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Sexual Politics

# For an anticapitalist feminism in the here and now

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**We are publishing here the translation of the preface to the Spanish edition of the book by Cinzia Arruzza *Las sin parte : Matrimonios y divorcios entre feminismo y marxismo* published in the Critica & Alternativa collection by [Izquierda Anticapitalista](#). [1]**

*One of the fundamental problems of Marxism today consists of not understanding the specific reasons that divide workers and prevent the growth of class solidarity. Among these reasons racism and sexism stand out in particular. As a result, a class struggle which wants to be serious in the modern world must put these issues in the forefront.*  
(Stephanie Coontz)

## Marxism without feminism

The histories of feminism and Marxism are characterized by constant opportunities to meet which, however, have never succeeded in crystallizing a complete unity, satisfactory for both parties. For nearly two centuries, the feminist movement and the workers' movement have found themselves together in struggles, worked together, been suspicious of each other, have started to converge, to separate, to rediscover, to deny and to observe from a safe distance. And so on. So far. Up until now.

While it is true that the scepticism of the workers' movement towards feminism - a consequence, quite often, of the lack of interest of feminism in the specific conditions and needs of working men and women - has often been more than justified, tensions between the two cannot be reduced to or explained solely by this factor. During the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, voices were raised in the workers' movement against the participation of women in the labour market. Furthermore, they were accompanied by speeches, as in the First International, claiming that the natural place for women was in the home. These postures were the result of considerations that were both economic and moralistic. The dominant perception of women as being inferior to men combined with the effect of the lowering of overall wages caused by the entry of women into the labour market, sparking off strikes organized by men against women workers.

Historically, capital has used the labour power of women and children to reduce costs. In response, the workers' movement - and therein lies its first betrayal - has often opted to demand the family wage in order to exclude women from the labour market, instead of fighting side by side for equal pay and rights for all and thus avoiding a fragmentation of the working class. Ironically, the sin of division of the workers' movement, which was the main charge of the workers' movement against feminism, was the responsibility of the former and not the latter. The combination of miscalculations and moral prejudices has sometimes led the workers' movement and Marxism to leave women by the wayside, and Cinzia Arruzza tells us in detail how issues such as the right to vote for women, divorce, contraception and abortion, among other democratic rights of women, were taboo issues in both the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) for much of the twentieth century.

Women have not been the only ones to have been excluded at one time or another from union demands and from Marxism. Historically, ethnic minorities and people of immigrant origin have shared the dubious honour of being perceived as a threat instead of being seen as comrades in arms. All of us have been sacrificed on the pretext of safeguarding the rights of male white workers of the dominant nationality: the workers "who have always been there", the "real" workers. Needless to say, these exclusions have benefited the interests of capital and contributed to the fragmentation and weakening of the class struggle.

Historical tensions between Marxism and feminism have not been limited to the field of political demands; another important issue, although related to what we have already mentioned, concerns the "micro-political", or sexism in the workers' movement and other social movements. We can remember the contempt with which the women workers were treated by their fellow trade unionists in the film *The Salt of the Earth*. But this sexism, and the sexual division of political activities, has also been present in many mixed organizations and social movements over the last decades of the twentieth century. Thus, Cinzia Arruzza vividly describes the case of the North American social movements of the 1960s, "wherever they went, thousands of North American women involved in the movement for civil rights, in the student movement, in the antiwar movement, came up sharply against the same sexism. The sarcasm, the mockery, the open contempt to which they were subjected when they tried to make demands and to put forward ideas from the point of view of their specific oppression as women could only have had one outcome: divorce between the feminist movement and the other movements", particularly the workers' movement. And such was the case.

## Feminism without Marxism

The North American feminist movement emerged and consolidated in the early 1970s, particularly in the petty bourgeoisie and the middle and intellectual classes. It organized in small groups of women who were dedicated mainly to consciousness-raising. Radical feminism, which focuses on the analysis of interpersonal relationships and is based on an essentialist version of the derived difference of the sexual characteristics of women, had a particular influence. In other countries, such as France, separatist feminist groups also spread, despite the fact that some feminist activists in mixed organizations of the revolutionary Left tried in vain to connect the feminist movement with their organizations. Significantly, over the years, some sectors of Italian feminism publicly proclaimed "a clean break with the history of the workers' movement and its theory" and criticized any form of collaboration with mixed organizations.

One of the theoretical and political responses from the feminist movement, faced with the "class without gender" perspective of much of the workers' movement and the Marxist tradition, was to advance the concept of "gender as a class." According to materialist feminists such as Christine Delphy, it was men (and not so much capitalism) who, in the context of a patriarchal mode of production, appropriated the reproductive work of women. In this mode of production, men and women were two antagonistic classes linked by a relationship of exploitation of the latter by the former. The logical conclusion of this relationship, as Arruzza shows, is the existence of a class of women which, regardless of whether they are wives of wealthy tycoons or of industrial workers, is situated in an adversarial relationship with the exploiting class of men.

Although the principal contribution of feminists like Delphy was to highlight the importance of the reproductive work carried out by women, whose importance was underestimated by classical Marxism, her perspective was characterized by the same error, but in the opposite sense to Marxism. To put it another way; faced with the invisibility of gender in favour of class, they postulated the predominance of gender over class, thus, in a certain fashion, making class disappear.

Another of the components of the separation between feminism and mixed social movements has been the political dominance, in some feminist sectors, of the gender of class relations, or the so-called "classless gender." The North American radical feminism of the late 1970s, which had a huge influence in many Western countries, considered patriarchy as an autonomous system of oppression by men, and as distinct from both liberal feminism and socialist feminism, identified it as the main enemy and common to all women. The feminist Shulamith Firestone identified the biological difference between men and women as the root of women's subordination, thus rendering gender inequalities natural and presenting them as inevitable. On the other hand, the "feminism of difference," strongly criticized by Lidia Cirillo in "Better to be orphans," resulted in an essentialisation of sexual difference by focusing on the biological and the symbolic, which also played a fundamental role in the "secession" of feminism with regard to

social movements.

During the 1980s and 1990s, both lesbian thinking and Queer theory began to question the binomial concept of "man" and "woman" established by radical feminism and the theory of difference, as well as the essentialism to which they led. Queer theory, in particular, mainly represented by Judith Butler, reverses the relationship of cause and effect established by radical feminists and defenders of the theory of difference, and concludes that instead of it being sex that determines gender, it is precisely gender, constituted by coercive rituals, which configures the power relationship and which defines and models the materiality of the body and sex.

The breaking of the feminist movement from the workers' movement and other social movements since the 1970s has taken place parallel to the break from its critique of the relations of production in favour of one that focuses on the relations of domination and power. It has thus displaced material relations towards the level of discourse and language, defined as the places where the hierarchy between the sexes is configured. This, together with an explanation of the inequalities between men and women as being the consequence of biological differences between each other, leads to the de-historicization of patriarchy and its interpretation as something static and unchanging.

Because of this lack of analytical rigour and of the separatism of some sectors of the feminist movement in recent decades, this movement has not produced an effective feminist political strategy. It has on the contrary contributed to the isolation of the movement, and to its increasing internal fragmentation, making alliances between it and other struggles very difficult. The theoretical and political consequences have been no less negative. The analyses based on biology and psychology have led to an idealistic vision of the relationship between men and women which has ignored the importance of other axes of power, such as "race" or class, in the configuration of the forms of oppression experienced by women, and in their process of identification and affirmation as a collective subject. Moreover, biological determinism has often ended up by justifying discrimination and segregation; the insistence on male power has often led to condemnations of a moralistic and even reactionary kind.

## Anticapitalist feminism in the here and now

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since the First International and the long and thorny itinerary of Marxism and feminism in the twentieth century. Things have changed, but not as much as we would have liked. While the workers' movement and Marxism still do not integrate the perspective of gender in an organic and global manner into their discourse and their practice, broad sectors of feminism continue to be marked, to varying degrees, by strong doses of paralyzing essentialism and to be sceptical when it comes to working together with other social movements. Regardless of whether we are capable of understanding the historical reasons of blindness and negligence on both sides, we have to recognize that, now more than ever, they are not only inopportune, but above all counterproductive.

We, anticapitalist feminists in the here and now, are inevitably the daughters of this entire heritage: heirs and survivors of this constant though precarious equilibrium, of marriages and divorces. While denouncing in a determined fashion the capitalist system as inherently predatory and destructive of the rights of people and the planet, we are engaged in a no less enthusiastic way in the fight against gender oppression and patriarchy. While believing that it is necessary to carry out this work in mixed political organizations, it is no less important for us to work in the feminist movement with other women who, whether or not they see themselves as anticapitalist, are also often, together with the men and women activists of our organizations, our travelling companions, our comrades in struggle.

Our dual aims and our dual presence, however, present many challenges and contradictions that it is not always

easy to resolve. On the one hand, we often find that feminist analyses and demands still do not have a central place in the discourse, the declarations and the practice of our mixed political organizations. This is regularly reflected in the fields of political discourse, internal debates, the division of labour and visibility, as well as interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, some sectors of the feminist movement are watching us with some suspicion precisely because of our activism in mixed political space, as well as our attempt to intertwine our feminist struggle with the anticapitalist struggle. Somehow, some feminists do not forgive us our attempt to transcend gender and women as category and political subject and see our dual presence as a betrayal rather than an attempt to enrich simultaneously feminism and anticapitalism.

So while the history of the relationship between Marxism and feminism, between the workers' movement and the feminist movement, is filled, as Arruzza explains, with unhappy marriages and irreconcilable divorces, anticapitalist feminists in the here and now ironically are facing the fact that it is difficult to feel all our "natural political spaces" as completely belonging to us. While in some of them we are often the "little sisters", in the others we are "guests". This is the price to pay for acting as a bridge, an intersection, a liaison. Of course, this is not always the case, but it is important to understand and to recognize with courage and honesty that, if it is not always so, it still is.

And it is important to recognize this for two reasons. Firstly, because it is necessary to contextualize both the historical and the political, since if we have learned from past mistakes, we are also the product of them. The second reason is that, far from living the contradictions we face and sometimes suffer with frustration, victimization or defeatism, we need to explain them and articulate them politically in order to overcome them and to help make of both Marxism and feminism languages, combative theories and spaces and more complex, inclusive and richer proposals. Despite the difficulties involved, it is time to stop looking at reality as a one-dimensional process. It is with this objective in mind that, far from seeing Marxism as a completed process whose purity and rigour are threatened by the integration of feminism into class analysis, we argue for a feminism that in reality may contribute fundamentally to complete Marxism and anticapitalism, and that reinforces them when it comes to explaining reality and changing it in favour of all the oppressed and exploited. In our commitment to meet this challenge, the work of Cinzia Arruzza is, in my opinion, an extremely useful tool.

At a time like today, of systemic and multidimensional crisis; economic, ecological, food and health crisis, it is necessary and urgent to ensure our presence in multiple fronts and to make visible the forms and spaces where they hide. Ultimately, it is clear for us that, as Lidia Cirillo expressed it in the 1990s, power relations are mutually supportive and that it is not possible to challenge one of them without challenging them all. It is precisely here that the difficulties of being anticapitalist and feminist must be transformed, here and now, into a new range of possibilities.

It is in the present era of global capitalism that Cirillo's affirmation becomes more obvious than ever, because it is impossible to understand the international pirouettes of capital without taking account of how it mobilizes and uses oppression, not only of gender, but also, among others, racial and national, in order to maximize its profits, reproduce itself and assert itself as the only conceivable alternative.

It is not possible, for example, to understand the way global cities function, as studied by the sociologist Saskia Sassen, without taking into account the specialization of many countries of the periphery in the formation and export of domestic and care workers who carry out reproductive work in the countries of the Centre in situations of serious job insecurity, social and legal. What role do the many immigration laws play in all this? How can we understand the interrelationship of its xenophobic, gender and class elements? It is not possible to understand the emergence of massive "maquila" factories in Mexico and Central America and of zones of production for export in Southeast Asia, which are key factors in the delocalization of industry, without analyzing the international feminization of the labour force that has been effected during the same period. This has resulted in the loss of prestige of certain categories of work and in reducing the cost of the labour used in them and has highlighted, through phenomena such as the femicide in Ciudad Juarez, the enormous social resistance to the "emancipation" of women.

And speaking of resistance, to take examples closer to home; what is the role played by the growing and increasingly visible gender violence in countries such as the Spanish state, in the context of the generalized integration of women into the labour market and the challenging of traditional gender roles that this entails? Would that just be a question of unconnected processes? To ignore the relationship between all these factors leads, as the author of the book warns us, to devalue not only the question of women, but "also Marxism and a political project for the radical transformation of society."

Understanding global as well as local processes from a feminist, anticapitalist and internationalist perspective involves listing the different relations of power and exploitation that take place on both levels and analyzing all their intersections. Without fearing "to make class complex" or "to make gender visible" or, as Arruzza says, falling into the "darkness of idealism", but as a result of the desire to build a new movement of men and women workers, inclusive and vibrant. A revolutionary social and political movement that, far from being preoccupied with asserting a primary or original oppression that traces a border between interior and exterior, between the centre and the edges, fights decisively and relentlessly to end all oppression.

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[1] Originally published in Italian: *Le relazioni pericolose, Matrimoni e divorzi tra marxismo e femminismo* by Edizioni Alegre. The English edition published by Merlin Press: *Dangerous Liaisons. The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism* (2013) is available from [Resistance Books](#) or [IIRE Books](#). The preface to the English edition appears on this website at [Dangerous Liaisons: The marriages and divorces of Marxism and Feminism](#).