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Introduction to Special Issue of *Historical Materialism* on Social Reproduction

Sue Ferguson, Genevieve LeBaron, Angela Dimitrakaki, Sara Farris

Abstract

The 2011 Historical Materialism Conference in London saw the launch of a Marxist Feminist set of panels. This issue is inspired by the success of those panels, and the remarkably sustained interest in reviving and moving beyond older debates and discussions. Its focus, social reproduction feminism, reflects the ongoing work and engagement with that thematic that has threaded through the conferences since 2011. This Introduction provides a summary overview of the social reproduction feminism framework, situating it within Marxist Feminist thinking and politics more generally, and calls on readers to consider its promise as an historical materialist approach to understanding capitalist social relations as an integrated totality.

Keywords

Marxist Feminism, Social reproduction feminism, feminist theory, gender and class, unitary theory

*The proletarian women's . . . [desire] to improve their status even within the framework of the current bourgeois system . . . is constantly hindered by obstacles that derive from the very nature of capitalism. A woman can possess equal rights and be truly free only in a world of socialized labour, of harmony and justice.*¹

- Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909)

1. Introduction

Women's oppression, as Alexandra Kollontai tells us, is in 'the *very nature* of capitalism'. Despite its purportedly equalising and liberating dynamic, capitalism is organised in and through deeply patriarchal institutions, processes and values. But the shifting contours and dynamics characterising this intertwining relation of gender oppression and class exploitation are anything but obvious. The history of Marxist Feminism is the history of a lengthy, ambitious, and inspiring, political and theoretical project to better understand, challenge and uproot patriarchal capitalism. While the insights and concepts that emerged from that project gained real currency in the early 1970s, the tradition shortly afterward came crashing down, a victim of a more generalised Left political defeatism in the West, *and* of its own significant theoretical limitations.² Yet we now see, and celebrate, real signs of its revitalisation. A new generation in new political times is grappling with the Marxist Feminist legacy, reshaping many of its insights to develop a more relevant and expansive theory and

¹ Kollontai 190H9.

² Cf. Barrett 1980; Sargent 1981. The Marxist feminist project comprises various strands of thought and politics, some overlapping, some competing. But its proponents were broadly united in exploring the interrelation of Feminist and Marxist insights and methods.

politics.³ This special issue of *Historical Materialism* is a contribution to and from this new generation of Marxist Feminist thinking.

Like all political-intellectual traditions, Marxist Feminism comprises competing, sometimes contradictory, explanatory pathways, some more rigorously argued than others. These pathways and their evolution have been the topic of sustained analysis and debate⁴, and so there is no need to fully detail them here. We simply note instead the distinct premises and focus of four of the tradition's more influential currents. (i): At the beginning of the twentieth century Kollontai, following Frederick Engels's method, if not his conclusions, saw *private property and marriage* as the pivotal institutions whose existence signaled and entrenched women's secondary status within the burgeoning capitalist social order. (ii): Building on the conceptualisation of the household as the key site of women's oppression, in the 1960s and 1970s the writings and political activism of Margaret Benston, Peggy Morton, Selma James, Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Maria Mies, Silvia Federici and others emphasised the role played by women's *domestic labour* therein. Domestic labour, they pointed out, produces labour power, which in turn produces capitalist value. (iii): Finding such formulations overly structural and mechanistic, some Marxist Feminists, most notably Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, retained a focus on the private family but turned to Althusserian ideas about the *relative autonomy of ideology* to explain the apparently anachronistic co-existence of patriarchal and capitalist systems. (iv): And lastly, Lise Vogel, Eli Zaretsky, Wally Seccombe (to name a few early contributors) developed the *social reproduction* perspective, which highlighted and examined the logic of the contradictory but necessary internal/external relationship between gendered and economic productive relations.⁵ Various theorists have defined the concept of social reproduction differently, but broadly, it encompasses the activities associated with the maintenance and reproduction of peoples' lives on a daily and intergenerational basis.⁶ By centralising these activities as the foundation on which markets, production and exchange rest, the social reproduction perspective conceptualises the 'material foundations of social relations as an integrated and unified process'.⁷

The lines between these approaches were (and still are) sometimes blurred, most especially between the social reproduction and domestic labour variants of Marxist Feminism. Moreover, the tradition as a whole struggles to reconcile its limited terms of reference – the binary concepts of class and gender – with the multi-faceted complexity of real world relations and political struggles, as well as the ways in which racial oppression intersects with gendered forms of domination and class exploitation. In some respects, the work carried on at *Historical Materialism* conferences – especially since the 2012 launch of a Marxist-feminist stream of panels – and in this issue of the journal is inspired by these two challenges. Of the four strands of Marxist Feminism identified here, Social Reproduction (Marxist-) Feminism, or SRF, stands out as a promising approach for

³ This renewed Marxist Feminism has learned from and is attempting to build upon the critical insights of other feminist traditions, many of which have compellingly illustrated the fallacy of reductionist, mechanical theorisations of social relations, and some of which have developed in articulation with Marxism as well. See, for example, Davis 1981; Anderson and Hill Collins 2016.

⁴ Cf. Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Holmstrom 2002.

⁵ Kollontai 2008; Engels [1884] 1972; Benston 1969; Morton 1971; James 1975; Dalla Costa 1972; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Mies 1999; Federici 2012; Barrett and McIntosh 1982; Vogel 1983; Seccombe 1995; Zaretsky 1976.

⁶ This focus on 'survival strategies', as Johanna Brenner calls social reproduction, reflects the political economy focus of Marxist Feminism's historical roots. In this it differs from Pierre Bourdieu's more cultural focus when he uses the term social reproduction to describe the ways in which education and family relations contribute to the persistence of class inequalities. See Bourdieu 1973.

⁷ Ferguson 1999.

grasping the complexities that have eluded it and the other strands in the past. While the first generation of SRF theorists worked from within a binary framework, the methodology they developed has encouraged others to extend and deepen its theoretical range.⁸

A sustained analysis of social reproduction Marxist Feminist theories is long overdue in the pages of *Historical Materialism*. Following on a widespread trend amongst Marxists, much of the analysis within the journal so far has focused on the relations of production (narrowly construed) as the dominant force shaping capitalist social relations, and seldom have the insights of Marxist theory been used to address gender-based forms of oppression and domination. From a Marxist-Feminist perspective this is problematic insofar as large swathes of historical-materialist analysis have failed to understand and emphasise the interdependence between relations of production and reproduction, or to capture the role of gender and sexuality in forms and structures of oppression that shape capitalism's social matrix. Yet, we believe an historical-materialist perspective should aim to interpret such relations and to develop theory that can explain the interlocking relations of production and reproduction as forces that structure social relations under capitalism – relations that are essential for capitalism's own reproduction.

This special issue is an initial attempt to address these shortcomings, and to deepen and broaden the explanatory capacity of Marxist theory. As we outline below, we see SRF as an analytic tool that is crucial to understanding exploitation and oppression under capitalism.

2. What is Social Reproduction Feminism?

In some respects SRF is a response to the crossroads at which the Marxist-Feminist project had arrived by the late 1970s. Heidi Hartmann's 1979 article 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism' aptly describes the ways in which the tradition's many explanations had, to date, failed to offer a compelling *unitary* theory – that is, an account of the systemic connection of gender and class relations. In her estimation, the distinct currents alternately: (i) dodged the issue of men's power over women by subsuming it to an institutional question of the family and its economic function in relation to 'capitalism'; (ii) failed to ground analysis of that power in material relations; or (iii) underplayed or dismissed the many contradictions between patriarchy and capitalism.⁹ Yet almost immediately following the publication of Hartmann's critique, a wave of academics and political activists across the Global North called off the search for such a unitary theory, portraying it as indicative of a futile (and unfashionable) exercise in totalising thinking.

In spite of the swelling critique of unitary theory, a small number of Marxist Feminists in parts of Canada, the US and Europe continued to organise and write.¹⁰ Among them was Lise Vogel, who in 1983 published *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. In this cogently developed account of SRF, Vogel argues that capitalist forms of gender oppression exist and persist because of the systematic – necessary and

⁸ Cf. Arat-Koc 1997; Arruzza 2015; Bakker 2007; Isabella Bakker and Rachel Silvey 2008; Farris 2014; Ferguson 1999 & 2008; Mies 1999; LeBaron 2015.

⁹ Hartmann 1979. We put 'capitalism' in scare quotes because Hartmann, like so many others at the time and since, uses the term to denote formal economic relations. Our preference is to understand capitalism as a social system, or put differently, to emphasise that 'the economic' is an abstraction, which does not concretely exist outside of culture and society, and which is therefore organised in and through the relations of gender, race, sexuality, nation and imperialism.

¹⁰ Cf. Young 1980; Sacks 1989; Armstrong and Armstrong 1990; Fortunati 1996.

contradictory – relation between the production of labour power (social reproduction) and the production of value or capital. Capital needs labour power but doesn't produce it directly. Social relations outside of the direct labour/capital relation – Vogel and most SRF theorists have explored those of gender in particular – shape the processes and institutions through which labour power is (re)produced. But these relations are simultaneously shaped by and exist in articulation with the capitalist dynamic of accumulation. That articulation cannot be avoided because capitalism has already dispossessed workers of the means of their subsistence, and continues to do so.¹¹ The conditions of capitalist value production thus structure (in the sense of defining what is possible) all production – value production in the formal and informal economies, *and* the daily and generational social reproduction of human beings on which the former depends but which takes place beyond capital's direct purview. Moreover, because it is an 'externality', social reproduction comprises a cost to the capitalist (realised in the form of wages or taxes). Capitalism needs it but doesn't want to pay for it, a fact that accounts for the strong systemic pressure to cheapen, and thus devalue and degrade, social reproductive labour.

In developing the SRF current, its proponents have largely focused on the gendered nature of social reproductive labour. In so doing, they reprise one of Marxist Feminism's greatest weaknesses – its tendency to begin theorising from within a binary framework which privileges issues of gender and class, and to investigate these in isolation from race, sexuality, colonialism and other constitutive social relations.¹² True, this exclusionary focus reflects the historical reality that labour power is predominantly renewed daily and generationally through privatised households in which women (including both unpaid mothers, grandmothers, and other family members, as well as paid caregivers) do the majority of the work. Yet, as Vogel makes clear, the patriarchal household is just one historically evolved institution through which the need for capitalist labour power has been met. To begin, households are themselves highly flexible institutions, not all of them intrinsically patriarchal in nature.¹³ But more significantly, SRF theory is not simply about the relationship of *households* to workplaces. It is about relationships between the workplace and *all* the institutions and processes through which labour power is renewed, including – among others – (private and public) schools, hospitals and daycares. Although the organisation and forms of power surrounding these institutions can be accurately enough described as patriarchal, they are also organised in and through relations of race, colonialism, sexuality and so on. Moreover, on an international scale, labour power's renewal occurs in and through the policing of borders, flows of migrants and the remittances many send to their countries of origins, army camps, refugee camps, and other processes and institutions of a global imperialist order. There is plenty of evidence, in other words, that the social reproduction of labour involves social relations beyond the gendered and household relations that have been the conventional focus of Marxist Feminism in general, and SRF in particular.

One common Marxist response to feminism has been that capitalism is 'gender-blind'. It doesn't care whose

¹¹ Acts of dispossession, it bears emphasising, both draw on and redraw gendered and racialised social relations. See, for example, LeBaron 2015.

¹² Meg Luxton and Lise Vogel both defend Marxist Feminism for having a more inclusive politics than the dominant history of feminism allows for, but neither address the failure of the tradition to grapple with the theoretical underpinnings of women's multi-faceted subjective experience. See Luxton 2014 and Vogel 1995.

¹³ This is the weakness of the Domestic Labour theory which attributes gender oppression to the patriarchal nature of the private household and not to the structural relation of reproductive labour to productive labour (despite the latter being a premise of that critique).

labour it exploits, so long as there is labour at its doorstep, waiting to sell its ‘special commodity’, labour power. The rest is a question of history.¹⁴ Yet there is no capitalism outside of history. Or rather, there is only an abstract or conceptual capitalism outside of history. And as Marx insisted, the task of theory is incomplete if it remains in the realm of the abstract. Theory’s task is to comprehend and articulate the *concrete* unity of the diverse. Staying with Marx on this point, we can see the fallacy of the ‘gender-blind’ response. Exploitation and dispossession exist concretely only in and through generalised, systematic, differentiated control and degradation of human life itself. And control and degradation are secured concretely in and through the negotiation of race, gender, sexuality, and other layered social relations. These are the relations that ensure that labour arrives at capital’s doorstep ready to be further dehumanised and exploited.

It is the integral nature of these interrelations with which SRF grapples. As readers of the essays in this volume will discover, the precise nature of that integration remains open to some contestation. Yet there is a general agreement amongst contributors within this collection that race, gender and sexuality are *not* additional systems that just happen to coincide. Rather they are concrete relations comprising a wider sociality, integral to the very existence and operation of capitalism and class. While the first generation of SRF theorists generally framed their analyses within the binary of gender and class, this generation are pushing beyond that binary, suggesting that a SRF analysis could be much more expansive.

3. Contents of the Special Issue: *Social Reproduction Beyond the Household*

The articles in this volume are unique in that they seek to mobilise the SRF framework to more comprehensively and holistically theorise key social relations and turning points in the development of capitalism. Specifically, they address contemporary colonialism, biological labour, sexuality and sexual liberation, and the social relations of race and racialisation. This is largely new terrain for Marxist Feminism, which still too often focuses narrowly on gender, women, and the household (and their omission and devalorisation within Marxist analysis) as discrete and specialised arenas without sufficient attention to broader interlocking social relations. By mobilising and developing the SRF framework described above, the volume endeavors to more rigorously develop Marxist-Feminism – and SRF theory in particular – as a fully integrative approach to understanding capitalism and the potential to resist and overcome it. It self-consciously rejects the binary legacy of Marxist-Feminism, moving analysis beyond the household, and pushing and exploring the scope of SRF theory in distinct ways.

The five articles presented here (written by Ferguson, Floyd, Hall, Leach, and Sears), comprise preliminary efforts to develop the SRF theoretical framework. Rather than rehearse the now well-known tenets associated with feminist critiques of Marxism, the articles seek to productively extend the SRF framework, and in doing so, to demonstrate its potential for holistic analysis of capitalist social relations. The volume’s contribution is primarily theoretical. Though the articles develop their arguments with reference to various historical and empirical examples, this material is largely intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. Indeed, the editors recognise the need for (and call for) much more historical and comparative work to continue to move

¹⁴ This position is most succinctly argued by Ellen Meiksins Wood, in her essay ‘Capitalism and Human Emancipation: Race, Gender, and Democracy’ (Wood 2002). Johanna Brenner, notwithstanding her attention to gender analysis, arrives at a similar conclusion about capital in her critique of Lise Vogel (Brenner 2000).

forward, and allow us to further refine and deepen SR theory and its impact.

Sue Ferguson's article outlines the complementarities and tensions between SRF and the dominant feminist lens of intersectionality, which stresses the intersected nature of social identities, particularly those of gender, class, and race. Ferguson argues that the SRF framework's insistence on the differentiated but unified realities of (re)productive labour under capitalism gives rise to a non-determinist conceptualisation of the social. As such it offers a unified ontology from which to understand the integration and layering of social identities and oppressions within the capitalist mode of production, thereby responding to one of the longstanding criticisms of intersectionality feminism, whose essentially additive logic falters when it comes to identifying the social basis and logic of resistance to capitalism. In elaborating SRF's capacity to uncover the internal relationality and reproductions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, Ferguson makes a compelling case for the theoretical capacity of SRF to illuminate what is peculiarly capitalist about the contemporary complex of social relations.

Kevin Floyd's contribution considers *biologically reproductive labour*, which he defines as reproductive labour facilitated by biotechnology. Deploying and extending the SRF framework, Floyd argues that biologically reproductive labour must be understood through rigorous re-theorisation of four categories: gender, labour, value, and life. He takes issue with contemporary theorisations (led by Cooper and Waldby) of life as necessarily regenerative, seeing this as mistakenly collapsing biological labour with value. Instead, Floyd suggests that an SRF framework can illuminate the structural compulsion that increasing numbers of women face to sell the living materiality of their bodies (such as through surrogacy), and contemporary capitalism's reduction of poor women from a source of labour power to living raw material. Floyd makes a convincing case for the expanded scope and definition of reproductive labour within SRF, and its central role in mediating the dual crises of value production and reproduction of the capital-labour relation.

Rebecca Hall's piece explores possibilities for an anti-colonial SRF. Hall contends that SRF can be usefully expanded to understand colonial violence, and the ways in which it has shaped the lives and bodies of Indigenous women and Indigenous relations of social reproduction, both historically and today. Drawing on a case study of the tensions between Indigenous women's productive and reproductive labour in Canada, she shows how capitalist 'development' in the settler-colonial context necessitates reorganised modes of social reproduction that disrupt traditional Indigenous social (household-based, subsistence) reproduction, and opens up space for feminised social reproduction and particular forms of patriarchal violence. Hall thereby highlights Indigenous women's reproductive labour as a site of colonial and capitalist contestation, the control over which is essential to enacting strategies of accumulation. Hall's analysis launches a new line of inquiry, extending SRF to encompass and address Indigenous experiences, and raising questions about sites of resistance and the possibility of decolonisation.

Nicole Leach's contribution revisits the 'transition debates' – and especially the work of Robert Brenner and the 'political Marxist' school of thought – through the lens of SRF. Leach argues that political Marxism uncritically absorbs the neo-Malthusian logic of demographic change, and thus lines up with a common characterisation of patriarchy within non-feminist Marxism, namely the view that patriarchy has merely persisted from pre-capitalist times and has been relatively unchanged by the transition to capitalism. Leach seeks to correct these shortcomings by highlighting SRF's recognition of labour as an embodied activity, claiming that this expanded definition of labour leads to different conclusions about the transition and its

implications for gender oppression. Leach's paper contributes to the SRF project of documenting the linked historical development of social production and reproduction in capitalism, past and present.

Finally, Alan Sears's article points to the potential of the SRF framework to deepen our understanding of sexuality under capitalism. He argues that SRF provides key insights into pressures that the capitalist need for labour power exerts onto sexuality. Further, he contends, while sexuality is not homogenous under capitalism, capitalist social relations and divisions of labour place limits on sexuality and gender that produce and sustain oppression for those who fall outside the norm. His work also pushes SRF to better articulate the fluidity between the so-called public and private realms, and the potential a more integrative conceptual framework provides for reimagining what sexual freedom looks like. An effort to 'think from scratch' about a key set of questions about sexuality, queerness, and capitalism, Sears's article addresses a longstanding gap in the SRF framework, and provides a helpful roadmap for future research.

Although the volume covers significant theoretical terrain, we are aware that it represents only a beginning to what we hope will be a more comprehensive exchange of contributions to the SRF perspective, and to Marxist Feminism theory and politics more generally. In particular, we believe it will be crucial to include discussions of migration and mobility, racial relations, labour and unfreedom, non-western countries, macroeconomic relations, as well as engagement with postcolonial and poststructural feminisms.¹⁵ We thus hope that the creative and thoughtful elaborations of SRF presented in these pages will both be engaged with on their own merits, but also initiate a much needed discussion on the importance of social reproduction for developing cultures of solidarity across the range of contemporary anti-capitalist struggles.

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¹⁵ Social Reproduction Feminism also informs the theory and politics generated by cultural and art workers. Changes in the demographics of the art world, such as the greater numbers of women art graduates, and the levels of precarity experienced in the sector, are enabling explorations into whether, and how, the noted feminisation of labour is related to social reproduction. The discussions are too broad and diverse to summarise here but one important debate addresses whether social reproductive labour is associated with a regime of gendered labour *values* (for example, labour that is ideologically constituted as self-rewarding, 'natural', performed round the clock, invisible, 'unproductive') that are essential for sustaining and reproducing a formal art economy. See Precarias a la deriva 2003), *Caring Labor: An Archive* (14 December 2010), <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/12/14/precarias-a-la-deriva-close-encounters-in-the-second-phase-the-communication-continuum-care-sex-attention/> Accessed 18 February 2016. Social reproduction has been deployed in investigative curatorial projects and debate platforms such as *Beyond Re/Production: MOTHERING – Dimensionen der sozialen Reproduktion im Neoliberalismus* at Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin, 30 March 2011 and *Now You Can Go: On Social Reproduction*, ICA, London, 5 December 2015.

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