

# Marx and Feminism

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**Abstract:** This contribution focuses on aspects of feminism and gender in Marx's theory. Marx's methodology has given us the tools and the categories enabling us to think together gender and class, feminism and anti-capitalism. However, his contribution is an indirect one because Marx never developed a theory of gender. It is important to include the role of reproductive labour, slave labour, migrant labour, labour in the Global South and the unemployed in the critical analysis of capitalism and its division of labour. Reproductive labour is the largest activity on this planet and a major ground of divisions within the working class. A different Marx was discovered in the 1970s by feminists who turned to his work searching for a theory capable of explaining the roots of women's oppression from a class viewpoint. The result has been a theoretical revolution that has changed both Marxism and Feminism. What was redefined by the realisation of the centrality of women's unpaid labour in the home to the production of the work-force was not domestic work alone but the nature of capitalism itself and the struggle against it. This meant to turn Marx upside down to make his work important for feminism.

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## 1. Introduction

Marxism and feminism are two of the most important radical movements of our time. Understanding their relation is crucial for the possibility of overcoming the division that capitalism has created within the global proletariat and for the question of what strategies and what struggles we need to build a more just society.

I will try to assess what is the significance and the importance of Marx's work to contemporary feminist theory and feminist movements and, at the same time, what are its main limits and where we need to go beyond Marx.

My argument here is that Marx has given an important contribution to the development of a feminist perspective and that at the same time feminists have demonstrated the limits of Marx's analysis, in that it is conducted from the viewpoint of a particular sector of workers, the waged industrial workers, the working man, in whose name the First International was formed, while it marginalises the experience of the wage-less of the world, those whose labour fuelled capitalist accumulation but outside of contractual relations. In doing so, it gives us a partial understanding of capitalist relations.

## 2. The Presence and Absence of Gender Relations in Marx' Work

Marx's contribution to feminism has been an indirect one. It is found in his methodology, his materialist conception of history, his analysis of the capitalist exploitation of

labour. To the feminists like myself convinced that we cannot eliminate gender oppression unless we change society from the bottom up, his methodology has given us the tools, the categories enabling us to think together gender and class, feminism and anti-capitalism.

However, his contribution is an indirect one because Marx never developed a theory of gender. From his earliest writings, we find in his work many pronouncements indicating an understanding of the importance of gender relations and denouncing the oppression of women in capitalist society, especially in the bourgeois family.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, echoing Fourier, Marx (1844, 296) argued that the man-woman relation is a measure of social progress, it tells us the extent to which and how much “man’s *natural* behaviour has become human”. In *The German Ideology* he speaks of the “slavery latent in the family” (Marx and Engels 1845/46, 33) as the father appropriates the labour of women and children. In his translation of Jaques Peuchet’s essay *On Suicide*, he showed the destructive consequences of bourgeois morality on women’s lives, often leading them to suicide (Marx 1845). In the *Communist Manifesto*, he derides the bourgeois family as built on adultery, and treating women like private property (Marx and Engels 1848). Throughout these writings the target is private property, the fact that the capitalist class sees and treats women as property and uses them for the transmission of private property. In *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx (1867) analyses the capitalist exploitation of women’s labour, but his focus is on women as factory workers.

Few political writers have described as powerfully the brutality of capitalist work outside of slavery as Marx has done in his description of the exploitation of women and children’s labour in the factory system. But despite his eloquence, his account is more descriptive than analytic and is remarkable for its absence of a discussion of the gender issues that it raises.

We are not told, for instance, how the employment of women and children in the factories affected workers’ struggles, what debates it prompted within workers’ organisations or how it affected women’s relations with men, except for some moralistic comments to the effect that factory labour encouraged promiscuous behaviour, degraded women’s “moral character”, and made them neglect their maternal duties. Never are women portrayed as subjects of struggle, as capable of fighting on their own behalf<sup>1</sup>. Mostly they appear as victims, although their contemporaries noted their independence, their boisterous behaviour, and their capacity to defend their interests against the factory owners’ attempts to reform their ways.

Marx’s treatment of women’s labour in the factory system is shaped by the belief that capitalism, and in particular large-scale industry, creates the material foundation for a higher type of family and society, and for more egalitarian relations between women and men. He argues in *Capital Volume 1* that modern industry creates a different type of human being, free from personal dependence and not fixed in any particular type of skill, therefore capable of engaging in a broad range of activities and continuous development of human capacities. Industrial work is for Marx a higher form of work, overcoming all specialisation (always stultifying for Marx) giving workers what Alfred Marshall would later call a “general ability” to work.

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<sup>1</sup> The only reference to a female factory workers’ struggle is on page 551, where he mentions power-loom weavers going on strike in Wiltshire over the question of time-keeping (Marx 1867, 551).

Thus, while decrying the barbarous conditions of work in the factories, Marx saw women's employment in industrial labour as a positive factor. It liberated them from the patriarchal hold of the father in the cottage industry, created more egalitarian relations, by making them collaborate with men, and exposed them to a higher form of work eliminating all social and biological distinctions.

I make these observations drawing on Marx's scattered pronouncements in *Volume 1*. As in his previous writings, gender issues have a marginal place in *Capital*. In a three-volume text of thousands of pages, only in about a hundred we find any references to family, sexuality, housework, and generally as passing observations.

References to gender are missing where they would be most expected, as in the chapters on the social division of labour or the one on wages. In all of *Capital Volume 1* there are only two references to domestic labour and in footnotes. Even in his analysis of the reproduction of labour-power, in the chapter entitled "Simple Reproduction" (Marx 1867, Chapter 23) there is no mention of women's work.

### 3. A Partial Understanding of Reproduction

Marx acknowledges that labour-power, our capacity to work, is not a given. Being daily consumed in the work-process, it must be continuously (re)produced, and this (re)production is as essential to the valorisation of capital as "the cleaning of machinery" (Marx 1867, 718), for it is the production of the capitalists' most precious means of production: the worker itself. However, he places its realisation solely within the circuit of commodity production. The workers – Marx imagines – use their wages to buy the necessities of life – and by consuming them they reproduce themselves. In other words, the production of labour-power, the production of the worker, is accomplished through the consumption of commodities produced by waged workers. Thus, "the value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner" (Marx 1867, 274) and it is determined by the labour-time necessary for the production of the commodities that the workers consume.

At no point in *Capital* does Marx recognise that the reproduction of labour-power entails women's unpaid domestic work – to prepare food, wash clothes, raise children, make love. On the contrary, he insists on portraying the waged worker as self-reproducing.

Even when considering the needs that the workers must satisfy, he portrays them as self-sufficient commodity-buyers, listing among their necessities for life food, housing, clothing, but awkwardly omitting sex, whether they are obtained in a familial set-up or purchased, suggesting an immaculate male workers' life, with only women being morally tainted by industrial labour (Marx 1867, 275). The prostitute is thus negated as a worker, and relegated to an example of women's degradation, being pictured as belonging to the lowest sediment of the surplus population, the *lumpenproletariat* that in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he had described as "the refuse of all classes" (Marx 1852, 149).

Even when referring to the generational reproduction of the workforce, Marx makes no mention of women's contribution to it, and rules out the possibility of any autonomous decision-making on their part with regard to procreation, referring to it as the "natural increase of population" (Marx 1867, 788), commenting that "the capitalist may safely leave this to the workers' drives for self-preservation and propagation" (Marx 1867, 718), suggesting that procreation is a natural phenomenon, which contradicts the previously cited comment that female factory workers' neglect of their maternal duties practically amounted to infanticide.

Marx also implies that capitalism does not depend on women's procreative capacity for its self-expansion, given its constant creation of a "surplus population" through its technological revolutions. In reality, capital and the state have been so concerned with population movements that the advent of capitalism marked an extension of the prohibitions against all forms of birth control, in many cases in place even today, and an intensification of the penalties for women tampering with procreation.

Marx also ignored that the most important commodities for the reproduction of labour-power in Europe, those that fuelled the Industrial Revolution – sugar, tea, tobacco, rum, cotton – were produced by slave labour, and that since at least the late 17<sup>th</sup> century an international division of labour, an international assembly line, had been created that cut the cost of producing the industrial work-force, connecting waged and enslaved workers, in ways prefiguring the present use of immigrant labour, serving to cut the cost of producing the industrial work-force. The plantation system was a key step in the formation of an international division of labour that integrated the work of the slaves into the (re)production of the European industrial workforce, while keeping enslaved and waged workers geographically and socially divided. But there is no analysis of slave labour in *Capital's* discussion of the working day and the accumulation process, only passing references, although the International supported the boycott of cotton during the Civil War.

Why this blindness? Certainly in the case of housework we can see a masculine bias that naturalises reproductive activity and makes it appear, in comparison with industrial labour, as an archaic form soon to be superseded by the progress of industrialisation. In addition, the working class family was all engaged in factory labour and little housework was done in the home. Another possible reason is that Marx was always thinking organisationally and did not see the social forces capable of transforming housework in a revolutionary direction.

#### 4. The Wage Illusion and Its Consequences

But there is something more that is very central to Marx's work. Marx does not see the wageless as central subjects of capital accumulation and anti-capitalist struggle. Paraphrasing Keynes, he was subject to the 'wage illusion' believing that waged industrial work was the key terrain of capital accumulation and the terrain as well where the struggle for human liberation would be fought, whereas other forms of work would be superseded by capitalist development. As I have shown in *Caliban and the Witch* (Federici 2004), his analysis of primitive accumulation concentrated on the formation of wage labour while there was no analysis of the change in the organisation of domestic reproductive activities.

This was to have major consequences for Marxist theory and politics. In his understanding of the working day and the struggle over the working day, Marx ignores that the wage mobilises not only waged workers but unwaged labour as well, that it extracts surplus labour also from the unwaged, which means that the working day is much longer and wider than the one computed on the shop floor. One consequence of Marx's under-theorisation of domestic work is that *his account of capitalist exploitation and his conception of communism ignore the largest activity on this planet and a major ground of divisions within the working class.*

Politically the most problematic consequence of Marx's blindness to the importance of unwaged workers in capitalist accumulation and struggle is that he was not able to fight against the assumption, predominant in the socialist movement, that the interest of the waged industrial worker represented the interest of the entire working class – an assumption that has led many anti-colonial theorists to conclude that Marxism was

irrelevant to their struggle. He did not see how crucial to the containment of the class struggle would be the divisions that the capitalist class was able to construct through the wage relation, and in particular through the differential between waged and unwaged labour along the lines of gender, race, and age. He also could not see that rather than unifying the global proletariat, capitalism's worldwide expansion, through the creation of a colonial, 'underdeveloped' world, would deepen these divisions.

Not last, Marx did not realise that the work of the inspectors and reformers he so often quoted in *Capital* was not an idle, hypocritical exercise, but was part of a process of reconstitution of the proletarian family – with the introduction of the family wage, the gradual expulsion of women from the factory and the beginning of an investment in the reproduction of the work-force that would go a long way to pacify the working class as well as stimulate a new form of capitalist accumulation.

Through this move, capital was able to dispel the threat of working class insurgency and create a new type of worker: stronger, more disciplined, more resilient, more apt to make the goals of the system his own – indeed the type of worker that would look at the requirements of capitalist production “as self-evident natural laws” (Marx 1867, 899). This was the kind of worker that enabled end-of-the-century British and US capitalism to make a technological and social shift from light to heavy industry, from textile to steel, from exploitation based upon the extension of the working day to one based upon the intensification of exploitation. This is to say that the creation of the working class family and the full-time proletarian housewife were an essential part and condition of the transition from “absolute” to “relative” surplus-value production. In this process, housework itself underwent a process of “real subsumption”, for the first time becoming the object of a specific state initiative binding it more tightly to the need of the labour market and the capitalist discipline of work.

These criticisms are necessary if we are to distinguish what in Marx's works remains crucial and what we need to abandon if we believe that our task – and here we agree with Marx – is to build a society where *production is for life, for the happiness of the community instead of life being functional to production and the private accumulation of wealth.*

## 5. Feminism, Marxism, and the Question of “Reproduction”

Marx as a proponent of “women's emancipation” through participation in social production mostly understood as industrial labour has inspired generations of socialists. However, a different Marx was discovered in the 1970s by feminists who, in revolt against housework, domesticity and economic dependence on men, turned to his work searching for a theory capable of explaining the roots of women's oppression from a class viewpoint. The result has been a theoretical revolution that has changed both Marxism and Feminism.

This revolution included works such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa's (1975) analysis of domestic work as the key element in the production of labour-power or Selma James' (1975) location of the housewife on a continuum with the “wageless of the world”, who nevertheless have been central to the process of capital accumulation, the redefinition by other activists of the movement of the wage relation as an instrument for the naturalisation of entire areas of exploitation and the creation of new hierarchies within the proletariat. All these theoretical developments and the discussions they have generated have at times been described as the “household debate”, presumably centring on the question whether housework is or is not productive. But this is a gross distortion. What was redefined by the realisation of the centrality of women's unpaid labour in the home to the production of the work-force was not domestic work alone but the nature

of capitalism itself and the struggle against it.

It is not surprising that Marx's discussion of "simple reproduction" was a theoretical illumination in this process, as the confirmation of our suspicion that never would the capitalist class have allowed so much domestic labour to survive if it had not seen the possibility to exploit it. Reading that the activities that reproduce labour power are essential to capitalist accumulation brought out the class dimension of our refusal. It showed that this much despised, always taken for granted labour, always dismissed by socialists as backward, has in reality been the pillar of the capitalist organisation of work. This resolved the vexed question of the relation between gender and class and gave us the tools to conceptualise not only the function of the family, but the depth of the class antagonism at the roots of capitalist society. From a practical viewpoint, it confirmed that, as women, we did not have to join men in the factories to be part of the working class and conduct anti-capitalist struggle. We could struggle autonomously, starting from our own work in the home, as the "nerve centre" of the production of the workforce. And our struggle had to be waged first against the men of our own families, since through the male wage, marriage and the ideology of love, capitalism has empowered men to command our unpaid labour and discipline our time and space.

Ironically, then, our encounter and appropriation of Marx's theory of the reproduction of labour-power, in a way consecrating Marx's importance for feminism, also provided us with the conclusive evidence that we had to turn Marx upside down and begin our analysis and struggle precisely from that part of the "social factory" that he had excluded from his work.

Discovering the centrality of reproductive work for capital accumulation also raised the question of what a history of capitalist development would be like if seen not from the viewpoint of the formation of the waged proletariat but from the viewpoint of the kitchens and bedrooms in which labour-power is daily and generationally produced.

## 6. Envisioning Different Futures

The need of a gendered perspective on the history of capitalism – beyond "women's history" or the history of waged labour – is what led me, among others, to rethink Marx's account of primitive accumulation and discover the 16th- and 17th-century witch-hunts, as foundational moments in the devaluation of women's labour and the rise of a specifically capitalist sexual division of work.

The simultaneous realisation that, contrary to Marx's anticipation, primitive accumulation has become a permanent process, also puts into question Marx's conception of the necessary relation between capitalism and communism. It invalidates Marx's stage view of history that depicts capitalism as the purgatory we need to inhabit on the way to a world of freedom and that attributes a liberating role to industrialisation. This miscalculation that Marx and generations of Marxist socialists have made is today all too obvious. Today, no one would dare to dream, as August Bebel (1904) did in *Woman Under Socialism*, of the day when food would be all chemically produced and everyone will carry with him a little box of chemicals wherewith to provide his food supply of albumen, fat and carbon hydrates, regardless of the hour of the day or the season of the year.

The rise of eco-feminism which connected Marx's devaluation of women and reproduction with his view that humanity's historic mission is the domination of nature strengthened our stand. Especially important have been the works of Maria Mies (1986) and Ariel Salleh (1997), who have demonstrated that Marx's effacement of reproductive activities is not an accidental element, contingent to the tasks he assigned to *Capital*, but a systemic one. Salleh stresses that everything in Marx establishes that

what is created by man and technology has a higher value. History begins with the first act of production. Human beings realise themselves through work. A measure of their self-realisation is their capacity to dominate nature and adapt it to human needs. And all positive transformative activities are thought in the masculine: Labour is described as the father, nature as the mother, the earth too is seen as feminine – *Madame la Terre*, Marx calls it, against *Monsieur le Capital*.

Eco-feminists have shown that there is a profound connection between the dismissal of housework, the devaluation of nature, and the idealisation of what is produced by human industry and technology.

As industrialisation is eating the earth and scientists at the service of capitalist development are tinkering with the production of life outside of the bodies of women, the idea of extending industrialisation to all our reproductive activities is a nightmare worse than the one we are experiencing with the industrialisation of agriculture.

Not surprisingly, in radical circles we have been witnessing a “paradigm shift”, as hope in the Machine as a driving force of “historical progress” is being displaced by a refocusing of political work on the issues, values, relations attached to the reproduction of our lives and the life of the ecosystems in which we live.

We are told that Marx too in the last years of his life reconsidered his historical perspective and, on reading about the egalitarian, matrilinear communities of the American North East, he began to reconsider his idealisation of capitalist, industrial development and to appreciate the power of women.

Nevertheless, the Promethean view of technological development that Marx and the entire Marxist tradition have promoted, far from losing its attraction, is making a comeback, with digital technology playing for some the same emancipatory role that Marx assigned to automation, so that the world of reproduction and care work – that feminists have valorised as the terrain of transformation and struggle – is risking being again overshadowed by it. This is why, though Marx devoted limited space to gender theories in his work, and presumably changed some of its views in later years, it remains important to discuss them and to stress that his silences on this matter are not oversights, but the sign of a limit his theoretical and political work could not overcome but ours must.

It is important, then, that as we celebrate Marx’s work we refocus our politics on the production of our material life, and the life of the ecosystems in which we live, and draw inspiration for the struggle of the present from the experience of those who have most contributed to its preservation: women as care workers, subsistence farmers and indigenous people, forming now a new International that unfortunately often comes into conflict with those who continue to see their future in participating in the capitalist exploitation of the Earth (like the miners who applauded Trump’s election) or see the task of the struggle as pushing for more capitalist development.

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