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Gender and Capitalism

Capitalism and Gender Oppression

- Features - Feminism -

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Feminist theorists today are increasingly returning to the insight that capitalism must constitute the critical frame for understanding contemporary forms of gender oppression. Investigating the relationship between feminism and capitalism raises a host of difficult questions, however, which Cinzia Arruzza faces head on in her lucid essay [Remarks on Gender](#). She gives an illuminative roadmap of the terrain in which this issue was debated in the 1970s and 1980s by laying out three different theses on how capitalism and gender oppression are related: dual or triple systems theory, indifferent capitalism, and the unitary thesis. She begins by assessing carefully the problems of the first two positions and concludes by defending the third, the unitary thesis: in capitalist societies, a patriarchal system that would be autonomous and distinct from capitalism no longer exists. Instead of treating gender and sexual oppression as separate forms of domination, a unitary Marxist-feminist theory must incorporate them in the total framework of capitalist accumulation.

Similar to Marx himself, Arruzza's argument is both historical as well as philosophical. She contends that gender oppression and racial oppression have become "an integral part of capitalist society through a long historical process that has dissolved preceding forms of social life." Theoretically, she insists that we have to understand capitalism not merely as an economic system or a distinct mode of production, but as a complex and articulated social order that essentially consists of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation. Such an enlarged conception of capitalism allows us to recognize the irreplaceable role of social reproduction in it – the daily and intergenerational maintenance and reproduction of social life. From such an expanded theoretical perspective, patriarchal gender relations appear intrinsic, rather than merely contingent or instrumental for the way that social reproduction is organized in capitalist societies.

I strongly agree with Arruzza on several points of her argument, starting with the importance and the urgency of the topic she raises: a critical analysis of contemporary capitalism is a pressing task for feminist theory today. I am in full agreement with her on the need to recognize that social reproduction forms an essential condition of possibility for contemporary capitalist economies. I also find her critique of the first thesis – the dual systems theories – astute and convincing. Arruzza incisively summarizes the problems that Marxist-feminists faced in trying to model gender oppression on class exploitation by theorizing patriarchy and capitalism as similar, yet distinct systems of oppression. While men clearly benefitted from a sexist division of labor, there was no "surplus" in the strictly Marxist sense that men were able to appropriate from women's unpaid work at home. Neither did women form a unified, transhistorical class with essentially the same interests; instead the intersections of class, gender, and racial oppression called for more specific and historically varied analyses.

However, I have some problems with Arruzza's dismissal of the second position, indifferent capitalism, as well as her endorsement of the third, the unitary thesis. But before I turn to examine them more closely, I want to make a more general remark that underlies my concerns here. Arruzza notes at the beginning of her essay that the debate on the structural relationship between capitalism and patriarchy became increasingly unfashionable in the 1980s. She commends the many feminists who have nevertheless continued to work on the question at the risk of seeming out of touch with the times. In the midst of our current economic and social crisis, we are now well advised to return to their analyses.

I want to insist that returns are never easy: something more than intellectual fashion changed in the 1980s and 1990s. Empirically, neoliberalism and globalization happened; theoretically, post-structuralism happened. Both of these changes mean that the terrain upon which the questions about capitalism and gender oppression have to be posed has radically changed, too. Hence, it may not be enough to find new answers to the old question of what is the

“organizing principle” connecting patriarchy and capitalism. We may have to pose completely new questions.

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The problem the early Marxist-feminist projects faced was economic reductionism. The motivation behind developing so-called dual systems theories was the realization that gender oppression was not merely an economic phenomenon, but something that traversed all aspects of social life. It was not only capitalists who were benefitting from gender oppression, but all men. As Heidi Hartman noted sharply in her definitive essay: “Men have more to lose than their chains.” [1] In other words, if feminists were going to analyze women’s subordination through the theoretical framework of capitalism, and to avoid economic reductionism, it seemed apparent that they had to either supplement the existing economic analyses of capitalism with their own analyses of other, complementary or intersecting forms of oppression, or they needed to adopt a broader, “non-economic” conception of capitalism. The unitary theories that Arruzza defends opted for the latter alternative.

The problem that unitary theories face, however, is that while they forge connections between seemingly fragmented and isolated phenomena, they do so at the cost of hiding contradictions, historical contingencies and singularities under generality. They inevitably risk solidifying diversity and theoretical specificity into a totality. Arruzza is very aware of this problem and tries to avoid it by insisting that we need a radically historicized analysis of capitalism. She emphasizes that while surplus-value extraction is a distinctive and defining feature of capitalism, trying to explain capitalism by this process alone 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.” Instead of only considering the heart, we have to understand capitalism as “a versatile, contradictory totality, continually in movement, with relations of exploitation and alienation that are constantly in a process of transformation.” She sounds very Foucauldian when she emphasizes that capitalism consists of varied and diffuse power relations: “power relations connected to gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, and religion.” Moreover, there is no unidirectional and overarching rationality that explains them all. Although she insists that all these power relations “are put in the service of the accumulation of capital and its reproduction,” this often happens “in varying, unpredictable, and contradictory ways.”

Once we insist that capitalism is in fact versatile, adaptable, historically dynamic and that it contains contradictory tendencies, diffuse power relations and produces unpredictable effects, however, we seem to be rapidly emptying the notion out of its explanatory force. If everything is capitalism, then nothing is. In other words, if we give up the idea that the functioning of the heart can explain the functioning of the whole human body, then we seem to have given up the idea that we can find one “organizing principle” that explains gender oppression in capitalism. We can still grant that the economic logic of capitalism explains something, or even a great deal about gender oppression, but we nevertheless need a variety of other critical analyses that are linked with the analysis of class exploitation, and with each other, in complex and historically contingent ways. In other words, it seems to me that a radically historicized and complex version of the unitary theory in fact makes it more or less indistinguishable from a historicized version of the second thesis, which Arruzza calls “indifferent capitalism” – the thesis that the relationship between capitalism and gender oppression is opportunistic and historically contingent.

When discussing this second “indifferent capitalism” thesis Arruzza switches back to a more narrow, essentially economic understanding of capitalism as a distinct mode of production and highlights one of its key defining features: in capitalist modes of production, production aims at capitalist accumulation – the maximization of profits. All other normativities are subservient to this overriding goal. When we focus on its economic logic, capitalism now appears to have a merely contingent and opportunistic relationship to gender oppression. When women’s subordination and gendered division of labor are beneficial for the goal of capitalist accumulation, capitalism works in tandem with mechanisms of gender oppression. In geographical locations and historical periods in which the reverse is true, however, it is completely conceivable that capitalism and feminism are in fact allies. In other words, there is no

intrinsic or essential relationship between them. Arruzza notes that those feminists who argue that capitalism is good for women have readily appropriated this thesis: capitalism has no intrinsic ties to particular identities, inequalities, or extra-economic, political, or juridical differences.

Just because a thesis can be appropriated to defend capitalism does not mean that it is false, however. As Arruzza notes at the beginning of her article, we have to carefully distinguish between logical and historical versions of this thesis and therefore between logical or metaphysical necessity on the one hand, and empirical or historical necessity, on the other. Even if we accept that capitalism, now understood as a distinct economic system of production, does not logically need gender inequality, historically things are not so simple. Arruzza admits herself that it is “perhaps difficult to show at a high level of abstraction that gender oppression is essential to the inner workings of capitalism,” but insists that her argument concerns the way things are now, in our lived, historical reality.

In other words, what I take her to be arguing is that if we operate with an abstract, economic definition of capitalism that identifies it through its economic logic, then it is impossible to make a necessary, logical connection between capitalism and gender oppression. The relationship is historically contingent and opportunistic. However, if we move to the level of lived reality where capitalism denotes a totality – a historically specific social formation consisting of all the myriad social practices in which we are involved daily – then the two become indistinguishable. Here Arruzza and I are again in full agreement: I think that both of these claims are valid and ontologically true at the same time.

However, my problem is methodological. Once we have moved on to the level of a totality, the level of our lived reality, there is not much else that can be significantly stated about the connection between capitalism and gender oppression than that they are intertwined or inherently connected. The proposition becomes non-falsifiable. Stating that something in a total social formation is connected to something else in it is obviously true in a trivial sense. But on this level it seems difficult to explain the link between capitalism and gender oppression through a single organizing principle. To explain anything at all about their connection, we have move back to some form of “fragmented thought”: retrieve a more precise definition of capitalism and then study the myriad and often contradictory ways in which the economic logic of capitalism determines, intersects or shapes historically specific, gendered social practices.

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It is my contention that today we can identify at least two different and opposing ways that the capitalist logic of accumulation – the imperative of economic growth – intersects with gender oppression. On the one hand, the rapid neoliberalization of our economies in recent decades has resulted in a constant drive to extend the reach of the market. According to neoliberal economic theory, commodification and privatization are particularly effective means of speeding up economic growth given that the GDP is measured in terms of market transactions. This doctrine is consistent with the attempts to commodify both the private and the public realms and to turn women into wage-laborers. As the marketization of everyday life expands, people have come to increasingly rely on the affective and care services that they now buy and which used to be provided mainly by women in the private realm. This has resulted in new forms of gender oppression, as it is often poor, immigrant and third-world women who end up providing these commodified services. The so-called “global care chains” and the enormous growth in the trafficking of women have become some of the gendered effects of globalization. [\[2\]](#)

On the other hand, it is also clearly beneficial for capitalism in the current historical conjuncture to rely on women’s unpaid reproductive labor in the private sphere. Even though it is possible to construct economic thought experiments and to imagine, logically, capitalist forms of production that have completely commodified social reproduction, historically we are still far from achieving that. Attempts to commodify biological reproduction and affective relationships, such as sex and love, encounter both technical difficulties as well as moral objections in our current

forms of life. The social provision of childcare and domestic labor, on the other, is an obvious hindrance to the logic of capitalist accumulation because it requires public investment. This must be counted as at least part of the explanation for why the feminist movement, despite decades of political struggle by now, has had very little success in socializing and ungendering reproduction. Women are still expected to take the main responsibility for the early provisioning of childcare, as well as for most of the housework.

Hence, we can identify opposing ways to relate capitalist economic logic and gender oppression – capitalism wants women to both work and to stay at home –and we can find examples of both incentives today. Women are increasingly torn between the conflicting demands of femininity in neoliberal capitalist societies. [3]

A contradiction characterizes the gendered consequences of recent economic crises too. The instability of capitalist economies has been negotiated in recent decades through neoliberal forms of governmentality – new political technologies of power and social regulation that emphasise individual responsibility in risk management. While a stable nuclear family was previously understood to provide the necessary counterweight to competitive and individualistic capitalist societies, today social volatility and economic risks have become increasingly central for profit making. It is especially the poor and the most vulnerable segments of the population, for example, who have been forced into unprecedented levels of debt in recent decades, and whose indebtedness has thereby made possible the growth of the lucrative credit markets and the rapid financialization of Western economies. In other words, the breaking up of the stable nuclear family and the collapse of the traditional gender order based on the idea of family-wage can be understood as both useful and harmful for capitalist accumulation: on the one hand the dissolution of social cohesion and the growing number of poor, single-parent households has provided new lucrative opportunities for capitalist accumulation in the form of subprime lending, for example; on the other hand, the disintegration of the traditional gender order has resulted in an intensified crisis of care in Western societies and made the questions concerning social reproduction appear as acute problems in capitalism.

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We should be mindful of Nietzsche's assertion that only that which is without history can be defined. Our conceptions and theoretical understandings of reality are produced through political struggle and are thus always contingent and contestable. All definitions of capitalism must be understood as political acts, and their extension and validity remains open to constant contestation. In other words, capitalism does not "essentially" mean anything. It is a theoretical tool, or perhaps even a weapon, that I believe can be successfully deployed in several contexts.

Depending on the theoretical or political context in which it is deployed and the way it is defined there, we can do different things with it. In political economy, it denotes a distinctive mode of production, which can be identified through a list of key features – private property, the dominance of wage labor, the allocation of goods and services through markets and so on – and usefully distinguished from other types of economic systems. In much of critical social theory, on the other hand, it denotes something broader, usually framed in terms of a totality or a comprehensive social formation. The clear advantage of such a totalizing perspective is that it is capable of theoretically connecting seemingly disparate phenomena and therefore politically uniting people who are able to recognize that their individual problems are not merely local, psychological or accidental.

However, as I have tried to argue, there are also costs and risks involved in such totalistic thinking. When capitalism is analyzed as a mega-structure or an all-encompassing explanatory background against which all other things are understood, we risk losing a clear theoretical focus and political aim. Not only do varied forms of gender oppression have historically contingent relationships to the distinct and contradictory economic logics characterizing contemporary capitalism – feminist political struggles do too. In other words, I want to cast our disagreement as ultimately strategic: whilst Arruzza defends a unitary theory based on an enlarged definition of capitalism because it

can provide feminists with an effective and cutting conceptual weapon, I want to defend a more precise definition and more variegated historical analyses – for the very same reason.

This article is part of a dossier entitled [Gender and Capitalism: Debating Cinzia Arruzza's "Remarks on Gender"](#) published on [Viewpoint Magazine](#)

[1] Heidi Hartmann, "[The Unhappy Marriage of Patriarchy and Capitalism: Toward a More Progressive Union.](#)" *Capital & Class* 3.2 (1979), 24.

[2] The term "global care chain" was first used by Arlie Hochschild to describe the links between people across the globe based on their roles in the transnational division of care work. See, Arlie Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value", in *On The Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, eds. William Hutton and Anthony Giddens (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 131.

[3] Cf. Johanna Oksala, "The Neoliberal Subject of Feminism," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42.1 (2011), 104–120.