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Reviews

# Marxist and Feminist Interventions

- Reviews section -

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**This new edited by Shahrzad Mojab, an Iranian-born scholar and activist at the University of Toronto, is an important addition to the body of radical analysis that left feminists can use to educate ourselves about old and new theoretical, political and methodological debates on the left. It also is a signal that such debates are receiving new energy in the 21st century by new generations of left feminist intellectuals and activists dissatisfied with the academic compromises that institutionalized feminism has made, and the failure to incorporate feminist insights into Marxist-inspired theory and politics.**

I was present at the first international Marxist Feminist Congress in Berlin in 2015, as well as the second one this past fall in Vienna. Both were attended by about 500 people, and at the first, the book was enthusiastically received in a celebration of its publication. The two Congress events reflect years of collective hard work and study by mostly German feminists collaborating with Frigga Haug of the Rosa Luxemburg Institute, as well as feminists in other countries such as Mojab and her co-authors in this new anthology.

Many of the collection's authors are academics working in Canada, and most work in the areas of critical theory and cultural studies from a transnational perspective. As a whole the book advances the debates between Marxists and feminists typical of the 1970s European and U.S. women's movements to cover important new terrain, such as how to connect capitalism, racism and patriarchy theoretically and politically, and how to understand the relations between production, reproduction and the gender division of labor.

However, while the book is helpful in its presentation of important debates in Marxism for feminists, it is nonetheless rather uneven in its quality.

The anthology's authors are connected theoretically with the Marxist-Feminist analysis of German activist scholar Frigga Haug. She is a former professor of economics and politics, the co-editor of the journal *Das Argument* and co-founder of the Peoples University of Berlin who works with the left-social democratic party *Die Linke*.

For years Haug has been co-editor of the *Historical Critical Dictionary of Marxism*, which may explain the chapter layout of this anthology based on different concepts important to Marxist theory and practice. Her two opening chapters analyze gender relations, and hence male domination (patriarchy), as based on the interconnected historical relations of production (the production of things) and reproduction (the production of life) in a society.

Haug compares and contrasts her own view to Marx's writings and the debates within feminism about domestic labor. According to her, in capitalist commodity production the production of things creates an economy of exchange, profit and growth that exploits those doing reproductive work, who tend to operate according to the principles of care and love rather than profit. Such exploitation varies historically, with contemporary artificial reproductive technology creating possibilities that undermine fixed genders and the initial domestic mode of production/reproduction that capitalism relied on.

## Gendered Production and Reproduction

Haug's historical analysis of the gender division of labor in the production (reproduction) of life critiques not only radical feminist analyses that see this as an ahistorical base for male domination, but also socialist-feminist views

that sexuality, love and care are organized historically in different semi-autonomous modes of patriarchy (Ferguson, Hartmann, Walby) as well as queer poststructuralists like Butler who bypass questions of reproductive power to emphasize gender performances as the site of male and heteronormative power. When applied, however, her theory seems to be indistinguishable in method from that of the socialist feminists she mentions.

In separate chapters Helen Colley, Michelle Murphy and Sara Carpenter develop Haug's insight that the means and relations of reproduction change historically and are sites of power struggles. Colley, a professor of Life Long Learning at the UK University of Huddersfield, expands Marx's notion of worker alienation to include women's alienated emotional wage labor, including the emotional manipulation of gendered labor in voluntary programs such as adult-child services aimed at reducing welfare recipients.

Colley also supports the historical analyses given by Maria Mies (1986) and Sylvia Federici (2004) that the transition from feudalism to capitalism used witch burning to control the reproductive labor of women so as to ensure enough children to replenish the labor force. From this historical structural analysis she, Murphy and Carpenter (both in Women's Studies at the University of Toronto) argue that the struggle to control women's reproduction (and especially to curtail the reproductive capacities of women of color in advanced capitalist countries and in their neocolonial world) is key to right-wing programs at the heart of patriarchal capitalism and to feminist struggles against them.

What is less clear, however, is to what extent systems of male dominance over women have their own internal dynamic – for example, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's idea (1993) of masculinist logic behind the control of women and nature in Western forms of capitalist growth and development at odds with an earlier more egalitarian, women-centered harmonious model.

In contrast, Michelle Murphy suggests broadening the idea of reproduction and its relations to include the amassing of bio-capital, not only through population control and artificial reproduction but also through various forms of reproductive injustice that undermine capacities to maintain life, family and community by militarization, industrialized agriculture, racialized economic inequality, immigration law, pollution and climate change. (Murphy, 298)

Murphy's point of view questions whether an historical Marxist-feminist point of view would allow us to theorize a sphere of reproductive caring work with its own logic that has remained impervious to capitalist penetration. In this way her analysis conflicts with Haug, Mies and Shiva's more hopeful analysis of a care-love sector with its own values.

Editor Shahrzad Mojab, a professor in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, gives an informative overview of the Marxist-Feminist perspective of the authors, situating her analysis as emerging from the two world historical movements of Western Marxism and Feminism that began in the 19th century. Mojab argues that although the two movements have overlapped at various points in this history, today they are divergent, since much of feminism and feminist theory has become coopted.

Other authors in the anthology touch on this issue of the cooptation of feminism. Delia Aguilar, an emerita professor from the University of Connecticut who has been an activist in the U.S. and Philippines women's movements, argues that the current emphasis in academic feminism on intersectionality, as a multiplicity of social identities in which individuals are positioned, allows postmodernists to downplay class, particularly in its systemic aspect within the capitalist system in the process of accumulation and the expansion of capital.

This bypassing of class has allowed most of the debates around how gender, race, class and sexuality interconnect to ignore the key role of capitalism, imperialism and primitive accumulation in the social world. Hence, as Aguilar

argues, the reformulations of intersectionality by academic feminists “merely reflect the corporatization of the academy and its increasing subservience to a neoliberal global regime.” (203)

# Marxist and Feminist Interactions

What the book does well, although better in some chapters than others, is to present various themes and debates in Marxist theory as they interact with feminist theory. Each chapter is organized around important key words that are relevant to an understanding of capitalist and patriarchal political economies, and their processes of production and reproduction of economic class power relations and inequalities.

Such keywords include democracy, financialization, ideology, imperialism and primitive accumulation, intersectionality, labor-power, nations and nationalism, patriarchy/patriarchies, reproduction, revolution and standpoint theory.

The Marxist-Feminist emphasis on primitive accumulation as an ongoing aspect of capitalist globalization, and the gendered violence involved in the growth of global and domestic sex trafficking, imperialist wars and mass incarceration, are key to Jamie Magnusson’s excellent chapter on financialization. Magnusson, a colleague of Mojab at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, details the gendered-race-imperialist nature of the contemporary global financial capital system.

Judith Whitehead, professor at the UK University of Lethbridge, authors a helpful chapter on imperialism and primitive accumulation that continues this focus and gives us an insightful disagreement with David Harvey’s analysis of the latter because of his likening of assaults on the social wage in financial capitalism to land grabs in periphery countries in the South as examples of capitalist primitive accumulation. She argues that this approach obscures the First World imperialism involved in the latter but not the former case.

These chapters are welcome summaries of important debates that involve David Harvey, U. Patnaik, Silvia Federici and others, which show how coercive practices of primitive accumulation and privatization of the commons are key to the workings of the contemporary world system. They give a context for understanding how food sovereignty, a defense of the commons and the environment, and the development of economies of resistance are key to many alternative social movements both North and South.

Other chapters include analyses of ideology based on a theory of consciousness as grounded in socially embodied practices (Bannerji); the differences between bourgeois/liberal and socialist/communist democracy (Carpenter); how feminism and nationalism have been associated (Amir Hassanpour); how to unpack the notion of an ahistorical concept of patriarchy by theorizing concrete patriarchies (Kumkum Sangari); feminist epistemological standpoint theory and its relevance to Marxist-Feminist analysis (Cynthia Cockburn); and a critique of much of academic liberal and postmodernist feminism in favor of a more class-based “red” feminism (Teresa Ebert).

There are interesting aspects of all these chapters, although they are also uneven, but I do not have space to comment further.

# Disappearing Class and Race

An anomaly of how the book is organized is that these chapters, each written by a different author, appear in Part Two of the book but “class” and “race” do not appear as chapters that are supposed to itemize Marxist-Feminist keywords!

Part One does have a chapter by Himani Bannerji called “Building from Marx: Reflections on ‘race,’ gender and class.” But Bannerji, who is a professor of sociology at York University in Toronto, gives us a disappointingly abstract chapter with no specific examples to clarify her claim.

Race, ethnicity and class deserve more concrete analysis than they are given here, particularly for U.S. leftists analyzing the history of white supremacist imperialism and slavery in the founding of this nation, as well as in its confused understanding of class.

Why is it that mainstream discourse has been allowed to get away with eliminating “capitalist class” and “working class” in favor of the rich, middle class and poor? How does this connect with the material practices of racism and sexism that have demonized poor Black single mothers as welfare queens, supported racialized mass incarceration, and enforced racial segregation?

Why is it that the poor in the United States are assumed (falsely) to be mostly people of color (Latino immigrants and African Americans) who are blamed for their situation because of their bad culture (e.g. the “culture of poverty” posited by some mainstream sociologists)?

It might be argued in defense of the book project that theoretical tools are provided in various chapters to allow us to take up race, gender and class in non-additive ways. For example, Bannerji presents a Hegelian-Marxist standpoint that maintains that gender and race are mediating parts of the particular capitalist mode of production in most white supremacist postcolonial capitalist social formations, and thus cannot be separated from each other by a mechanical intersectional approach.

She argues that using a Marxian notion of “practical consciousness” that focuses on “concrete” forms of existence, “‘race’ is no more or less than a form of difference, creating a mode of production through practical and cultural acts of racialization.” (112)

It is hard to unpack this Marxist jargon to understand what is being said concretely. Race is said to be a “mode of production” as is capitalism. How then do these two systems relate? Are they then the same mode of production or two interacting modes? Are gender relations their own mode of production as well?

Bannerji refers to Marx in the Grundrisse to argue that “class cannot be genderless or cultureless, nor can culture be genderless and classless.” (113) But what does this mean concretely? Does it mean, as some Marxist (socialist) feminists such as Heidi Hartmann (1981) have argued, that European and U.S. capitalisms historically have involved men exploiting women’s labor as well as capitalists exploiting workers’ labor?

Has the racial division of labor perpetuated in part by white working-class trade unions excluding people of color allowed a divided work force in which white skilled workers can be said to have exploited the labor power of unorganized skilled and unskilled workers of color? In that case white women from skilled labor and professional classes are also class exploiters of white and of color working-class women (and men)!

Or should we say instead that the heterogeneous forms of labor, in part perpetuated by a white male labor aristocracy, have allowed capitalists, of all races and genders, to exploit all segments of the working class?

# Organizing Strategies

The above is not merely a theoretical debate, because the practical implications of the way we interpret these so-called mediating relations between capital and race/ethnic and gender elites may be different.

If we hold the latter classic Marxist interpretation we may argue for a “unite and fight” organizing strategy across race and gender through a Marxist vanguard party, while from the former socialist-feminist Dual or Multi-system position (which I maintain) we should theorize the need for multiple social movements that challenge institutional racism and sexism as well as class exploitation.

These movements will involve autonomous leadership among the relevant oppressed elements (as we see happening with Black Lives Matter and reproductive justice movements) that will need to make complex alliances around issues of common concern. Such coalitions need to find ways to use existing affective solidarities created by society (gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality) to challenge oppressions based on such social positioning, while challenging the hegemonic solidarities that perpetuate white supremacy, male dominance, heteronormativity, and class exploitation and privilege.

The question of how to organize the working class to demand a socialist revolution is important in addressing the notion of revolution, and requires an answer to the theoretical (and sociological/economic) question “Who is the working class/proletariat?”

Indeed, after the U.S. presidential election which Trump won with substantial working-class support, we need to disarticulate the “99%” concept that obfuscates the economic clash of interests between the (mostly liberal) professional class and the (mostly conservative) working class if we are ever to have a revolutionary strategy for the United States or other Northern capitalist countries.

But this is an issue that Maryam Jazayeri, author of the chapter “Revolution,” never addresses. Jazayeri, who defines herself as a “researcher and activist in the communist movement in Iran since the 1970s” (376), gives an analysis of the process of revolution that leaves unaddressed this class question, as well as the nature of the revolution’s “proletarian leadership,” women’s role, and to what extent undermining patriarchal structures is relevant to this process.

In order to have a successful revolution, there must be a plausible theory of how to resolve the “transition problem,” that is, how to bring about a democratic decision-making process after a revolutionary state is initially imposed by force. And this is what Jazayeri does not provide.

Jazayeri positions herself as a Marxist revolutionary from the Middle East who claims to have a “sharper” analysis of revolution as a concept than other Marxist-Feminists from the West like Maria Mies and Sylvia Federici. She critiques their view (and that of Hardt and Negri and other autonomist Marxists) that radical social movements can create non-capitalist relations that pre-figure communism within “the commons” that still exists, in spite of capitalism, in relations such as subsistence production (e.g. the Zapatistas) and solidarity economy networks (worker cooperatives, fair trade networks, etc.).

Jazayeri’s arguments are laced with a Hegelian Marxist type of question-begging jargon. For example, she critiques what she calls Federici’s “mechanical” analogies of how capitalist relations grew within feudalism. Apparently in contrast, her point of view is an “organic” understanding of how patriarchy and capitalism (little mention of racism) are historically internally related. But how does one test which explanation is mechanical and which organic?

Her main point against the autonomist Marxists is that they sidestep the revolutionary task of overthrowing the capitalist state, and in so doing fall into the utopian socialism that Marx critiqued. I would argue that the debate is a more strategic one about means and time frames in a revolutionary process.

Federici does suggest that working for Jazayeri's "total" revolution now, even if it led to a successful revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois state, would be "statist." Without more work first on creating an alternative culture of democratic sharing based on old and newly created commons (e.g. shared knowledge), the revolutionary state could revert to a bourgeois state or some worse form of totalitarian state.

## Revolutionary Problems

Jazayeri does acknowledge that there is a problem of how to keep the revolutionary seizure of private property from restoring a form of state capitalism. After a long critique of Maria Mies's vision of anti-capitalist communal structures based on subsistence, Jazayeri reveals herself to be a Maoist (quoting Mao and Bob Avakian favorably) who supports the idea of a strong revolutionary state based on "the dictatorship of the proletariat."

The failures of actually existing former so-called "communist" societies [which some theorize as bureaucratic collectivist or state capitalist] such as the USSR and China to develop into democratic worker-controlled socialism is attributed by Jazayeri to the complexity of class struggle in this process, which led to the unfortunate restoration of state capitalism.

She dismisses left (including postmodernist) intellectuals who critique such failed socialist states: for her they are guilty of denying the "basic facts of class struggle." But she herself gives us no clue of how to insure such a struggle will remain democratic rather than install an authoritarian political elite.

Another irritating aspect of Jazayeri's analysis of revolution, from a feminist point of view, is the way she pays lip service to the importance of thinking of women as a potential revolutionary class in such a struggle, but gives no examples of how such a class gets formed. Further, she fails to address the role that institutional patriarchy may have played in the failure of the USSR, China and Eastern European countries to develop a revolutionary leadership of women or to go beyond some initial reforms to promote women's liberation.

She does not discuss any of the Marxist-Feminist critiques of "real existing" socialist revolutions such as those by Hilda Scott (1974), Judith Stacey (1983), and Maxine Molyneux (2001). Such critiques point out how women's liberation and leadership was derailed in these countries by dominant male leadership, as well as by state reproductive policy that kept women unable to control their own reproduction and paid little attention to the implications of the "second shift" of caring labor for women workers.

Surely if patriarchy is organically internally related to capitalism, challenging such reproductive policy should also be relevant to a revolutionary undermining of such patriarchy! In any case, since all of the existing socialist-communist states ended up as dictatorships that did not allow independent organizing, there was no possibility that independent women's organizations could exist who could present ongoing challenges to the patriarchal aspects of these societies. (I owe this point to Nancy Holmstrom.)

In my opinion Haug, Federici and Mies give us a better starting point to organize the affective solidarity needed for the emergence of a united working class through their insight that there is a radical potential for a logic of Care (what I see as a revolutionary affective commons) which women community organizers can and are utilizing for

revolutionary struggle.

We need only to look at the example of the recent Chicago teachers' and California nurses' strikes, headed by and composed mostly of women, to see the importance of understanding the key role of women and women's issues for any revolutionary movement. We cannot neglect the strategic necessity of organizing women as a means to address the crisis of care in U.S. and European capitalist patriarchies, and this step will hopefully avoid the construction of a male-dominated vanguard party of the sort partially responsible for the failures of previous attempts at achieving democratic socialist revolutions.

Before we can get to any possibility of a total revolution against the capitalist state we need to be building an egalitarian revolutionary culture that empowers women, racial and ethnic minorities and LGBT people and works through participatory models of leadership.

In conclusion, I found the book an uneven read, very helpful in some chapters and exasperating in others. I would certainly recommend it to those who would like to enter some of the classic debates within Marxism about such questions as nationalism, democracy, and how capitalism works in exploitative ways to oppress workers and also women.

It also contains thought-provoking discussions of the relations between production and reproduction and Marxist-Feminist theories of how male domination is embedded in gender divisions of labor. But the book needs to be taken with a grain of salt in other chapters, or else those (students, for example) not familiar with arguments on each side of various theoretical debates may be misled into thinking that they have received a well-rounded discussion of a concept which in fact has been presented in a shallow and/or one-sided way.

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