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Understanding women's oppression

# Social Reproduction Beyond Intersectionality: An Interview

- Features - Feminism -

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**This interview with David McNally and Sue Ferguson was published in October 2015, on the occasion of the publication of a new version of Lise Vogel's *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, for which they wrote a new Introduction.**

**Viewpoint:** We can begin with the concept of social reproduction itself. In your recent foreword to the reissue of Lise Vogel's classic 1983 work, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, you locate Vogel's distinct contribution to the Marxist-feminist thought in her inquiry into the "conditions of possibility of labor-power," or the manner in which labor-power is biologically, socially, and generationally reproduced. From this important point it is then possible to trace the inner connections of activities and relationships that are necessary for the continued existence of wage labor and processes of class formation outside of production. In your opinion, how does social reproduction transform the categories of Marxist class analysis? What is its theoretical and political importance?

**David McNally and Sue Ferguson:** First, there's the question of a category transformation. As your question points out, the social reproduction approach transforms our understanding of labor-power. In conventional Marxist analyses, labor-power is simply presumed to be present – a given factor of capitalist production. At best, it is understood as the product of natural, biologically determined, regenerative processes. In socializing labor-power – in unearthing its insertion in history, society, and culture – social reproduction feminism reveals, in the first instance, that labor-power cannot simply be presumed to exist, but is made available to capital only because of its reproduction in and through a particular set of gendered and sexualized social relations that exist beyond the direct labor/capital relation, in the so-called private sphere. It also sharpens our understanding of the contradictory position of labor-power with respect to capital – identifying all aspects of our social reproduction – of our quest to satisfy human needs, to live – as essential to, but also a drag on, accumulation (because capital pays indirectly for this through wages, benefits, and taxes).

These are the key insights of the early generation of social reproduction feminists. But, as more recent scholarship suggests, this approach also reveals labor-power itself to be a more complex, differentiated, category. When one attends to the social reproductive relations, it becomes clear that – despite the equalizing impulses of capitalist value extraction – all labor-power is not the same. Certain workers, indeed increasingly so, are more vulnerable to heightened oppression than others – not due to any difference in the ways in which capitalist laws of accumulation operate, but because oppressive relations beyond the workplace mediate the social reproduction of labor-power, ensuring not only that workers arrive at capital's doorstep, but that they do so embodying varying degrees of degradation or dehumanization.

This leads to your second question, the theoretical importance of the social reproduction approach. In explaining the interconnection of the unwaged work we do to reproduce ourselves on the one hand, and waged work on the other, social reproduction feminism presents us with a complexly differentiated yet nonetheless unified understanding of social totality. This is its central theoretical contribution to Marxism. With the turn from dual systems analysis to intersectionality, radical social theorists have convincingly presented us with an image of the messy experiential world, and they have identified key social, political, economic and psychological dynamics that sustain patriarchal, racialized, and settler colonial relations to name but a few. And the best intersectionality accounts have rightly insisted that it is impossible to isolate any particular set of oppressive relations from the other. Yet they've not developed any coherent explanation of how and why, for instance, heterosexualized relations intersect with patriarchal relations in some ways and not others (why the family, though its form changes over time to accommodate, for instance, same-sex marriage, nonetheless remains a private institution through which heteronormativity and patriarchy are routinely if not always affirmed). One reason for this has to do with

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intersectionality feminism's inadequate theorization of the social totality, the overall processes or dynamic in and through which discrete social relations intersect. This dynamic is either not theorized at all or is simply assumed to be neutral, void of power relations itself. And this means, of course, that despite claiming distinct oppressions are co-constitutive, they are in fact treated as ontologically distinct systems, crisscrossing or inter-meshing in space.

The social reproduction approach, on the other hand, posits a capitalist totality. A capitalist social whole is defined, in the first instance, by the separation of workers (by which we mean all people who work to reproduce themselves and their world, the social reproducers in other words) from the means of their subsistence (or social reproduction). This is a bare fact of existence under capitalism, and as such, it broadly shapes what is possible – within the labor/capital relation, to be sure, but also within our gendered, racialized, heterosexualized, etc. relations beyond the workplace.

While to speak of capitalist determination may sound like a throw-back to Marxist fundamentalism, there is nothing mechanically causal in this notion of determination. Patriarchy and racism, according to this perspective, are not presumed to be directly functional to the needs of capital; they did not arise because capital called them into being. Rather the capitalist imperative to accumulate is determinative in the sense that it sets limits to what is possible, even if the specific possibilities – the degree of women's participation in the workforce, for example, or access to abortion – are themselves altered through struggle.

By this reckoning, the precise relations through which we socially reproduce ourselves can vary quite a bit. And people can and do continually modify these relations in ways that best accommodate their needs, and may in fact be disruptive to capitalism's needs for labor-power. People choose, for instance, to live in all types of relationships, including childless relationships. Men, women, and transgendered people might share the housework and childcare equally. Others may choose to spend time painting pictures that will never sell, staring into space, or fighting racism on the streets. None of that is functional to capitalism, and all of it prioritizes human need over the reproduction of labor-power for capital. But, so long as certain oppressive forms of relations facilitate (rather than hinder) the task of bringing labor-power to capital's doorstep, there will be powerful forces (be they the institutions and practices of state, civil society or capital) sustaining racism, sexism and other oppressions – and discouraging alternative forms of human relations. As a result, the degree to which people can take control over their lives beyond the workplace – the degree, for instance, that women can take control of the conditions of their waged work and reproductive work and bodies, or that racialized people can control housing, childcare and food distribution in their communities – is, within capitalism, limited. Put differently, there is a reason that oppressive practices and institutions have not disappeared under capitalism on their own accord, and why they will remain points of struggle for as long as capitalism survives.

And this brings us to the final question, that of the political importance of social reproduction. Let's agree that capitalism's reproduction requires something more than the direct labor/capital relation, "economic" exchanges and laws of motion – that in fact it critically depends upon the messy, complex, set of lived relations carried out by differently gendered, sexualized, racialized human beings. If this is the case, then we need to also realize that racialized, sexualized, gendered bodies, practices, and institutions matter: racism and sexism are not historical aberrations that can somehow be separated from capitalism's "real" or "ideal" functioning. Rather, they are integral to and determinant of – in the sense that they really and actively facilitate– actual processes of capital dispossession and accumulation. By the same reasoning, challenging racism, sexism, or any oppression that impacts the social reproduction of labor-power, can hinder the reproduction of capital.

It is in this sense that "movement" or non-workplace struggles are class struggles. That is, they are themselves potentially anti-capitalist in essence, just like a workplace struggle is always incipiently anti-capitalist. And just as downing tools can make the capitalist heart skip a beat, so can a movement that demands the end to the differential degradation of human life, full and communal access to the means of subsistence, control over our own human bodies. Certainly, no singular movement or workplace struggle of course will bring the capitalist heart to a full stop. But each disruption reverberates throughout the body, potentially weakening its pulse. So the political importance of the social reproduction approach lies in its capacity to show the importance of struggling on many fronts, but with an

explicit anti-capitalist orientation.

**VP:** In your piece in the recent issue of the *Socialist Register*, you focus on the connection between social reproduction and migrant labor, particularly in the North American context. Now, the topic of immigration or migration has been covered extensively by Marxist scholars in Europe, but within the United States, Canada, and Mexico, comparatively little has been done to elaborate research on migrant labor into a broad and contemporary Marxist theory. There are exceptions of course – Rosemary Hennessy’s recent book comes to mind – but by and large, the politics of immigrant-rights organizations are not articulated in a Marxist or socialist language. Do you see your piece as contributing to this larger project, i.e., viewing processes of migration and racialization as inseparable from class and gender analysis?

**DM and SF:** The short answer to your question is yes. A Marxist social reproduction theory helps us draw out and explore the contradiction at the heart of the formation of labor-power. After all, capitalism has a tendency to render labor homogeneous and interchangeable. At the same time, there is no discrete commodity called labor-power just waiting on the market for purchase by capital. Instead, there are concrete human beings who are “bearers” of labor-power, to use Marx’s apt expression. As a result, the capacity for abstract labor is tied to concrete persons. And such persons exist in real, differentiated places and spaces. Just as labor-power must be produced and reproduced in actual social relations, so these relations subsist in concrete space and time. Yet, and this is another tendency of the system, the spaces of capital are differentiated according to regimes of race and empire. All of this massively affects the actual treatment of the living “bearers” of labor-power, particularly if they are racially degraded, or located as outsiders to the principal zones of capitalist accumulation.

There is an economistic strain in much of radical political economy which tends to default to the idea of “labor” as a commodity with its own markets, just like real estate or investment goods. Social reproduction theory demystifies all this by pushing on Marx’s insight about the human bearers of labor-power and then posing questions about the conditions of their production and reproduction. And theorizing the concrete sites of that reproduction requires not only attending to household and community practices – the key insight of early social reproduction theory – but also to the social-geographic location of those households and communities in a racialized social hierarchy within and between nation-states.

And here questions of migration come to the fore. After all, labor-power today is being massively reproduced at low-wage sites outside the core zones of capitalist production and accumulation. In some cases, capital can migrate to set up production, distribution and informational networks in areas where labor-power is cheap. But in cases of work that is spatially immobile – agro-business, childcare for wealthy families in the Global North, or construction, restaurant and hotel service work in those same zones – cheap labor-power (and its human bearers) must be brought to where this work is directly required. But, because its human bearers are generally desperate, they can be attracted without offers of full legal and political rights and membership. This results in differentiated statuses borne by many migrant workers, and the heightened precarity, degradation and oppression that go with them.

Of course, many commentators have provided rich descriptions of temporary worker regimes and the forms of servitude they entail. Much of this work is highly valuable. But we believe that a Marxist social reproduction approach can theorize migrant labor in ways that more fully grasp its role in late capitalism and the multi-dimensionality of the class formations involved, particularly their gendered and racialized dimensions. To offer just one example, consider the spatial separation of sites of household reproduction from those of paid employment. To theorize this adequately we need to attend not only to the physical movement of migrant workers across borders, but also to the counter-flows of chunks of their wages (in the form of remittances), as well as the work of nurturing and educating children, currently reliant on those remittances, who will likely compose part of the global reserve army of labor available for migration to the capitalist core. Social reproduction analysis has the capacity to link these flows of people and wages, as well as the spatially and nationally separated practices of waged work and social reproduction into a complex yet unitary social process. Migration thus becomes central to the reproduction of capital and the global working class,

rather than an interesting sidebar. And such a mode of investigation internally links racialization and differentiated status to any meaningful gender and class analysis.

**VP:** Sue Ferguson has written on the emergence and importance of Canadian social reproduction feminism as an approach that conceptually integrates the relational character of class, gender, and race within the broader context of specifically capitalist power relations. We can think here especially of the work of earlier theorists in journals like *Studies in Political Economy* and influential edited collections like *Hidden in the Household*, to more contemporary theorists like Stephen Gill and Isabella Bakker, David Camfield, Alan Sears, and sympathetic critics like Himani Bannerji. Why did social reproduction analysis remain so prominent in Canadian thinking?

**DM and SF:** It is certainly true that, as Australia's Kate Davison remarked at last year's London Historical Materialism conference, there was a "social reproduction party" going on in Canada in the 1970s and 80s. We can only speculate as to why that was the case here, and not elsewhere. To begin with, it is surely important that socialist feminism had become the dominant feminism in English-speaking Canada by the early 1970s (in Quebec a left-wing kind of feminism took hold, with significant roots in the unions and left-nationalist social movements). Meg Luxton and Heather Jon Maroney suggest there were two reasons this was the case: (i) the strength of social democracy (unlike in the United States, a social democratic party has had a meaningful social and electoral presence here since the 1930s), and (ii) the relative lack of institutions and practices espousing a more traditional Marxism (unlike Great Britain or France, where Communist parties had a greater presence). These underlying conditions, they believe, helped create and sustain an intellectual and political culture that took socialist ideas seriously.

As members of a group that differentiated itself from CP-influenced Marxism – David joined the International Socialists in the mid-1970s, and Sue joined in the early-1980s – we participated in many of the debates around Marxist Feminism. This is where we encountered Lise Vogel's book, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. Although our interest in Vogel's text was not widely shared within our political ranks, and indeed encountered outright hostility, we continued to consider Vogel's orientation among the soundest in developing a unitary Marxist Feminist approach.

Even more significant, however, was the way in which socialist-feminism developed some real traction inside the unions in both English-speaking Canada and Quebec. Union drives among retail and bank workers were very significant in this regard, as were strikes by nurses and hospital workers throughout the 1970s. In Ontario, where we are active, a strike by predominantly female auto parts workers in 1978 became a rallying point for the left. At the same time, a large strike by nickel miners erupted, in which women, organized under the banner "Wives Supporting the Strike" played a critical, galvanizing role. This was followed by a union-based campaign in the early 1980s to get women hired in the highly unionized steel industry. All of this meant that feminist issues were resonating within the unions. And this gave real credibility to socialist-feminists who insisted on the inter-connections between gender oppression and class exploitation. This provided a social and political context in which a feminism concerned with labor and class experience in all their complex diversity could develop.

Certainly, we saw a rise of poststructural discourse-based feminism in these quarters. But feminist political economy remained vibrant, including in its Marxist and social reproduction variants. Within the universities, much of the theoretical work being done in this area found its way into the journal, *Studies in Political Economy*, launched in the late 1970s. Feminists – Meg Luxton, Bonnie Fox, Wally Seccombe, and Pat and Hugh Armstrong among others – started exposing the male bias of most political economy frameworks. Drawing on the pioneering work of Margaret Benston, socialist-feminist theorists like these looked for ways around the shortcomings of the domestic labor debate. While, as Himani Bannerji has suggested, they too often defaulted to a structuralist framework, and neglected theorizing the experiences of racialized women, they nonetheless struggled to theorize gender and class in materialist, unitary terms. Against the odds, they succeeded in sustaining an intellectual interest in social reproduction throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s while so many others were heeding the siren call of postmodernism.

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*VP:* What was the influence of Italian Marxist-feminist thought in Canadian Marxist-feminist circles? Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, among others, have made distinctive contributions to the development of social reproduction as a theoretical framework. In addition, their work has been quite influential in the United States. Did any direct ties to this tradition exist?

*DM and SF:* Mariarosa Dalla Costa is the only Italian Marxist feminist that we're aware of having been influential. Inspired by her work, a few small "Wages for Housework" collectives were formed, particularly in Toronto, but these remained relatively marginal and never constituted a serious alternative to the approach of socialist-feminists working in the unions. Getting women into unionized waged work was much more predominant than the idea of organizing women as homeworkers. Dalla Costa's work was considered part of the Domestic Labor Debate, and as such was constructively critiqued. And today, the work of Silvia Federici is being very widely read, although in these parts it is taken up less in relation to the wages-for-housework current, and more for its insights and rethinking of issues of enclosure, primitive accumulation, and women's bodies.

**VP: To conclude: we know that theoretical analysis is always connected to social movements on the ground. What were the sites of struggle that prompted you to investigate social reproduction and class formation in the recent past and today? Are there specific experiences you can speak to here?**

**DM and SF:** Part of our experience simply has to do with the complex ways in which the left of the 1970s and 1980s struggled in practice and theory to integrate class and gender. Particularly significant for both of us was our involvement in pro-choice struggles in Ontario in the mid- to late-1980s. Participation in this movement really foregrounds how resistant capitalist societies have been to reproductive freedom for women. And this raises all kinds of interesting theoretical and strategic questions in which we have both been interested. But especially since the mid-1990s, when we began to work politically in a less dogmatic Marxist environment (especially in the New Socialist network), we increasingly felt the need to grapple much more seriously with race and racialization—and ultimately with sexuality and ability—as constitutive dimensions of class and gender. Our support for anti-racist and migrant justice movements was certainly an important part of this story. And we found ourselves dissatisfied with just asserting that the axes of multiple oppressions “intersected” in modern capitalist society.

While intersectionality theory has raised important questions, and generated important insights, it tends to flounder at explaining why these multiple oppressions exist and are reproduced throughout late capitalism, and at accounting for the how of their interaction. Because its approach is holistic and unitary, social reproduction theory is, we think, potentially better equipped in these areas. But this requires a lot of work, and a real commitment to learning from the best of anti-racist and anti-colonial theory and practice, in order to overcome some significant shortcomings of early social reproduction theory. By emphasizing the spatial organization of capitalist and working class reproduction, Sue has attempted to take up this challenge in a couple of essays by showing how the spaces of capitalism are always racialized and colonial ones. And our joint contribution in the latest Socialist Register represents an effort to take this somewhat farther by sharply pushing beyond the horizons of the nation-state in order to consider the reproduction of the working class as a global phenomenon in which migration is a central feature. We think this is an especially exciting and challenging time for historical materialist work in these areas. And the living pulse of real social struggles is likely to keep pushing work in these areas for many years to come.

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