that term.

A hypothesis that has already been suggested in the past is that patriarchy is an independent ideological system, whose motor resides in the process of the production of signifiers and interpretations of the world. But here, we run into other problems: if ideology is the way in which we interpret our conditions of existence and our relations to them, a link must exist between ideology and these social conditions of existence; a link that is definitely not mechanistic, or automatic, or anything like that. But it would still be a matter of a certain form of connection, otherwise we would risk having a fetishistic and ahistorical conception of culture and ideology. Now the idea that the patriarchal system is an ideological system that constantly reproduces itself, despite the incredible changes introduced by capitalism in social life and relations of production these last two centuries, is even less convincing. Another hypothesis could be that the motor is psychological, but this also risks falling into a fetishistic and ahistorical conception of the human psyche.

### Last Problem

Let us admit for a moment that patriarchy, racial relations, and capitalism are three independent systems, but also intersect and reciprocally reinforce each other. In this case, the question is of knowing the organizing principle and logic of this “holy alliance.” In Kergoat’s texts, for example, the definition of this relation in consubstantial terms remains a descriptive image, which does not succeed in explaining much. The causes for the intersection between these systems of exploitation and domination remain mysterious, just like with the Holy Trinity!

Despite these problems, the dual or triple systems theories, in their different forms, remain implicit influences in many recent feminist theories. In my opinion, this is because these seem to be the most immediate and intuitive kinds of explanation. In other words, these are explanations that reflect how reality as such is manifested. It is evident that social relations include relations of domination and hierarchy based on gender and race that permeate both the social whole and daily life. The more immediate explanation is that these relations all correspond to specific systems, because this is the way they manifest themselves. However, the most intuitive explanations are not always the most correct.

## III. IS IT ALL CAPITALISM’S FAULT?

In the last section, I wrote that the conception of patriarchy as an independent system within capitalist society is the most widespread not only among feminist theorists but also activists. This is because it is an interpretation that reflects reality in the way this appears to us. To speak of modes of appearance does not mean to describe an illusory phenomenon that is to be put in opposition to reality with a capital R. “Appearance” here refers to the specific way in which the relations of alienation and domination produced and reproduced by capital are experienced by people because of their very same logic. As Daniel Bensaid has remarked, the critique of political economy is first and foremost a critique of economic fetishism and ideology, which forces us to think in the shadow of capital. [1] This is not a matter of “false consciousness,” but of a mode of experience determined by capital itself: the fragmentation of our perception of reality. This is a complex discourse, but in order to have an idea of what is to be understood by “a mode of experience determined by capital,” we have to refer, for example, to the section in the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* on commodity fetishism. (Available [here](#).)

Since our perception is fragmentary and those who have developed an awareness of gender inequality usually experience and perceive it as determined by a logic that is different and separate from that of capital, any denial of the view that patriarchy is an independent system within capitalism inevitably encounters rejections and doubts.

## The Transformation of the Family

The most common objection has to do with the historic dimension: how can one affirm that patriarchy is not an independent system when the oppression of women existed before capitalist society? Now, to say that within capitalist society women's oppression and power relations are a necessary consequence of capitalism, and that these phenomena do not have their own independent and proper logic, is not to support the absurd argument that holds that gender oppression originates with capitalism. What is being defended here is a different argument, tied to the particular characteristics of capitalism. Societies in which capitalism has supplanted the preceding mode of production are characterized by a profound and radical transformation of the family.

The transformation of the family is above all the result of the expropriation of the land, or primitive accumulation, which separated large portions of the population from their means of production and subsistence (the land), provoking on the one hand the disintegration of the patriarchal peasant family, and on the other a historically unprecedented process of urbanization. The result was that the family no longer represented the unity of production with a specific productive role, generally organized through the specific patriarchal relations that prevailed in the previous agrarian society.

This process began at different moments and took different forms in all the countries in which capitalist relations took hold. With the separation between the family and the site of production, the relation between production and reproduction (in the sense of biological, generational, and social reproduction) was also radically transformed.

And here is the point: although the relations of gender domination were maintained, they have, on the other hand, ceased being an independent system following an autonomous logic because of this transformation of the family from a unit of production to private place outside commodity production and the market. Moreover, these relations of domination have undergone a significant transformation.

For example, one of these transformations is tied to a direct link between sexual orientation, reified into an identity, and gender (we can consult on this matter the work of Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, works by Judith Butler, or, more recently, the writings of Kevin Floyd and Rosemary Hennessy). While it is certainly true that gender oppression existed well before the advent of capitalism, this does not mean that the forms it takes remained the same afterwards.

Moreover, one could question the idea that gender oppression is a transhistorical fact, an idea defended forcefully by a number of "second wave" feminists but which must be revised in light of recent anthropological research. In fact, not only has the oppression of women not always existed, but it did not exist in various classless societies, where gender oppression was introduced only with colonialism. In order to have a better idea of the link between the class relation and the power relations between genders, we can take the example of slavery in the United States.

## Race and Class

In her book *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis highlights the way in which the destruction of the family and all the relations of kinship between African-American slaves, as well as the specific form of slave labor, gave rise to a substantial overturning of gendered power relations between slaves. This does not mean that the female slaves did not undergo a specific form of oppression as women, quite the opposite: they severely suffered, but at the hands of the white slaveowners, not their fellow slaves. In other words, the persistence and articulation of gender relations are linked in complex ways to social conditions, class relations, and relations of production and reproduction. An abstract and transhistorical vision of women's oppression does not allow for an understanding of these articulations and differences, and therefore cannot explain them.

# Persistence of the Domestic Mode of Production

As I wrote above, in the countries where the capitalist mode of production supplanted the preceding mode of production, radically transforming the family and its role, the relations of power between genders ceased to form an independent system. This does not hold for countries with structures of production that are not entirely transformed and that remain on the periphery of the global capitalist economy. Claude Meillassoux documented on this point the persistence of a “domestic mode of production” in many African countries, in which the process of proletarianization (that is, the separation of the peasantry from the land) remained quite limited. [2]

However, even in places where the domestic mode of production remains in place, it is subjected to intense pressure by the country’s integration into the world capitalist system. The effects of colonialism, imperialism, the pillaging of natural resources on the part of the advanced capitalist countries, the objective pressures of the global market economy, etc., have a significant impact on the social and familial relations which organize the production and distribution of goods, often exacerbating the exploitation of women and gender violence.

## A Contradictory Totality

Let’s return now to the advanced capitalist countries. A classic objection to the thesis that patriarchy does not constitute an independent system is that Marxist feminism is fundamentally reductionist. In other words, it tries to reduce the plural complexity of society to mere economic laws without correctly grasping the irreducibility of power relations. This objection would make sense under two conditions: the first would be that capitalism is understood only as a strictly economic process of the extraction of surplus-value, and thus as an ensemble of economic rules that determines this process; the second would be to understand power relations as the mechanistic and automatic result of the process of surplus-value extraction. The truth is that this type of reductionism does not correspond in the least to the richness and complexity of Marx’s thought, and even less to the extraordinary sophistication of a large part of the Marxist theoretical tradition.

As I already said above, to try to explain what capitalist society is only in terms of surplus-value extraction is like trying to explain the anatomy of the human body by explaining only how the heart works.

Capitalism is a versatile, contradictory totality, continually in movement, with relations of exploitation and alienation that are constantly in a process of transformation. Even though Marx attributed an apparently automatic character to the valorization of value in the first volume of *Capital* – a process in which value is the real subject, while capitalists and individuals are reduced to the role of emissaries or bearers of a structure – “Monsieur le Capital” does not really exist, except as a logical category. It is not until the third volume of *Capital* that this becomes clear. Capitalism is not a Moloch, a hidden god, a puppeteer or a machine: it is a living totality of social relations, in which class relations trace lines of demarcation and impose constraints that affect all other forms of relations. Among these, we also find power relations connected to gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, and religion, and all are put into the service of the accumulation of capital and its reproduction, but often in varying, unpredictable, and contradictory ways.

## Is Capitalism “Indifferent” to the Oppression of Women?

A widely held opinion among Marxist theorists is to consider gender oppression as unnecessary to capitalism. This is

not to say that capitalism doesn't exploit or profit from the forms of gender inequality produced by previous social configurations; it is, however, a contingent and opportunistic relationship. In actuality, capitalism does not really depend on gender oppression, and women have attained an unprecedented level of freedom and emancipation under capitalism in comparison to other historical epochs. In short, there is not an antagonistic relationship between capitalism and the project of women's liberation.

This point of view has been favorably received among Marxist theorists from many different schools of thought, so it is worthwhile to analyze it. We can use an article written by Ellen Meiksins Wood as a starting point. In her article "Capitalism and Human Emancipation: Race, Gender, and Democracy," (available [here](#)) Wood begins by explaining the fundamental differences between capitalism and the modes of production that preceded it. Capitalism has no intrinsic ties to particular identities, inequalities, or extra-economic, political, or juridical differences. Quite the opposite: the extraction of surplus-value takes place in the relations between formally free and equal individuals, without any differences in juridical or political status. Capitalism is thus not structurally disposed to creating gender inequalities, and it even has a natural tendency to put such differences into question and dilute racial and gender identities.

## An Internal or an Opportunistic Relationship?

Capitalist development also created the social conditions conducive to the critique of these inequalities, and to the facilitation of social pressure against them. This has no precedent in previous historical epochs; one only needs to think back to Greco-Roman literature in which abolitionist positions are practically absent, despite the universal presence of slavery for productive ends.

At the same time, capitalism tends to use pre-existing differences inherited from previous societies in an opportunistic manner. For example, gender and racial difference are utilized in order to create hierarchies between the more and less advantaged sectors of the exploited class. These hierarchies are passed off as consequences of natural differences, masking their real nature, namely that they are products of the logic of capitalist competition.

This should not be understood as a conscious plan that capitalism follows, but as the convergence of a series of practices and policies which follow from the fact that gender and racial equalities are advantageous from the point of view of the capitalists. Capitalism does indeed instrumentalize gender oppression for its own ends, but it would be able to survive just fine without it. On the other hand, capitalism would not be able to exist without class exploitation.

It is crucial to note that the framework of Wood's article is a series of basic political questions about the type of extra-economic gains and benefits that can – and cannot – be obtained in a capitalist society. Her starting point is the shift in attention of social struggles from the economic terrain to non-economic questions (racial and gender emancipation, peace, environmental health, citizenship). And there's the rub. I mention Wood's framework because on the one hand, her article is based on a sharp separation between the logical structure of capital and its historical dimensions; but, on the other hand, it ends up conflating these very same levels, thus reproducing a classic confusion that is unfortunately common in the work of many Marxist theorists who would subscribe to the theses of Wood's article.

To put this point more clearly: as soon as we accept this distinction between the logical structure of capital and its historical dimensions, we can then accept the idea that the extraction of surplus-value takes place within the framework of relations between formally free and equal individuals without presupposing differences in juridical and political status. But we can do this only at a very high level of abstraction—that is to say, at the level of the logical

structure. From the point of view of concrete history, things change radically. Let's take this issue point by point.

1. Let's start from a fact: a capitalist social formation devoid of gender oppression (in its various forms) has never existed. That capitalism was limited to the use of pre-existing inequalities in this process remains debatable: imperialism and colonialism contributed to the introduction of gender hierarchies in societies where they did not exist before, or existed in a much more nuanced way. The process of capitalist accumulation was accompanied by the equally important expropriation of women from different forms of property to which they had access, and professions that they had been able to hold throughout the High Middle Ages; the alternation of processes of the feminization and defeminization of labor contributed to the continual reconfiguration of family relations, creating new forms of oppression based on gender. The advent of the reification of gender identity starting from the end of the 19th century contributed to the reinforcement of a heteronormative matrix that had oppressive consequences for women, but not only them.

Other examples could be cited. To say that women obtained formal freedoms and political rights, until then unimaginable, only under capitalism, because this system had created the social conditions allowing for this process of emancipation, is an argument of questionable validity. One could, in fact, say the exact same thing for the working class as a whole: it is only within capitalism that the conditions were created allowing for the political emancipation of the subaltern strata and that this class became a subject capable of attaining important democratic victories. So what? Would this demonstrate that capitalism could easily do without the exploitation of the working class? I don't think so. It is better to drop the reference to what women have or have not obtained: if women have obtained something, it is both because they have struggled for it, and because with capitalism, the social conditions have been favorable to the birth of mass social movements and modern politics. But this is true for the working class as well.

2. It is important to distinguish what is functional to capitalism and what is a necessary consequence of it. The two concepts are different. It is perhaps difficult to show at a high level of abstraction that gender oppression is essential to the inner workings of capitalism. It is true that capitalist competition continually created differences and inequalities, but these inequalities, from an abstract point of view, are not necessarily gender-related. If we were to think of capitalism as "pure," that is, analyze it on the basis of its essential mechanisms, then maybe Wood would be right. However, this does not prove that capitalism would not necessarily produce, as a result of its concrete functioning, the constant reproduction of gender oppression, often under diverse forms.

3. Lastly, we must return to the distinction between the logical level and the historical level. What is possible from logical viewpoint and what happens at the level of historical processes are two profoundly different things. Capitalism always exists in concrete social formations that each have their own specific history. As I have already said, these social formations are characterized by the constant and pervasive presence of gender oppression. Let us suppose, as a thought experiment, that these hierarchies in the division of labor were based upon other forms of inequality (large and small, old and young, fat and skinny, those who speak an Indo-European language versus those who speak other languages, etc.). Let's suppose as well that pregnancy and birth are completely mechanized and that the whole sphere of emotional relationships can be commodified and managed by private services... briefly, let's suppose all of this. Is this a plausible vision from a historical point of view? Can gender oppression be so easily replaced by other types of hierarchical relations, which would appear as natural and be as deeply rooted in the psyche? These scenarios seem legitimately doubtful.

## Towards Concrete Historical Analysis

To conclude: in order to respond to the question of whether it is possible for women's emancipation and liberation to be attained under the capitalist mode of production, we must look for the answer at the level of concrete historical analysis, not at the level of a highly abstract analysis of capital.

It is indeed here where we find not only Wood's misstep, but also the error of many Marxist theorists who remain fiercely attached to the idea of a hierarchy between (principal) exploitation and (secondary) oppression. If we want to pose the political aspect of this question and also be in a position to respond to it, we must have a historical conception of what capitalism is today and what it has been historically. This is one of the points of departure for a Marxist feminism where the notion of social reproduction occupies a central role.

# IV. RETHINKING CAPITAL, RETHINKING GENDER

In the previous section, I tried to clarify the limits of the "fragmented thought" which presents the different types of oppression and domination as each being connected to an autonomous system, without understanding their intrinsic unity. Moreover, I criticized the reading of the relation between capital and gender oppression that relies on what I called an "indifferent capitalism." It is time now to approach "unitary theory," as well as the concept of "social reproduction."

## Reconceptualizing Capital

The dualist positions often begin from the idea that the Marxist critique of political economy only analyzes the economic laws of capitalism, through solely economic categories. This approach would be inadequate to understand such complex phenomena as the multiplicity of power relations, or the discursive practices that constitute us as subjects. This is why alternative epistemological approaches are deemed to be more capable of seeing causes that lie outside the domain of economics, and more adequate for understanding the specificity and irreducible nature of these social relations.

This position is shared across a broad spectrum of feminist theorists. Some of them have suggested that we need a "marriage" or eclectic combination between different types of critical analyses, some devoted to the "pure" economic laws of capitalist accumulation, and others addressing other forms of social relations. On the other hand, other theorists have embraced what is called the "linguistic turn" in feminist theory, which separates the critique of gender oppression from the critique of capitalism. In both cases, there is the common assumption that "pure economic laws" exist, independent from specific relations of domination and alienation. It is precisely this assumption that must be critically questioned. For reasons of space, I will limit myself to highlighting two aspects of the Marxian critique of political economy.

### **1. A relation of exploitation always implies a relation of domination and alienation.**

These three aspects are never truly separated in the Marxian critique of political economy. The worker is before everything else a living and thinking body and is submitted to specific forms of discipline that remold her. As Marx writes, the productive process "produces" the worker to the same extent that it reproduces the work-capitalist relation. Since each process of production is always concrete – that is to say, characterized by aspects that are historically and geographically determined – it is possible to conceive of each productive process as being linked to a disciplinary process, which partially constructs the type of subject the worker becomes.

We can say the same thing for the consumption of commodities: as Kevin Floyd has shown in his analysis of the formation of sexual identity, commodity consumption entails a disciplinary aspect and participates in the reification of sexual identity. Consumption thus takes part in the process of subject-formation.

### 2. For Marx, production and reproduction form an indivisible unity.

In other words, while they are distinct and separate and have specific characteristics, production and reproduction are necessarily combined as concrete moments of an articulated totality. Reproduction is understood here as the process of the reproduction of a society as a whole, or in Althusserian terms, the reproduction of the conditions of production: education, the culture industry, the Church, the police, the army, the healthcare system, science, gender discourses, consumption habits... all these aspects play a crucial role in the reproduction of specific relations of production. Althusser noted in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that without the reproduction of the conditions of production, a social formation would not be able to hold together for even one year.

It is essential, however, not to understand the relation between production and reproduction in a mechanistic or deterministic manner. In fact, if Marx understands capitalist society as a totality, he nonetheless does not understand it as an "expressive" totality: put otherwise, there is no automatic or direct "reflection" between the different moments of this totality (art, culture, economic structure, etc.), or between one particular moment and the totality as a whole.

At the same time, an analysis of capitalism that does not understand this unity between production and reproduction will fall back into a vulgar materialism or economism, and Marx does not make this mistake. Beyond his political writings, Capital itself is proof of this, for example in the sections on the struggle over the working day or on primitive accumulation. In these passages, one can clearly see that coercion, the active intervention of the State, and class struggle are in fact constitutive components of a relation of exploitation that is not determined by purely economic or mechanical laws.

These observations allow us to highlight how this idea that Marx conceives capitalism solely in economic terms is untenable. This is not to say that there have not been reductionist or vulgar materialist tendencies within the Marxist tradition. This means, however, that these tendencies relied on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Marxian critique of political economy and a fetishization of economic laws, the latter conceived as static things or as abstract structures rather than as forms of activity or human relations.

An alternative, opposed assumption to the separation between the purely economic laws of capitalism and other systems of domination amounts to conceiving the unity between production and reproduction as a direct identity. This point of view characterizes a section of Marxist-feminist thought, in particular the workerist tradition, which insisted on seeing reproductive labor as directly productive of surplus-value, and thus governed by the same laws.

Again, for reasons of space, I will limit myself to the observation that such a point of view returns to a form of reductionism, which obscures the difference between various social relations and does not help us understand the specific characteristics of diverse relations of domination that are not only constantly reproduced but also transformed within each capitalist social formation. Moreover, it does not help us to analyze the specific way in which certain relations of power are located outside of the labor market, while still being indirectly influenced by this market: for example, through different forms of commodity consumption, or through the objective constraints that wage labor (or its equivalent, unemployment) imposes on personal life and interpersonal relationships.

To conclude, I propose to rethink the Marxian critique of capitalism as a critique of an articulated and contradictory totality of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation.

## Social Reproduction and "Unitary Theory"

In light of this methodological clarification, we now have to understand what is meant by “social reproduction” within what is generally called “unitary theory.” The term social reproduction, in the Marxist tradition, usually indicates the process of reproduction of a society in its totality, as already mentioned. In the feminist Marxist tradition, however, social reproduction means something more precise: the maintenance and reproduction of life, at the daily or generational level. In this context, social reproduction designates the way in which the physical, emotional, and mental labor necessary for the production of the population is socially organized: for example, food preparation, youth education, care for the elderly and the sick, as well as questions of housing and all the way to questions of sexuality...

The concept of social reproduction has the advantage of enlarging our vision of what was previously called domestic labor, and which a large part of Marxist-feminism has focused on. In fact, social reproduction includes within its concept a series of social practices and types of labor that go well beyond only domestic labor. It also makes it possible to extend analysis outside the walls of the home, since the labor of social reproduction is not always found in the same forms: what part of the latter comes from the market, the welfare state, and family relations, remains a contingent question that depends on specific historical dynamics and feminist struggles.

The concept of social reproduction, then, allows us to locate more precisely the mobile and porous quality of the walls of the home: in other words, the relation between, on the one hand, domestic life within the home, and the phenomena of commodification, the sexualization of the division of labor, and the policies of the welfare-state on the other. Social reproduction also enables us to more effectively analyze phenomena like the relation between the commodification of care-work and its “racialization” by repressive migration policies, such as those that aim to lower the costs of immigrant labor and force them to accept slave-like working conditions.

Finally, and this is the crucial point, the way social reproduction functions within a given social formation has an intrinsic relation to the way the production and reproduction of societies are organized in their totality, and therefore to class relations. Once again, these relations cannot be conceived as purely accidental and contingent intersections: viewing them through the lens of social reproduction allows us to identify the organizing logic of these intersections without for this reason excluding the role played by struggle, and the existence of contingent phenomena and practices in general.

We must keep in mind that the sphere of social reproduction is also determinant in the formation of subjectivity, and thus relations of power. If we take into account the relations that exist in each capitalist society between social reproduction, the production of the society as a whole, and the relations of production, we can say that these relations of domination and power are not separate structures or levels: they do not intersect in a purely external manner and do not maintain a solely contingent relation with the relations of production.

The multiple relations of power and domination therefore appear as concrete expressions of the articulated and contradictory unity that is capitalist society. This process should not be understood in an automatic or mechanistic manner. As noted before, we must not forget the dimension of human praxis: capitalism is not a machine or automaton but a social relation, and as such, is subject to contingencies, accidents, and conflicts. However, contingencies and conflicts do not rule out the existence of a logic – namely, capitalist accumulation – that imposes objective constraints not only on our praxis or lived experience but also on our ability to produce and articulate relations with others, our place in the world, and our relations with our conditions of existence.

This is exactly what “unitary theory” tries to grasp: **to be able to read relations of power based on gender or sexual orientation as concrete moments of that articulated, complex, and contradictory totality that is contemporary capitalism.** From this point of view, these concrete moments certainly possess their own specific characteristics, and thus must be analyzed with adequate and specific theoretical tools (from psychoanalysis to literary theory...), but they also maintain an internal relation with this larger totality and with the process of societal

reproduction that proceeds according to the logic of capitalist accumulation.

The essential thesis of “unitary theory” is that for Marxist feminism, gender oppression and racial oppression do not correspond to two autonomous systems which have their own particular causes: they have become an integral part of capitalist society through a long historical process that has dissolved preceding forms of social life.

From this point of view, it would be mistaken to see both as mere residues of past social formations that continue to exist within capitalist society for reasons pertaining to their anchoring in the human psyche or in the antagonism between sexed “classes,” etc. This is not to underestimate the psychological dimension of gender and sexual oppression or the contradictions between oppressors and oppressed. It is, however, a matter of identifying the social conditions and framework provided by class relations that impact, reproduce, and influence our perceptions of ourselves and of our relations to others, our behaviors, and our practices.

This framework is the logic of capitalist accumulation, which imposes fundamental limits and constraints on our lived experiences and how we interpret them. The fact that such a large number of feminist theoretical currents over the last few decades have been able to avoid analyzing this process, and the crucial role played by capital in gender oppression in its various forms, attests to the power of capital to co-opt our ideas and influence our modes of thinking.

*Republished with the author's permission from [Viewpoint magazine](#);*

---

[1] See Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for Our Times*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 227-228.

[2] Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).