

**GENDER & SEXUALITY**

# Producing and Reproducing: Capitalism's Dual Oppression of Women

The feminist movement has reemerged on a world scale, and the debate over how patriarchy and capitalism are related is once again on the agenda.

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Illustration by Ailin Rojas Bondarczuk

From the mid-19th century through the first few decades of the 20th century, women entered the labor force in increasing numbers. Driven at first by capitalist development and later by the “shortage” of male workers during War World I, women increasingly became wage laborers. However, this came into contradiction with their lack of political rights. Women were pushed into the job market where, like men, they were exploited by capitalists. With their new and relative “equality” in some aspects of life, the inadequate

and obsolete inequality between men and women enshrined in law became unsustainable. That contradiction was one of the driving forces behind the struggle for women's rights and for women's suffrage, led by educated women in England and other developed countries, along with large sectors of female workers.

While women in capitalist countries were struggling for the most basic rights, such as the right to vote, the transitional workers' state created by the Russian Revolution implemented measures to promote socialized housework. This was one of the fundamental pillars of the Bolsheviks' policy for female emancipation aimed at ending women's isolation in the home and promoting their inclusion in public and political life.<sup>1</sup> This socialization policy was never fully realized because of the breakout of the civil war and severe economic crisis. The policy was later crushed by Stalinism, which promoted traditional gender roles.

In the 1970s, second-wave feminism highlighted the relationship between the private and political spheres. Women questioned what capital had managed to institutionalize and naturalize since the mid-20th century: the separation between the public sphere (production, wage labor) and the private sphere (reproduction, unpaid labor). The first debates on the role of housework in the capitalist mode of production began. Does housework produce surplus value? Is there a patriarchal mode of production—sustained by housework—distinct from the capitalist mode of production? Or is there a single capitalist-patriarchal system in which reproductive work is determined by and subordinated to the production of exchange value?

In 1972, the feminist Marxist autonomist Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James published *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* in Italy and Britain simultaneously. They claimed that reproductive labor is essential to capitalism and that because it is unpaid, its crucial role is made invisible. Along with Silvia Federici in New York and Brigitte Galtier in Paris, they founded the International Feminist Collective to advocate this perspective and coordinate actions in various countries through a network of committees for “wages for housework.”

Lise Vogel wrote *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* in 1983, at the end of a period of mass radicalization and during the first advances of the neoliberal counteroffensive. Vogel argued that the capitalist gender order was based on the social connection between the capitalist mode of production and working-class households. This contrasts with an ahistorical patriarchy, as well as with the vision of domestic production as radically distinct from the relations between capital and labor.

In recent decades, there has been an extraordinary feminization of the workforce, which has taken place during a time of increased labor precarity for both men and women. At the same time, women have won relative gains in terms of democratic rights. Most developed countries and many semi-colonies claim that there should be equality for citizens of different genders. This elevated the aspirations of women who experience a stark contrast between this “equality before the law” and the persistent inequality in daily

life. This contradiction has created an international women's movement which has taken to the streets in the United States in solidarity with the immigrant community and against the Trump administration and its xenophobic policies. In Argentina, the women's movement is fighting for the right to an abortion, and in the Spanish State there have been massive mobilizations against gender violence supported by the state. These are just a few examples of massive mobilizations organized by the women's movement in recent years. This new wave has reappropriated the language and forms of the labor movement, with women's strikes and slogans like, "If our lives have no value, produce without us."

Do these expressions portend a growing class consciousness of the 21st-century working class — but with a female face? Will this new feminized working class lead to the emergence of a socialist feminism—which today represents only small fractions of the international women's movement—that can organize the masses of (working) women? We cannot wait passively for this emergence; we must take actions to promote it. Regardless of the result of this new women's movement, it emerges in a moment in which the proletariat looks very different from that of the 1970s. Thus, classic debates between feminism and Marxism on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and its expression in reproductive labor, overwhelmingly performed by women, must be updated.

These debates on the theory of social reproduction have been revitalized and Vogel's classic work is being revisited, particularly by American academics and activists aiming to build "a feminism of the 99%." As Vogel pointed out,

*Politically, the socialist and the socialist-feminist movements face the difficult task of fighting for women without succumbing to either of two temptations. On the one hand, they must be on guard against bourgeois feminism—the struggle for equality limited to the framework of capitalist society. On the other, they should not allow simplistic or economistic views of class struggle to subordinate the fight for women's liberation. To put the problem another way, socialists committed to women's liberation need to find an adequate way to link long-term feminist struggle for political power and social transformation.<sup>2</sup>*

It is from this perspective, reflected in our activism in the internationalist socialist-feminist organization Bread and Roses (*Pan y Rosas*), that we undertook our first analysis of a new Spanish-language anthology by Silvia Federici, *El patriarcado del salario* (The Patriarchy of the Wage), which includes her most recent articles on this renewed debate. This article is meant to be a first contribution, not an attempt to address all aspects of the discussion.

## **The Labor of Value and the Value of Labor**

Federici sees a "masculine" bias in Marx's definition of productive labor as a generator of exchange value. She argues that this definition justifies the lack of monetary compensation for (mostly female) reproductive labor, a kind of labor that is socially "devalued" as opposed to waged labor—the only kind deemed truly useful by capitalism.

Federici says,

*Marx failed to see that in the process of primitive accumulation, not only is the peasantry separated from the land, but the production process (production for the market, production of commodities) is separated from the reproduction process (production of labor power); production and reproduction become physically separated and begin to be carried out by different groups of people. The first is mostly male and the second, female; the first earns a wage and the second does not.<sup>3</sup>*

But neither the term “productive” nor “value” imply a moral judgment in Marx’s Capital. The fact that certain labor does not generate value should not be interpreted as meaning that the labor is useless. In fact, Marx himself highlights the unproductive (that is, non-value-generating) nature of trade and finance, which are vital for the circulation of capital but do not generate surplus value and thus are not productive. Yet no one would claim that the author of Capital failed to recognize the indispensable role of both activities in capitalism (although these activities, unlike housework, certainly generate massive profits).

Marx defines productive labor as labor that generates exchange value. This definition is quite specific and based on an analysis of the capitalist mode of production:

*productive labour is a quality of labour which in and for itself has absolutely nothing to do with the particular content of the labour, its particular usefulness or the specific use value in which it is expressed. Labour with the same content can therefore be both productive and unproductive.<sup>4</sup>*

Marx does not specifically address the characteristics of reproductive labor, but he does “establish the necessary link between production and reproduction beyond its apparent separation.”<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to the Grundrisse, he explains that the categories of capitalist economy—production, circulation and (economic) reproduction of capital—should be understood within a much broader social metabolism, which includes all activities that are essential for the reproduction of society. This is a topic that bourgeois political economy, with its exclusive focus on the market, leaves aside. Thus, Marx provides the basis for understanding the role that housework plays in the entire mode of production. Housework produces use-values that do not become exchange-values. Rather, they are used up in “productive consumption” within the same private sphere in which they are generated. This process is vital for the reproduction of labor power. Like Marx, Tithi Bhattacharya, a social reproduction theorist, sees in human labor, the “first premise of all human history”:

*Capitalism ... acknowledges productive labor for the market as the sole form of legitimate ‘work,’ while the tremendous amount of familial as well as*

*communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labor power, is naturalized into nonexistence.*<sup>6</sup>

Capitalism relegates women to unpaid reproductive labor, although today it would be more correct to say that for the vast majority of women, it overburdens them with it. Capitalism relies on these unpaid tasks for the reproduction of labor power, although no surplus value is extracted from this activity since it does not generate exchange value (i.e., it cannot be exchanged on the market). Reproductive labor is indispensable, although it does not generate value or surplus value. According to the logic of capital, it is thus unproductive labor.

It is not necessary for reproductive labor to generate surplus value for it to be socially recognized and valued. On the other hand, some feminist theorists argued that if reproductive labor “produces” labor power as a commodity, it should be considered productive. Yet, as these theorists claim, patriarchal (ideological, cultural) oppression keeps reproductive labor within private homes and performed by women without compensation from being seen as “productive.”<sup>7</sup> But as the French Marxist Daniel Bensaïd points out,

*The norms between labor that is actually subject to capital within the market and a private activity are nevertheless difficult to compare (Taylorization of kitchen and hotel work). The instruments of measurement depend on an unsatisfactory arbitrary choice, i.e., it involves calculating what a person could earn in the labor market during the time periods devoted to domestic activities (cost in potential earnings), as well as calculating how much should be paid in the market to obtain an equal service (cost of purchase in the market).<sup>8</sup>*

In the debates of the past few decades between feminists and Marxists, we support the position of Bensaïd, who pointed out that “the imprudent transfer of Marx’s concepts outside of their specific field has often obscured problems, as illustrated by the approximate use of the notions of exchange value and productive labor.”<sup>9</sup>

## **Familial (Re)production**

In line with her specific interpretation of the “masculine bias” in the definition of productive labor in capitalism, Federici wonders “what the history of capital 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.”<sup>10</sup>

With this question she presents her critique of what she sees as Marx’s (and later, Marxism’s) vision (or rather, blindness) regarding the place of women in the reproduction of labor power and in the social reproduction in the capitalist system.

Even if *Capital* does not delve into the nature of how labor power is produced as a

commodity, it should be pointed out that Marx considers the sexual division of labor—a characteristic of patriarchal societies—existed prior to capitalism and did not emerge for the first time during primitive accumulation. The patriarchy was already there. What capitalism did was adapt these relationships to its own logic and subordinate them to its needs.

For Marx, capitalism is an organic totality, a system centered on the creation of exchange value and the production of surplus value. From this perspective, the capitalist mode of production revolves around the exploitation of labor power, a unique and special commodity because it is capable of producing exchange value. Although capitalism benefits from the exploitation of wage labor, this does not mean that it does not benefit from other forms of non-wage labor subsumed in that central form that makes the generation of surplus value possible. Bhattacharya asserts that in *Capital*, “Marx does not theorize this second circuit but simply notes that ‘The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.’”<sup>11</sup>

Vogel also highlights the role of the family, the “reproductive unit” par excellence, although it precedes capitalism. Vogel maintains that the working-class family—that is, where labor power is reproduced—plays an indispensable role in the capitalist system and “shifts from an overriding preoccupation with the internal structure and dynamics of this family form to its structural relation to the reproduction of capital.”<sup>12</sup> Placing the family in the context of the dominant (capitalist) social relations makes it possible to see the role of this preexisting institution, although adapted and with a specific form (the working-class family), without isolating its internal dynamics, where hierarchies of gender and age operate, from its function in capitalism.

### **Contradiction as Opportunity**

Federici argues that since the second half of the 19th century, the working-class family of the Industrial Revolution has been left behind. She points out that although Marx witnessed the destruction of the family by capitalist exploitation, he believed—like Friedrich Engels—that the inclusion of women in the world of labor was positive. Yet, Federici argues that Marx did not realize that a “process of reform” was underway, one “that created a new form of patriarchy, new forms of patriarchal hierarchies.”<sup>13</sup> According to the author of *El patriarcado del salario*,

*Since the late 19th century, with the introduction of the family wage, of the male worker’s wage (which increased two-fold from 1860 to the first decade of the 20th century), women who worked in the factories were rejected and sent home, so that housework would become their first job and they would become dependent.*<sup>14</sup>

According to Federici, capitalism created the working-class family to appease a proletariat that increasingly rebelled against exploitation. This would guarantee a more productive

and less unruly class. However, this argument fails to take into account the contradictory processes of the class struggle. According to this quasi-conspiratorial view, the ruling class appears to have unlimited power to impose conditions of exploitation as well as of reproduction on the working class without obstacles, resistance or contradictions.

The transformation that Federici describes culminates in the establishment of the nuclear family—characterized by a male breadwinner and a housewife who depends on his salary and reproduces labor power. For Federici, this transformation is a historical process that emerges without any struggles for wage increases, for the reduction of working hours, without partial victories and defeats, for concessions that capitalists are also forced to make in order to continue to exploit wage labor in the best conditions allowed by the balance of forces between the classes. This process, like other processes that occur in the capitalist mode of production, is contradictory: On the one hand, women are expelled from the productive world in order to reduce the cost of labor power by their exclusive dedication to unpaid reproductive labor. But, on the other hand, this leads to a reduction in the population available for exploitation, that is, the population from which the capitalist can obtain surplus value.

For the working class, defending family relations against the voracity of industry which did not distinguish between men and women or between adults and children at the hour of exploitation also implied a confrontation with capital to improve their living conditions. With mass access to schools, hospitals and other public services, workers' living conditions improve, and a part of the burden of reproductive labor is transferred from the household to the capitalist state. This is why around the world, the working masses are resisting privatization and the elimination of public services, as it is a financial blow to working families and increases the amount of reproductive labor necessary in the home, i.e. largely by women.

In recent decades, capitalism in its neoliberal form has attacked unions and other working-class organizations in order to increase exploitation. But it has also affected the process of social reproduction of labor power through the privatization of public companies, cuts to social security programs, austerity policies that reduce the quality of public education and health care, as well as fee hikes in transportation and other essential services. These cuts have severely affected the household economy of working people. When we denounce the foreign debt of countries oppressed by imperialism, we know that the austerity measures implemented to pay the debt increase the reproductive labor carried out without compensation by women and girls. The struggle against capital's offensive is also “an effort by the class to demand its ‘share of civilization.’”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, while the family regulated by “the patriarchy of the wage” also has an aspect that is functional to capitalism, this does not mean that it is free of contradictions marked by the battle between capital and labor and defined by the class struggle.

These contradictions are inevitable because capitalist production revolves around generating surplus value by exploiting waged labor, but it cannot do this without the

social reproduction of that labor power. By transforming increasingly broad sectors of the masses into waged laborers, capital destabilizes the processes of reproduction. As Nancy Fraser argues, this leads to recurring crises, reflecting a contradiction that for Fraser, “is not located ‘inside’ the capitalist economy but at the border that simultaneously separates and connects production and reproduction. Neither intra-economic nor intra-domestic, it is a contradiction between those two constitutive elements of capitalist society.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the core functioning of capitalism cannot be found in “kitchens and bedrooms,” as Federici maintains, although what occurs there is molded by the capitalist mode of production. In the words of Bensaïd, “The indirect integration of housework in the determination of wages thus creates a personalized (and often legally codified) relationship of dependence, rather than a relationship of exploitation in the specific sense of the extraction of surplus value. This relationship is closer to relations of hierarchical domination than to modern class relations.”<sup>17</sup> This is what Bhattacharya defines almost aphoristically when she points out that “the wage labor relation suffuses the spaces of non-waged everyday life.”<sup>18</sup>

This inescapable link means that the struggle against women’s oppression must be waged from an anticapitalist and, more precisely, socialist and revolutionary perspective. At the same time, no working-class struggle against capitalist exploitation can do without a program of action against women’s oppression, which, under this system, is rooted in the naturalization of the unpaid reproduction of labor power.

## **Moving Towards a Conclusion**

The debate on the contradictory relationship between production and reproduction should not overlook an important new development: For the first time in the history of capitalism, women make up about 40% of the world’s wage laborers. This means that 54% of women of the economically active population participate in the labor market.<sup>19</sup> How many of those more than 1.3 billion women also carry the burden of unpaid labor that allows them to reproduce their own labor power as well as that of others? How many do paid housework so that an employer can be exploited in the labor market, thus using her own salary to reduce the amount of her reproductive labor?

The phenomenal transformation of labor power on a global scale has also radically transformed working-class families. How many households are supported exclusively by a woman’s salary? How many families are maintained by single mothers? What are the characteristics of the networks of women who, with or without financial compensation, take up housework and care work for other wage-earning women?

This new, complex reality leaves no place for the class reductionism of economic trade-union corporatism, which only recognizes the male (and specifically white, native-born and heterosexual) working class. But we cannot limit the struggle of women for their emancipation to the stereotyped figure of the housewife, whose existence has



substantially changed in recent decades. We must see capitalism as an organic whole, which includes this new feminized face of the labor force. What will be the impact of women's struggles in spaces of reproduction on the struggles of an increasingly feminized working class? How will women's empowerment, through this reemergence of feminism on a world scale, affect exploited women, and what will be the consequences for male trade unionism, which cannot incorporate the most oppressed sectors of the working class?

Feminists who aspire to emancipate women from all forms of patriarchal oppression cannot avoid the obstacles created by capitalism. The most obvious is that eight men today have as much wealth as 3.5 billion people, 70% of whom are women and girls. Women are more likely to be poor and employed in precarious or informal jobs. This is not independent of the conditions in which our reproductive labor is carried out.

We cannot fight gender inequality without considering what kind of society we aspire to build. Do we want to fight so that four women are among the planet's eight richest people? Do we want gender equality among the poorest? Is it possible to theorize the emancipation of women while leaving aside the core around which our society revolves—namely the accumulation of capital? After all, although there are differences between the struggles waged in the workplace and those waged in spaces of social reproduction, we should be looking for ways to confront the division and antagonism imposed by the ruling class and to unite what capitalism has historically divided. Today, more than ever, we can set off on this path because, perhaps for the first time, we women can say that it is about us, the proletariat.

## Notes

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2. Lise Vogel, "Questions on the Woman Question," *Monthly Review* 31, no. 2 (June 1979).
3. Silvia Federici, *El patriarcado del salario*, our translation (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2018): 19. (PDF available at [traficantes.net](http://traficantes.net).)
4. Karl Marx, "The Process of Production of Capital," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 34 (New York: International Publishers, 1994): 483-84.
5. Daniel Bensaïd, "El sexo de las clases," in *La discordancia de los tiempos*, our translation, 137.
6. Tithi Bhattacharya, "Mapping Social Reproduction Theory," *Social Reproduction Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2017): 2.
7. Bhattacharya conducts an interesting review of these debates from the perspective of social reproduction theory in *ibid.*
8. Bensaïd, "El sexo de las clases," 131.
9. *Ibid.*, 132.

10. Silvia Federici, "Capital and Gender," in *Reading 'Capital' Today*, ed. Ingo Schmidt and Carlo Fanelli (London: Pluto Press, 2017).
  11. Tithi Bhattacharya, "How Not To Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class," *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 31, 2015.
  12. Susan Ferguson and David McNally, "Capital, Labour-Power and Gender Relations," introduction to *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, Lise Vogel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), xxiv.
  13. Federici, *El patriarcado del salario*, our translation, 16.
  14. Ibid.
  15. Bhattacharya, "Social Reproduction."
  16. Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," *New Left Review*, no. 100 (July-August 2016).
  17. Bensaïd, "El sexo de las clases," 129.
  18. Bhattacharya, "Social Reproduction."
  19. *Sources*: Participation of women (aged 15 to 64) in the labor force (Geneva: International Labor Organization); Percentage of total workforce (World Bank).
- Translated by Marisela Trevin and Wladek Flakin.*

 **Womens' Rights** |



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