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Gender and Capitalism

Closing the Conceptual Gap

- Features - Sexual politics -

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This text raises the question of a *unified theory* of social relations. Cinzia Arruzza's essay ["Remarks on Gender"](#) reminds us of the debates, left dormant for decades, around creating a unified theory of capital. However, Arruzza's path toward that unification is one that abdicates the possibility of locating gender and race as part of the abstract, logical, or "essential mechanisms" of capitalism, opting instead to incorporate these pervasive relations as aspects of capitalism's historical and concrete unfolding.

This rejection of gender and race as part of the inner logic of capital is not particular to Arruzza. It is standard practice within Marxist-feminism, as well as other tendencies which attempt to argue for the importance of axes of violence, oppression, or exploitation beyond class (e.g. race, sexuality, gender) within the capitalist mode of production. The possibility that gender and race are somehow inherent to the inner logic of capital is not rejected because the attempts to prove it have failed – it is dismissed out of hand, before any attempt has been made. Hypotheses which do locate gender or race in the essential logical structure of capital are so rare or unpopular that Marxist critics like Arruzza do not even feel the need to argue *against* that possibility. It is *taken for granted* that these relations do not appear in capital's inner logic, in the abstract structure at the heart of capitalism.

While joining, albeit ambivalently, in this out-of-hand dismissal (see below), Arruzza also brings some important critiques to bear upon this and other erroneous resolutions to the question at hand.

Arruzza's essay lays out three common approaches taken by feminists who care to attend to capitalism: "dual systems theory," "indifferent capitalism," and the "unitary thesis." I would like to add another category, what I provisionally call *systemic fundamentalism*. With this approach, I associate some theorists who Arruzza has designated within *dual systems theory*, such as Christine Delphy. Arruzza criticizes Delphy for holding that patriarchy is a system of exploitation more fundamental than capitalist class relations, and upon which capitalist class relations are established. Arruzza's primary critique of this perspective is that it implies the existence of class relations between women and men, and hence "irreconcilable antagonisms" between the two genders, of which she finds no evidence (more on this below). But more importantly for my designation of "systemic fundamentalism," Arruzza critiques Delphy for arguing that patriarchal class relations would trump capitalist class relations – deflating the importance of one system by emphasizing another more fundamental and essential one. Arruzza writes: "In 'The Main Enemy,' Delphy insists that being a member of the patriarchal class is a more important fact than being part of the capitalist class." For Delphy, on Arruzza's reading, the system of patriarchy is more fundamental than that of capitalism.

Arruzza's central critique of our next approach, *dual systems theory* (or triple, for those who deign to acknowledge race relations), is that they do not attribute to patriarchal or racial systems their own internal force of self-reproduction, which is ostensibly the most basic requirement for the existence of an independent mode of production. Arruzza aptly notes that the only formidable attempt to articulate this force has been in ideological or psychological terms, as an independent system of signs. She dismisses these on the basis of their implausibility, their close tarrying with fetishistic and ahistorical notions of psyche. She criticizes most dual systems theories for taking economics to be the purview of capitalist social relations, while ideological and cultural forms are the terrain of gender and racial processes. Finally, Arruzza rightly criticizes the lack of "organizing principle" or "logic" to the "Holy alliance" of systems which would explain their interrelation. This downfall can also be attributed to the "intersectionality" approach – which, while constituting an important intervention into legal theory (the genesis of the term), and serving as a useful shorthand for people who want to say that they care about all three and don't privilege one over another, nonetheless leaves the details of these relations entirely vague.

However, Arruzza takes most issue with her third approach, the “indifferent capitalism” approach – and appropriately so, since it is the most formidable in contemporary Marxist and communist thought. For some thinkers that adhere to the “indifferent capitalism” approach, capitalism’s abstract indifference to gender and race means that capitalism is in fact *beneficial for women in general*, and/or for *racial minorities*, in certain contexts. Arruzza writes, for instance, that “some claim that within capitalism women have benefited from a degree of emancipation unknown in other kinds of society.” However some people who take up the “indifferent capitalism” approach do attend to the importance of racial and gender relations, arguing that the logical “indifference” of capital to race and gender is complicated by the historically ubiquitous role of gender and race, which re-inscribes gendered and racial oppression through contingent historical processes. On this reading, gendered and racial oppression are relatively inescapable because of how extensively they have permeated capitalism, historically.

In posing her own chosen hypothesis, that of a “unitary theory” of capitalist and patriarchal social relations, Arruzza chooses the excellent foil of Ellen Meiksins Wood, a proponent of the “indifferent capitalism” approach, who staunchly argued that race and gender only have a “contingent and opportunistic relationship” to capital, not a necessary one. She summarizes Wood’s perspective thus: “Capitalism is... not structurally disposed to creating gender inequalities.”

However, Arruzza makes a substantial concession to Wood:

It is perhaps difficult to show at a high level of abstraction that gender oppression is essential to the inner workings of capitalism... If we were to think of capitalism as “pure,” that is, analyze it on the basis of its essential mechanisms, then maybe Wood would be right. However, this does not prove that capitalism would not necessarily produce, as a result of its concrete functioning, the constant reproduction of gender oppression, often under diverse forms.

Here we find a relatively straightforward argument for the *logical* indifference but *historically-concrete* necessity of gender to capital – something she seems to cast doubt upon earlier in the piece when she writes, in her critique of the “indifferent capitalism” perspective, that some of this perspective’s adherents “maintain that we should carefully distinguish the logical and historical levels: logically, capitalism does not specifically need gender inequality and could get rid of it; historically, things are not so simple.” Elsewhere she again proposes this perspective, which she seemed at first to critique, but now in a positive light: “In order to respond to the question of whether it is possible for women’s emancipation and liberation to be attained under the capitalist mode of production, we must look for the answer at the level of concrete historical analysis, not at the level of a highly abstract analysis of capital.”

There is some tension here. At the same time as she states that on the most abstract level, we may not find gender within the defining characteristics of capital, Arruzza also criticizes the “indifferent capitalism” thesis for arguing that capitalism is not structurally disposed to creating gender inequalities, and that capitalism “has an essentially opportunistic relation with gender inequality.”

For a moment, let us look back to Delphy, and the “systemic fundamentalism” approach that I added to Arruzza’s list of approaches to the gender/capital question. The problem with this perspective was that it displaced the importance of capitalist social relations by emphasizing the more fundamental and essential relations of patriarchy. Arruzza’s version of a “unitary thesis” does the opposite – it logically displaces gender relations in favor of the more fundamental relations of capital (which ostensibly do not necessarily include gender). She insists upon avoiding the economic reductionism that is taken up by some Marxist theories of capital, and on this point she is undeniably correct. [\[1\]](#) But on Arruzza’s account, whether or not the inner laws of capital are exclusively economic, *we still do not find gender there*. Nor race, which enters for Arruzza primarily as a complication, along with class, to straightforward gender relations. While Arruzza does not firmly state that gender cannot be understood logically or in the abstract forms of capital, she casts doubt on this possibility and instead moves to a discussion of ostensibly non-abstract historical processes in order to locate the reproduction of gender in capital.

Arruzza introduces the concept of “social reproduction,” modifying it from its more traditional definition as “the process of reproduction of a society in its totality” to a more focused definition of social reproduction generated by the Marxist-feminist tradition, in which “social reproduction designates the way in which the physical, emotional, and mental labor necessary for the production of the population is socially organized: for example, food preparation, youth education, care for the elderly and the sick, as well as questions of housing and all the way to questions of sexuality.” Arruzza lauds the concept for “enlarging our vision of what was previously called domestic labor,” thereby extending our analysis “outside the walls of the home, since the labor of social reproduction is not always found in the same forms.” [2]

Social reproduction here appears to designate processes and relations that are both logically and historically necessary. This necessity functions, for Arruzza, to subvert the problem of considering gendered dynamics (such as domestic life, gendered divisions of labor in the factory) and some racial dynamics (immigration, racial divisions of labor) as “contingent.” In other words, I understand Arruzza to be saying something like this: since this category of *social reproduction* circumscribes the essential gendering and racializing processes within capital – whether they take place in the waged sphere or not – and we can say with certainty that this category of activity is necessary to capital, then on this basis we can argue for the deep necessity of gender and race to capital.

However, what remains logically and structurally contingent is the anchor between these necessary forms of social reproduction (e.g. housework, slave labor) to gender and to race. On Arruzza’s account, it appears to be this association between certain activities on the one hand, and gender or race on the other hand, that is historically constituted. To put this point slightly differently: whereas capital will always require members of working class to do unwaged activity such as childrearing and dishwashing, and will always engage in exploitative forms of social differentiation in which some people are cast out of work, enslaved, or otherwise hyper-exploited, it appears as if it is not “necessary” that these dynamics are associated with gender or race.

Her discussion beautifully sets in relief the question she doesn’t ask: how can race and gender relations be located within the logical understanding of the capitalist mode of production? Some people working within the communizing current have importantly approached this question, [3] attempting, in the words of Gonzalez and Neton, to “delineate categories [of gender] that are as specific to capitalism as ‘capital’ itself.” [4] The way that Arruzza frames her discussion of social reproduction allows the question to emerge in an interesting way. She acknowledges that certain forms that exceed waged labor are logically necessary to capital – e.g. unpaid housework. [5] She also acknowledges that women are intimately connected to this necessary form of work. However, that connection remains contingent – women and social reproduction could, theoretically, be decoupled. But what if we were to collapse *the set of necessary social relations associated with women in capitalism* and the *category of women in capitalism*. What if “woman” was *nothing but* the formal category of people who are on one side of specific set of social relations, similar to the way in which the proletariat is *nothing but* the formal category of people who are on one side of a specific set of social relations. In the case of the proletariat, the social relations consist in being those who own nothing but their own labor power, which they must sell in order to make a living, and be subject to the threat of being cast out of labor pool by capital. In the case of “women”, or perhaps more effectively and accurately “feminized people” (see below), this set of essential social relations certainly involves the bulk of what Arruzza refers to as “social reproduction.”

This set of relations has been generally been theorized by some working within a communization framework as a distinction between two gendered *spheres* immanent to the capitalist mode of production. Recently, these spheres have been further specified in terms of the non-social [6] or the abject [7], but I’m sure all interested parties would agree it requires far more thought and study. Further, it seems clear that the category woman is insufficient, and that a more dynamic concept such as “feminized people” may serve both to emphasize the fact that it is a process and a relationship, and that the people in question are not always women. This also entails a richer understanding of the social relations involved, including, for example, sexual violence, which is something which can be easily left to the side in theories of social reproduction, but which is certainly fundamental to the gender relation. As I’ve argued

elsewhere: “Understanding sexual violence as a structuring element of gender also helps us to understand how patriarchy reproduces itself upon and through gay and queer men, trans people, gender nonconforming people and bodies, and children of any gender.” [8] I also believe it is also one of the ways to render internal to a theory of gender the way in which some women, particularly trans women, women of color, and poor women, experience on average far higher levels of susceptibility to violence and appropriation. At the moment, such acknowledgments still remain sidebars to our theorizing, as is made quite clear by the preceding sentence. The question is: how do we develop our categories in a way that integrates these elements more deeply and integrally, in a way that subverts these superficial nods?

Arruzza’s formulation carries another confusing implication: it suggests that that relations of social reproduction, like housework, latch onto gender and become entwined with it. This implies that gender must then stand autonomous from those social relations, as waiting to be used in some sense. Here is where the “indifferent capitalism” thesis comes in through the backdoor, and we find ourselves back at the initial critique of an “opportunistic relationship” between gender and capital. We also abruptly encounter the question of *what exactly is gender, then, and from whence does it come?*

So let us close the conceptual gap between “feminized people” and the material relations they have in capital. A similar move is essential for the category of racialized/ethnicized people. To this end, Cedric Robinson’s work is extremely effective. In *Black Marxism*, he argues forcefully for the necessary role of what he calls “racialism” in the establishment and reproduction of capitalism, as a process with its own rationale that is immanent to capital’s rationale, rather than as a contingent adjunct to the class relation. [9] His work, for one, along with the Afro-Pessimist concept of “social death” [10] points towards defining that set of social relations which would be the real content of the category of racialized people in capitalism. Chris Chen has recently mobilized this work, along with an analysis of paradigms in racialism and race studies, towards the goal of accurately specifying the relation between race and capital, arguing that “race’ is not extrinsic to capitalism or simply the product of specific historical formations such as South African Apartheid or Jim Crow America. Likewise capitalism does not simply incorporate racial domination as an incidental part of its operations.” [11]

While Marxist critics have contended that relations of race and gender appear too malleable and complex to be articulated as structural and abstract, [12] the class relation is no less blurry and porous – there are as many exceptions to the basic definition of working class as there are to the basic definition of feminized people and racialized people. Surely miners and clerical workers and sailors and nurses are no more or less logically united as “the working class” by their relation to capital than feminized or racialized people are? And there are innumerable exceptions to the strict definition of the proletariat amongst those we would surely like to include within that class that will struggle and win against capitalism: semi-proletarianized seasonal migrant laborers who retain cultivated land; petit bourgeois who own their own businesses and storefronts; religious communities or leaders who live off donations; and, most famously, the lumpenproletariat.

In this text, I am more concerned with closing the conceptual gap referenced above than I am with nailing down the specificity of these relations that reproduce gender and race. That latter project is, in the end, the more important one, but here my goal is merely to show that if we are truly committed to a rigorous and unifying theory of capital, we must *consider the possibility* that race and gender are as logically necessary as class is to this mode of production. We must follow this hypothesis as far as it takes us. There has not yet been any good reason established as to why we should turn back from it. This path would entail the rigorous investigation of what those relations truly are. It would invariably render our understanding of capital more accurate, providing a more effective conceptual whetstone on which to sharpen our practical weaponry.

On a different note, it is important to challenge Arruzza’s statements about the negligible benefits of patriarchy to men. She suggests that “A man would lose nothing, in terms of workload, if the distribution of care work were completely socialized instead of being performed by his wife. In structural terms, there would be no antagonistic or

irreconcilable interests.” But this is far from the case: it is not possible for many elements of the hierarchized gender relation to be socialized. Men benefit directly and indirectly from the unpaid invisible work that women do, as well as from the relations of domination which are inherent aspects of the capitalist gender relation. Specific activities within the sphere of unwaged work can be socialized, but there will always necessarily remain a sphere of un-socialized work, and women – or feminized people – will, for the most part, do it. It is also not possible for coercive relations of secretive sexual abuse to be socialized. It is not possible for violent forms of control and psychic isolation and domination to be socialized. These are essential components of the gender relation which bolsters men’s power, of the mechanisms by which men obtain and protect power, resources, acquiescence. There is no reason for men to let go of them anymore than there is reason for capitalists to socialize their profits. The gender relation, like the class relation, is, even in the abstract, not exclusively “economic.”

Similarly, the direct and indirect material benefits of racialization to white and non- or less-racialized people are profound, and have been defended *to the death* throughout the history of capital. Neither can the particular relations of exploitation and oppression that characterize racialism or racialization be considered socializable. They are dynamics which cannot be ameliorated by even the best capitalist planning; to the contrary, capital *is in part* these processes of racialization/ethnicization. These processes include, at least, (1) the permanent and semi-permanent marginalization from remotely stable wage labor: as there will, definitionally, always be a group marginalized in this way, that group is thereby a racialized/ethnicized group. In Chen’s words, “The expulsion of living labour from the production process places a kind of semi-permeable racialising boundary bifurcating productive and unproductive populations even within older racial categories: a kind of flexible global colour line separating the formal and informal economy, and waged from wageless life.” [13] Those who are not marginalized in this way, and hence who are less racialized/ethnicized, will defend any threat to their position. In the United States, working class whites have fought back vehemently on every possible battlefield when black people have fought to gain access to waged economic stability. Also essential to racialization/ethnicization is (2) the vulnerability to untimely death, which is a vulnerability inherent to some large section of the proletariat no matter what. On this reading, the creation of this section is a racializing and ethnicizing process, and so the group which experiences this vulnerability has and will be, for the most part, racialized and/or ethnicized. In the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” [14]

Finally, this type of *unifying* theory which *closes the gap* (“unifying” rather than “unitary” here is meant to acknowledge that the picture will never be complete, will always entail further detail and nuance, a re-scaffolding – which is not to doubt our access to truth and accuracy, but to acknowledge our finite limits) subverts the “common sense” of Arruzza’s point that triple systems theory is intuitive because these relations “manifest themselves” independently. She writes that “those who have developed an awareness of gender inequality usually experience and perceive it as determined by a logic that is different and separate from capital.” In concordance with the arguments of many feminist theorists of color that race, gender, and class never appear as distinct, [15] or of working-class feminist theorists who describe their inability to disaggregate their gender oppression from their class oppression, [16] of trans women activists and theorists who articulate the mutual constitution of of these axes with transmisogyny, [17] and of prison abolitionists who, in their work, are fully confronted with the imbrication of race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, and so forth, [18] we must acknowledge that for many people, these things *do not* tend to manifest themselves independently. To some they appear independent while to others they appear unified, and while that poses some interesting questions, it is beyond the scope of my concerns here. I believe that when we understand class, feminization, and racialization as different organs in a body, different laws within an ecosystem, or whatever metaphor we choose to use for different but mutually constituted parts within a whole, it is unquestionable that at every moment all of them are really at play. Their appearance depends on many things, including an individual’s situation within the whole.

I welcome Arruzza’s reopening of these debates with tremendous warmth and excitement, and I offer my critiques and questions in comradeship to the project of a unifying theory of a capitalism in which, by Arruzza’s words, “It is evident that social relations include relations of domination and hierarchy based on gender and race that permeate both the social whole and daily life.”

May 4, 2015

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

[1] It is less clear whether or not Arruzza believes that the inner laws of capital are themselves "purely economic." This essay assumes, following Marx's work in the *Grundrisse* and throughout the volumes of *Capital*, that the essential inner laws of capital are not confined to an economic sphere.

[2] Note that the Marxist-feminist use of the term reproduction and other complementary concepts is aptly problematized by Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton in "[The Logic of Gender](#)" in *Endnotes*, Vol. 3.

[3] See Gonzalez and Neton, op. cit; P. Valentine "The Gender Distinction in Communization Theory," in *Lies: A Journal of Materialist Feminism*, Volume 1, 191-208; Bernard Lyon, "The Suspended Step of Communisation" in *SIC: International Journal for Communisation*; Théorie Communiste, "[Response to the American Comrades on Gender](#)."

[4] Gonzalez and Neton, 57.

[5] Many Marxists who oppose logical understandings of race and gender also acknowledge this; see, for example, David Harvey *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[6] See P. Valentine, op. cit.

[7] See Gonzalez and Neton, op. cit.

[8] Valentine, op. cit., 204.

[9] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1983]).

[10] See, for example, Frank Wilderson III, "[Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?](#)" *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 9.2 (2003), 225-240; and Jared Sexton "[The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism](#)." *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 1-47.

[11] See, for example, [exchanges](#) between David Harvey, Alex Dubullay, and myself regarding Harvey's recent book.

[12] Chen, op. cit.

[13] Chen, op. cit.

[14] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in *Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28.

[15] See, for example, bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), as well as Sojourner Truth's [own words](#) and work; Sharon Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Lakeyma King, "Inversions & Invisibilities: Black Women, Black Masculinity, & Anti-Blackness" and Pluma Sumac's "Notes on Prostitution", both forthcoming in *Lies: A Journal of Materialist Feminism*, Vol. 2.

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[16] See, for instance, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz' *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-75* (San Francisco, City Light Books, 2002); Michelle Tea's *Rent Girl* (San Francisco, Last Gasp Books, 2004); and Selma James's *Sex, Race, and Class* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

[17] See Susan Stryker's film *Screaming Queens*; also, recent interviews with Laverne Cox, for example [here](#).

[18] See, for example, both Angela Davis and Dean Spade's work, nicely epitomized in speeches found [here \(Davis\)](#) and [here \(Spade\)](#).