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Gender

Sara R. Farris

Abstract

This chapter reconstructs some of the main tenets of the theorization of ‘gender’ by western, and particularly anglophone, Marxist and socialist feminists from the 1970s to the present. It departs from a succinct reconstruction of the comments on women’s role, relations between the sexes, and the nature of femininity that are present in Marx’s early writings and in *Capital*, as well as in Engels’s *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. It then proceeds to outline some of the main debates among Marxist and socialist feminists centred on the relationship between gender relations and relations of production, from dual sex/gender system analyses, to those discussions that foreground the subjective dimensions of gender identification and gender formations. Specific sections are then devoted to discuss the debates on gender and race, the role of gender oppression within capitalism and the more recent contributions of transgender Marxists to a re-appraisal of the relationship between gender and sex.

Keywords

Gender; Marxist and socialist feminism; relations of production; gendered division of labour; gender and race; transgender Marxism.

Introduction.

I find the task of writing an entry on gender for a Handbook of Marxism particularly daunting. In one of the rare entries on this concept, which had been originally planned for the *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus (HKWM)*, Donna Haraway (2001) writes that what began as a five-pages long “keyword” entry, ended up taking many more pages and six years of work. That was not encouraging.

For Haraway, one of the difficulties of writing about gender within a Marxist framework was due to its fundamental acceptance of the nature/culture binary which, she argues, prevented traditional Marxists from developing gender into a political category.

I slowly realized that what I found so baffling in the process of working on this text was not only due to some of the epistemic difficulties that Haraway identified, or to the paucity of examples on which I could draw, but also to the widespread conflation within much Marxist and socialist feminist writing of the concept of gender with that of women’s oppression. Of course, these concepts have in many ways the same history, at least to a point, but more recent developments in both feminist and Marxist theory, as well as in capitalist social relations, have increasingly shown the need to disentangle them, not least because of the pathbreaking analyses of queer and transgender Marxists who have pushed for a more consistent disambiguation of gender and (female) sex.

The modern meaning of gender, if not immediately the term, dates back to one of the foundational texts of second wave feminism, *The Second Sex*, and particularly to Simone De Beauvoir’s idea therein that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. After the publication of De Beauvoir’s tome, the notion of gender as a social construct not dictated by biological/sex constraints was widely accepted and somehow

uncritically employed by Marxist and socialist feminists. Gender was de-naturalised while sex remained in the realm of nature, whether implicitly or explicitly. The question became then not so much what gender (and sex) is, but in what ways the social construction of femininity is based on, and reproduces, relations of domination and oppression. It was not until the work of Monique Wittig in France in the 1960s and 1970s (Wittig 1992) and of Judith Butler in the US in the 1990s (Butler 1990) that the category of sex itself, alongside that of gender, is subjected to full political scrutiny.

What follows is an attempt, inevitably selective, to reconstruct some of the main tenets of this complicated history and to find organizing criteria to comprehend the different articulations in which the concept of gender has been discussed by western, and especially anglophone, Marxist and socialist feminists in particular.

Gender relations in Marx and early Marxists.

Donna Haraway is correct when she maintains that the modern feminist concept of gender is not found in the writings of Marx (Haraway 2001: 52). Yet, comments on women's role, relations between the sexes, and the nature of femininity are scattered throughout his work, albeit not in a systematic form and often in ambivalent ways. At times, Marx showed a progressive view for his times on women's role in society, at others, he disclosed rather traditional and male-centered ideas. In this section I will provide a brief reconstruction of the main tenets of Marx's view on women's role and relations between men and women (the closest approximation we can find to the modern concept of gender) by looking particularly at his early works (*The 1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*) and *Capital Volume 1*.

Early writings.

One of Marx's most relevant statements on gender relations can be found in the text 'Private Property and Communism' in the *1844 Manuscripts*, in which he argues that the relationship between men and women is the benchmark to understand the level of development of a society. As he put it:

The immediate, natural and necessary relation of human being to human being is also the *relation* of *man* [Mann] to *woman* [Weib]. In this *natural* species relationship humans' [Mensch] relation to nature is directly their relation to man [Mensch], and his relation to the human [Mensch] is directly their relation to nature, to their own *natural* function. Thus, in this relation is *sensuously revealed*, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which human nature has become nature for him. From this relationship man's [Mensch] whole level of development can be assessed. It follows from the character of this relationship how far *human* [Mensch] has become, and has understood himself as, a *species-being*, a *human being*. The relation of man [Mann] to woman [Weib] is the *most natural* relation of human being to human being. It indicates, therefore, how far man's [Mensch] *natural* behavior has become *human*, and how far his *human* essence has become a *natural* essence for him, how far his *human nature* has become *nature for him*. It also shows how far humans' [Mensch] *needs* have become *human* needs, and consequently how far the other person [Mensch], as a person, has become one of his needs, and to what extent he is in his individual existence at the same time a social being (Marx 2004: 103).

This passage has been interpreted differently by several feminists. Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Grant, for instance, understood it to show Marx's principled commitment to the equality between men and women. For De Beauvoir: "To gain the

supreme victory, it is necessary for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (De Beauvoir 1989: 732). For Grant, this passage testifies that Marx’s perspective on gender relations was mediated by his idea of what it means to be human (Grant 2006). Grant argues that Marx had a fundamentally dialectical understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature. Human beings are natural beings, but their world is in constant transformation in relation to the natural. Alienation thus, refers precisely to human beings’ incapability to understand themselves as species-beings, that is, as beings who can achieve their true creative potential by means of their unique capacity at transforming nature for their own needs. It is precisely this dialectical feature of Marx’s humanism that, according to Grant, makes his position relevant on gender relations as he maintains human nature to be “self-transformational” thereby showing a nonessentialist understanding of nature.ⁱ

Juliet Mitchell and Donna Haraway, on the other hand, understood this passage to be a testament to Marx’s understanding of the female as the expression of the realm of nature. Mitchell takes Marx to argue that the index of civilization lies fundamentally in “the progress of the human over the animal, the cultural over the natural” (Mitchell 1971: 77). For Mitchell, thus, as Marx seems to associate women with nature, he is replicating the nineteenth century naturalisation of gender roles, with women being identified with the non-rational. Similarly, for Donna Haraway, “the relation of feminist gender theories to Marxism is tied to the fate of the concepts of nature and labour in the Marxist canon” (Haraway 2001: 53). Thus, Haraway maintains that traditional Marxist approaches did not lead to a political concept of gender because women “existed unstably at the boundary of the natural and social (...) such that their efforts to account for the subordinate position of women were undercut by the category of the natural sexual division of labour, with its ground in an unexaminable natural heterosexuality” (Ibid.: 53).

In *The German Ideology* and other essays published in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in the 1840s, Marx and Engels present some reflections on the family as an institution, which has deleterious effects on women. For Marx and Engels, the ‘natural’ division of labour between men and women within the family – whereby ‘natural’ seems to refer to ‘biological’, or what is dictated by different anatomical configurations between the sexes – leads to an unequal distribution and thus to the subordination of women and children to men as the heads of the household. As they put it:

the division of labour, which was originally nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act, then the division of labour which develops spontaneously or ‘naturally’ by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g., physical strength), needs, accidents, etc., etc. Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears (Marx and Engels 1998, 50).

Maria Mies criticised Marx and Engels for arguing that the true division of labour appears only with the distinction between manual and mental labour. In particular Mies claims that “by separating the production of new life from the production of the daily requirements through labour, by elevating the latter to the realm of history and humanity and by calling the first ‘natural’, the second ‘social’ they have involuntarily contributed to the biological determinism which we still suffer today” (Mies 1998: 52). Conversely, according to Heather Brown, while Mies’s point is well placed, Marx’s views on the division of labour did not amount to a glorification of the social over the natural (or sexual) division of labour. For Brown, Marx considers the

division between manual and mental labour not as a superior one, but as an exploitative and alienating process (Brown 2012: 41).

In his early writings, thus, Marx's ideas on the relations between women and men are mainly informed by his reflections on the binary natural/social. Here Marx (and Engels) seem to maintain that women's seeming 'proximity' to nature disadvantages them in the realm of the social, when the division of labour becomes more complex and rewards those who are able to take distance from, and 'dominate' nature. Haraway contends that Marx's inability to historicize – rather than naturalise – women's labour and the division of labour in the family, was rooted in his failure to historicise sex itself, which Marx seemed to conceive as a 'raw material' (Haraway 2001: 53).

Capital.

Besides his discussion of "simple reproduction," or reproductive labour (which are extensively discussed in this volume), in *Capital Volume I* in particular Marx's references to 'gender' relate both to his assessment of the impact of factory work on women and the family, and on femininity. For Marx, the introduction of machinery in the labour process, and the subsequent inclusion of women and children to factory work, fundamentally changed gender relations within the family. As he put it,

the labour of women and children was (...) the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family, without distinction of age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family. (Marx 1976: 517).

Women and young girls in particular, Marx noted, were employed for the dirtiest and worst paid jobs. In the footnotes Marx quotes long excerpts from factory inspectors' reports arguing that factory work for women led to the 'deterioration of their character'. These inspectors' reports implied that the subtraction of women from their more 'natural' roles at home had negative implications on their morality. While Marx's own opinion on these reports is unclear – as he often failed to comment on them – there are passages in *Capital Volume I* in which he seems to suggest that, in challenging traditional female roles, factory work could have a deleterious effect on women's morality and gender relations more generally. For instance, Marx referred to gang workers as images of "coarse freedom", "noisy jollity" and "obscene impertinence", with high rates of teen girls' pregnancy and a general atmosphere of "Sodom and Gomorrah" dominating the villages supplying gang workers (Marx 1976)

As noted by Heather Brown, in these passages Marx appears to be struggling to reconcile "his own overall theoretical views on the transitory nature of all kinds of 'morality' with some remnants of Victorian ideology." (Brown 2012: 88). But while Marx's position on female morality and factory work is quite ambiguous, what is clear is that for Marx capitalist social relations had profoundly transformed family and gender relations. On the one hand, "in overturning the economic foundation of the old family system and the family labour corresponding to it, [large-scale industry] had also dissolved the old family relationships" as Marx writes in the chapter on the working day. On the other hand, he analysed how women were used as a cheap and docile labour force to threaten male labourers' bargaining power as well as their role as heads of the family. By employing all members of the family into labour units, machinery for Marx,

“spreads the value of the man’s labour-power over his whole family. It thus depreciates it” (Marx 1976: 518). However, Marx regards it as a highly contradictory process with potentially positive effects on gender relations and women’s role in particular. As he stated in the chapter on the working day,

however terrible and disgusting the dissolution of old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes (Marx 1976: 620).

Marx, thus, seems to suggest that in shaking patriarchal authority within the working class family, capitalist social relations could have, at least potentially, an emancipatory role on gender relations as old roles were challenged and new ones could take shape. Albeit not discussing these issues in detail and often not presenting his own position in clear or unambivalent terms, Marx’s understanding of capitalist social relations and gender relations as dialectically tied one to the other, indicate a method for analysing gender roles in more complex ways. As we shall see in the next section, Engels’s work on gender relations attempted to apply the historical materialist method by linking the origin of the family and class society to changes occurring in the mode of production and gender roles. However, as several feminists pointed out, in doing so Engels ended up separating relations of production and gender relations (or social reproduction) as two separate spheres, thereby contributing to the many splits that will characterize subsequent analyses among Marxist thinkers in the 20th century.

Gender relations and class society: on Frederick Engels.

Frederick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was seen for decades as the most systematic Marxist account on gender relations and women’s oppression. As Michèle Barrett put it, “scarcely a Marxist-feminist text is produced that does not refer somewhere to Engels’s argument, and if one had to identify one major contribution to feminism from Marxism it would have to be this text” (1983: 214). *The Origin of the Family* was written after Karl Marx’s death in 1883, but it was largely based on notes that both Engels and Marx had taken on the research of anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, who had published *Ancient Society* in 1877. Morgan was of great interest to Marx and Engels as he was one of the first ethnologists to apply a materialist analysis to the history of human social organization.

By observing the Iroquois in New York State, Morgan thought he could reconstruct the ways in which primeval humans had organised. He took the Iroquois to exemplify primitive human life and organisation and inferred from those observation that kinship relationships and family life must have been totally different in the past when compared with family life in nineteenth century Britain. Morgan was particularly struck by the level of gender equality and women’s prominent roles within Iroquois society, which made him conclude that a subsequent process of civilisation had spoilt that primitive egalitarianism.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels used Morgan’s ideas to argue that the family form as it was known in Britain (and Europe) in the nineteenth century was not a ‘natural’ institution, but it had been the result of the rise of class society. According to Engels in pre-class societies gender relations had been much more advanced than in Victorian Britain, women and men had more sexual freedom and the family was not conceived as the repository and guardian of private

property. Engels thus concluded that the monogamous family had been the result of a change in the social and economic formation. Famously, he argued that the transition from a prevalently hunter-gatherer society to an agricultural society led to a distinct gendered division of labour, which disadvantaged women. As agricultural societies led to the creation of a surplus and the rise of private property, for Engels men came to control the sphere of production, while women were relegated increasingly to the sphere of reproduction and the family became the means through which property could be passed down from generation to generation. The advent of class society, according to Engels, turned the household into the realm of the private sphere to which women were segregated as the head servants.

Since its publication, Engels' *The Origin* has become the reference point of Marxist discussions on gender for decades, and as such, it's been subjected to praise, but also severe criticisms. While anthropologist Eleanor Burke Leacock and other feminists generally praised Engels' reconstruction of gender relations in primitive societies and the method he used to analyse them (Delmar 1977; Gimenez 2005; Orr 2015; Smith 2015; Vogel 1996; Dee 2010), others analysed the Eurocentric underpinnings of his inferences (Anderson 2010) and the many historical and logical shortfalls of his arguments (Barrett 1983; Mitchell 1974), not least his establishment of a dual analysis in which gender relations are subordinated to economic relations (Carver 1985; Haug 2005).

In this latter respect, according to Carver, Engels' fundamental flaw was to establish "two autonomous lines of explanation for the social order: economic relations and family relations, the class war and the sex war" (Carver 1985: 449). Similarly, according to Frigga Haug, Engels had "strengthened a mode of reading that, to a certain extent, comprehended gender relations as an addition to, and outside of, the relations of production" (Haug 2005: 287). By relegating the production of the means of subsistence to the realm of labour and economic production, and the production of life to the realm of kinship, Engels, according to Haug, failed to write "the history of gender relations as a dimension of the relations of production." (Ibid). Haug's criticism of Engels is at the core of her entry on 'gender relations' (*Geschlechterverhältnisse*) that she wrote for the Historical-Critical Dictionary of Feminism (*Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Feminismus*). Given its importance in the context of this discussion and this entry, the next section is devoted to provide a succinct summary and commentary of Haug's arguments.

Gender relations as relations of production.

In the attempt to conceptualise what it would mean to understand gender from a Marxist viewpoint German Marxist feminist Frigga Haug argued that the greatest obstacle to such an endeavour had been the tendency within Marx's and Engels's work to think of gender relations "as relationships between men and women." (Haug 2005: 288). For Haug, different historical modes of production must be investigated as also gender relations as neither of them can be comprehended without answering the question of how "the production of life in the totality of the relations of production is regulated and their relation to the production of the means of life, in short, how they determine the reproduction of the whole society" (Haug 2005: 288). That includes, as Haug maintains, the differential "shaping of genders themselves, the particular constructions of femininity and masculinity, just as much as the development of the productive forces, the division of labour, domination and forms of ideological legitimation" (Ibid.).

For Haug, the history of socialist and Marxist feminism shows that gender relations always emerged as the women's question with no attempt at linking them with the relations of production. One of the most promising paths to understand gender relations as relations of production, in her view, comes from feminist ethnology. By looking at the work of Eleanor Leacock (1981) and her historical reconstruction of different modes of production and especially domestic economies, of Ilse Lenz (1995) and her rethinking of the concept of power and domination in relation to production, and of Maxine Molineaux's (1977) centrality of the concept of gendered division of labour, Haug argues that these works were contesting precisely Engels's dualism of production and reproduction, which ended up essentialising the former. While most Marxists according to Haug continued making this mistake, thereby treating the study of gender relations as a field almost separate from the study of production and value creation, Antonio Gramsci in her view constituted an exception. His work on Fordism in particular, she maintains, provides an exemplary illustration of how a materialist analysis of gender relations should be carried out. By investigating the changes in the mode of production introduced by Fordism, not only at the level of productive forces and technologies, but also at the level of family norms and gendered subject formation, Gramsci allowed us to see "the disposition of the genders and thus essential aspects of their construction, along with political regulations." (Haug 2005: 288).

Ultimately for Haug, "research into gender relations as relations of production requires a differential combination of historically comparative studies, attentive to moments of transition, with social-theoretical and subjective analysis." (Haug 2005: 299). Commenting upon Haug's theoretical proposal to recombine the analysis of gender relations and production relations, Johanna Brenner sets to spell out how the latter must be understood. For Brenner, to comprehend women and men's positioning within specific modes of production we must look at 'social reproduction' (see Ferguson, Farris and Bhattacharya in this handbook), which she defines as "that part of the process of social labor which focuses on meeting individual needs for sustenance and on birthing and rearing the next generation" (Brenner). By encapsulating what Haug calls gender relations within the concept of social reproduction vis-à-vis production, Brenner claims, we are not separating the two spheres, but rather attempting to capture a fundamental dynamic of the capitalist mode of production.

Similarly commenting on Haug's concept of gender relations as relations of production, Rosemary Hennessy points at Haug's promising, but equally unclear and contradictory project. For Hennessy, while Haug identified "a longstanding theoretical knot" within historical materialism's treatment of gender relations, and offered an important starting point for thinking the materiality of gender, that is, the standpoint of the reproduction of society, ultimately she did not offer "a clear view of how the production of life and of the means of life are related nor of how gender relations feature in both under capitalism" (Ibid.).

Hennessy finds that several important debates and fruitful paths forward are missing from Haug's discussion. For instance, can gender be thought as an ideological formation? How are gender relations shaped by colonial histories and the ways in which they fashioned knowledge production itself? What is the relationship between gender and race? The emphasis upon feminist ethnology, for Hennessy, is also a problematic sign that Haug takes into account the history of capitalism in Europe as universal history, thereby naturalizing kinship relations as trans-contextual. As we shall see in a later section, much of contemporary Marxist feminist discussions on gender have been attempts to answer these questions. But before I delve into these discussions, the next section provides a brief reconstruction of "dual system analyses" developed by Marxist

and socialist feminists particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s. Their richness, as well as shortfalls, as I will attempt to show, will mark subsequent attempts to theorise gender as ideology as well as to interrogate the “whiteness” and “westocentrism” of much Marxist feminist theorizing up to the present.

Dual sex/gender systems analysis.

Haug’s identification of the limits of Marx’s and especially Engels’ theorizing on gender in their distinction of production as the realm of the economy and reproduction as the realm of sex and kinship, clearly hit the target. Such a distinction was rooted in a fundamentally un-dialectical understanding of social relations, particularly in Engels, which had important reverberations on Marxists’ theory and practice. The most evident one was the tendency many communist and socialist organisations had in the first half the 20th century (and beyond...) to consider gender (or the woman question to be more precise) as a *secondary* contradiction, and women’s liberation as subordinated to the abolition of class society. Taking stock of the condescending attitude, when not open hostility that many ‘comrades’ expressed towards feminism, in the 1970s in particular, several Marxist and socialist feminists decided to officialise in theory the split they experienced in practice.

In France, in 1970, Christine Delphy was one of the first to theorise an influential version of the dual system analysis in her article “The Main Enemy” (2001 [1970]). Here Delphy identifies unpaid housework undertaken mostly by women as a form of servitude that marked their submission to men. She thus theorises the existence of a “patriarchal mode of production of domestic services,” which she conceives as a mode of production different but parallel to the capitalist one. Within the patriarchal mode of production, women are to men what the proletariat is to the bourgeoisie: the class of the oppressed. The main enemies of women, thus, are men and their inherent desire to subjugate female freedom. Delphy’s work, alongside that of Monique Wittig, Colette Guillaumin and others, developed so called “materialist feminism”, to signal the continuity with Marx’s method in their attempt at thinking the economic basis of women’s oppression within domestic work, but also their rupture with what they perceived as Marxists’ failure to recognize women as a class.

In the US, Gayle Rubin in 1975 published one of the most important sources of inspirations for the dual system analyses within anglophone feminism. In her article “The traffic in women: notes on the ‘political economy’ of sex,” Rubin used Marx’s concept of exchange and commodity to analyse what she called ‘the domestication of women’. For Rubin, females had historically been the raw material for the production of woman which occurred through the exchange system of kinship controlled by men. Appropriating Marx and Engels, alongside Freud, Lacan and Levi-Strauss, Rubin defined the sex/gender system as the “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (Rubin 2011 [1975]: 29).

Rubin’s work was particularly influential on Heidi Hartmann, the author of the most representative text of dual system analyses, i.e., “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism”. Published in 1979, Hartmann’s article represented a predictable shockwave for Marxist and socialist feminists and Marxist conceptualisations of gender. Besides being in dialogue with Rubin, in this text Hartmann meant also to respond to Shulamith Firestone’s book published almost a decade earlier, *The Dialectic of Sex*, which had attracted a great deal of attention and greatly influenced a whole generation of feminists.

In a nutshell, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone rejected Marx's and Engels's substantial argument that the roots of unequal gender relations had to be found in the division of labour and changes in the mode of production. For Firestone, Marx and Engels's work was fundamentally a form of economic reductionism, not allowing to see that "there is a level of reality that does not stem directly from economics" (Firestone 1970: 5). However, Firestone aimed to employ Marx's and Engels's method in order to develop "a materialist view of history based on sex itself" (Firestone, p. 5). Such a view was based on the identification of women as the underclass that needs to take control of the means of reproduction and to seizure control of human fertility (Firestone 1970: 10-11). Firestone thus advocated for the abolition of sexual classes and sexual difference through the liberation of women from childbirth.

While treating women as the "oppressed class" in Marxian terms, Firestone's work, according to Hartmann was "the most complete statement of the radical feminist position" (Hartmann 1979: 9), but her insistence that women's oppression was the fundamental contradiction in society set her apart from Marxist feminism. Hartmann, on the contrary, wanted to provide a new "feminist Marxist" conceptual framework by theorising patriarchy as a separate system with a material base. Contra Firestone, the task for Hartmann was not to overcome oppression by getting rid of sex difference, but to understand "how sex (a biological fact) becomes gender (a social phenomenon)" (Hartmann 1979: 9). It was Rubin's sex/gender system that, for Hartmann, would allow feminist Marxists to understand patriarchy as that "set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women." (Ibid.: 14). Though Hartmann sees patriarchy as hierarchical, which entails that men of different classes, races, or ethnic groups have different places therein – men are still unified in their "shared relationship of dominance over their women; they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination." (Ibid.: 11).

The material base of women's oppression for Hartmann, thus lies in men's control over women's labour power, which operates by excluding them from certain economic sectors and jobs and by luring them into monogamous heterosexual relations and controlling their sexuality. One of the main problems with Hartman's argument was that while claiming to provide a materialist analysis of women's oppression as one rooted in men's interest in controlling women's labour, she did not explain where this 'interest;' came from. If men are differentiated by class interests and racial oppression, what do they gain by uniting under the banner of women's subordination? Is such an interest, or desire, rooted in anthropology, or psychology?

In the end, one of the fundamental pitfalls of dual system analyses, from Delphy to Hartmann, was their assumption that categories such as men, or women, could be thought of as leading to internally coherent 'classes' linked by common interests. Such an assumption in the end was premised (albeit unwittingly) upon whiteness, which disavowed the possibility for these feminists to understand the fundamental differences implied by race.

Gender and sexual division of labour analysis.

Dual system analyses were strongly criticized by a number of Marxist and socialist feminists from early on – from those advocating for a 'unitary theory' foregrounding social reproduction, as in the case of Lise Vogel, to those suggesting an integrative approach that would explain the workings of gender oppression without invoking separate systems. Iris Marion Young was the proponent of the latter approach.

The challenge for Young was to develop a “an analytical framework which regards the material social relations of a particular historical social formation as one system in which gender differentiation is a core attribute” (Young 1981: 50). The point, thus, was not to marry or divorce Marxism, but to take it over and transform it into a theory that foregrounds gender as a core element.

By locating patriarchal relationships within the family as opposed to the economy, Hartmann, according to Young, had only sanctioned the original split proposed by Engels and criticized by Frigga Haug. This “model of separate spheres” (Young 1981: 48), thus tended to hypostasize the division between family and economy specific to capitalism into a universal form, thereby accepting that traditional Marxist theory is gender-blind and simply adding a system of patriarchy to the list. The way forward, instead, for Young was to develop a theory of gender division of labour that supplements the concept of class within Marxism.

Young maintained that while the category of class at the core of traditional Marxism, is gender blind, the way to remain “within the materialist framework” was to “elevate the category of *division of labour* to a position as, if not more fundamental than, that of class.” (Ibid: 50). The advantages of foregrounding the category division of labour for centering gender within Marxism were testified, first, by the fact that such a category was central to Marx’s work itself. Second, the category of division of labour was broader than that of class, but also more specific. “The specific place of individuals in the division of labour – she maintained – explains their consciousness and behavior, as well as the specific relations of cooperation and conflict in which different persons stand” (Ibid.: 51). Third, gender division of labour analysis brings gender relations to the centre of historical materialist analysis as it provides “a way of regarding gender relations as not merely a central aspect of relations of production, but as fundamental to their structure.” (Ibid: 53). Furthermore, gender division of labour analysis for Young could also explain the “origins and maintenance of women’s subordination in social structural terms. Neither a biological account nor a psychological account” can (Ibid: 54).

All in all, gender division of labour analysis, had the benefit of allowing feminists “to do material analysis of the social relations of labour in gender specific terms without assuming that all women in general or all women in a particular society have a common and unified situation” (Ibid: 55). Young thus challenged Hartmann’s assumption – which she shared with many Marxists – that capitalism’s inherent tendency was to homogenize the workforce, “reducing the significance of ascribed statuses based on sex, race, ethnic origin and so on.” (Ibid: 57).

A gender division of labour analysis of capitalism which asks how the system itself is structured along gender lines, can give an account of the situation of women under capitalism as a function of the structure and dynamic of capitalism itself. *My thesis is that the marginalization of women and thereby our functioning as a secondary labour force is an essential and fundamental characteristic of capitalism*” (Ibid: 58).

The fact that patriarchy existed before capitalism, in Young’s view did not prove that it is an independent system, just as the existence of class societies before capitalism did not mean that all class societies have some “common structure independent of the system of capitalism” (Ibid: 58). Class societies, and so gender relations too, undergo historical transformations.

Departing from similar premises, Nancy Hartsock in those same years (Hartsock 1983 a and b) focused on the division of labour between men and women as key to understanding women’s oppression. Yet, unlike Young, Hartsock rejected the

terminology of gender and talked instead of the sexual division of labour to highlight the bodily dimensions of women's work. For Hartsock, the differential bodily experience of men and women vis-à-vis nature, mediated as it was by their different activities, had given rise to entirely different life-worlds. This differential experience, for Hartsock should become the basis for a "feminist materialist standpoint".

The materiality of gender subjectivity.

While many Marxist and socialist feminists up until the early 1980s tried to understand the ways in which gender, as a set of roles and social relations of oppression and domination, is directly, albeit complexly, tied up with capitalist relations of production, we also see attempts at understanding gender in terms of subjectivity and identity. How do people identify as female or male? Can processes of gender identification be explained through the Marxian method of historical materialism?

Three main approaches addressed these questions: the first includes authors like Juliet Mitchell and Michèle Barrett, who in different and sometimes even conflicting ways, understood gender in psychological and ideological terms. The second approach includes Marxist scholars such as Kevin Floyd, Rosemary Hennessy and Jordanna Matlon, who instead analysed gender identification as a form of reification (Floyd), and consumption (Hennessy, Matlon). The third approach can be found in the work of Beverley Skeggs who analysed gender formation as a moral class struggle.

Gender as ideology

In 1974 Juliet Mitchell published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, which set to foreground the Freudian theoretical framework to understand gender formations in ways that were still compatible with Marxism. Even though Mitchell was focusing upon psychoanalysis, ideology appears in her account, as the organising principle of the chief gender formation, i.e., patriarchy. For Mitchell, "ideology and a given mode of production are interdependent", however "one cannot be reduced to the other nor can the same laws be found to govern one as govern the other (...) we are (as elsewhere) dealing with two autonomous areas: the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy" (Mitchell 1974: 412). The particular expression of patriarchal ideology for Mitchell depends upon the way in which it interconnects with a specific mode of production. However, capitalism and patriarchy respond to different logics. While the former regulates the economy and class formation, the latter, which is expressed particularly in the nuclear family, is responsible for women's oppression and gender roles. In Mitchell's understanding, ideology is what mediates the unconscious, which enables the interiorisation of gender roles and thus the reproduction of the patriarchal law. "The unconscious that Freud analysed – writes Mitchell – could thus be described as the domain of the reproduction of culture or ideology" (Ibid: 413). Ultimately, Mitchell just like Hartmann, supported a dual systems analysis which saw patriarchy and capitalism as separate systems governed by independent laws. For this reason, for Mitchell, the overthrow of the capitalist economy would not in itself mean the end of patriarchy, for "the ideological sphere has a certain autonomy" (Ibid: 414). That is why, for Mitchell, we need a cultural revolution headed by women as the chief victims of patriarchal laws and thus the main subjects of transformation.

In her 1980's book *Women's Oppression Today*, Michèle Barrett criticised psychoanalytic approaches to the understanding of gender as fundamentally ahistorical. Building on Italian Marxist philosopher Sebastiano Timpanaro, Barret argued that

psychoanalysis eternalises situations that are historically specific and remains suspended in a limbo between the biological and the social without choosing either, thereby remaining elusive. A Marxist feminist approach instead, for Barret, needs to understand sexuality and gender at any given period and not in isolation from the economic. Mitchell's fundamental mistake, for Barret, lied in separating the ideological and the economic in such a way that not only fails to understand the ideological nature of developments such as the division of labour, but also leads to divisive and ineffective political strategies that separate class struggle from cultural struggles.

This notwithstanding, Barret herself conceived of gender as an ideological construct too. Gender identity, she maintained, is created "in an ideology of family life" and is "continually recreated and endorsed, modified or even altered substantially, through a process of ideological representation" (Barrett 1980: 206). By resorting to an Althusserian frame that conceived of ideology as interpellation, Barret proposed to analyse the category of gender as ideology. Contra Mitchell, however, who had also framed gender as the result of an ideological system (i.e., patriarchy) with relative autonomy, Barret defined ideology as "a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed" (Ibid: 97). For Barret, such ideological processes have an integral connection with "the relations of production", as becomes clear in the case of the capitalist division of labour and the reproduction of labour power. As she put it: "A sexual division of labour, and accompanying ideologies of the appropriate meaning of labour for men and women, have been embedded in the capitalist division of labour from its beginnings" (Ibid: 98). For Barrett, however, the point is not to understand the ideology of gender and women's oppression as simply a function of capitalist relations of production, but as a set of ideas and representations of femininity and masculinity that pre-dated capitalism, but that have been well embedded within capitalist social relations (Ibid: 165).

At the time of its publication, Barret's book represented one of the most sophisticated and systematic attempts to analyse gender relations without either treating them as simple reflections of economic relations, nor as autonomous from them. However, as Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas pointed out in a rather engaged critique of Barret, the book ultimately gave ideology too much ground and tended to treat "the appropriation of gender ideology as the relatively passive internalization of an already defined set of ideas about men and women that exists at the level of 'culture'" (Brenner and Ramas 1984: 35). By analysing the ways in which Barret discusses familial ideology as at odds with the structure of the working class household, which depends also on women's income, while portraying women as unproductive and mainly carers, Brenner and Ramas conclude that Barret ultimately conceived of ideology "as a mysterious, powerful, unchanging phenomenon – one that imposes itself upon individuals who accept it passively and for reasons that are really not very clear" (Ibid: 35).

Gender and sexuality as consumption.

A new sustained Marxist feminist engagement with the concept of gender and in particular with the idea of gender as ideology, was represented in the early 2000s by Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. Here Hennessy attempted to understand gender as an ideology, or a set of ideologies, that "naturalize and reproduce the asymmetrical social divisions that help to sustain, manage, and maximize the appropriation of surplus labour through a variety of complex arrangements." (Hennessy 2000: 25). For Hennessy, patriarchy is an historical

formation thereby subject to change and continual reorganisation. Ideology, in Hennessy's view, is what naturalises patriarchal gender hierarchies by maintaining that mainstream ideas of femininity and masculinity are the way things are and should be. Hennessy thus links gender ideologies to the sexual formations that are compatible with capitalism at any given moment. As she put it:

Bourgeois patriarchy depends on a hetero-gendered social matrix that includes imaginary identifications with opposite and asymmetrical masculine or feminine positions (naturalized as expressive attributes of males and females) as well as hierarchical gendered and racialized divisions of labour. By presenting hetero-gendered differences as fixed and natural opposites, patriarchal ideology makes invisible the precariousness of these imaginary identifications and the social order they help guarantee as well as the multiplicity of possible other engenderings of desire. As supplementary "other," homosexual identity is a product of this discourse even as it threatens to belie the naturalness of the heterogender system" (Ibid: 25).

While the dominance of hetero-gendered ideology for Hennessy characterised especially early capitalism and Fordism, she maintains that late capitalism has produced a shift in the realm of sexuality and gender identifications. While the latter were naturalised and taken for granted under the early capitalist hetero-normative order, under late capitalism we witness a move to "free choice". Sexuality, desire and the forms of gender identity that ensue from them are no longer a given, but rather are presented as range of options from which the late capitalist consumer can freely select "The emergence of a new subject of sexual desire was conditioned by the gradual disruption of gender distinctions taking place through changes in the division of labor, property, and consent law. This was a subject that was not defined so much in terms of species needs for reproduction as in terms of individual consumer preferences or the objects he or she desires." (Ibid: 101).

According to Hennessy, while the move has certainly been liberating for many, it has not meant the end of patriarchal heteronormative ideologies. The shift to an understanding of gender as synonymous with sexual identity and the articulation of the concept of gender as object-oriented (i.e., towards an object of desire) for Hennessy did not really threaten patriarchy, but rather assimilated to it.

Hennessy's work in many ways initiated the Marxist reflection on gender as consumption that would be subsequently taken on and developed by Kevin Floyd. In *The reification of desire*, Floyd set to historicise Judith Butler's account of gender as performance. Like Hennessy, Floyd foregrounded the ways in which specific stages of capitalism and their predominant modes of production and consumption, produce ideals of masculinity, femininity, and gender roles more generally. For Floyd the changes in the division of labour and the deskilling of the workforce that has occurred under capitalism, changed also how the gendered body and sexual desire have been understood.

Against this background, Butler's concept of gender as performativity becomes intelligible as the capitalist demand to develop new performances, or skills, including sexual skills. Floyd linked the development of gender and sexual skills with changes in the organisation of labour that occurred between the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the 20th century. Like Hennessy, Floyd analysed the shift in the conceptualisations of desire (see Proctor on 'Desire' in this volume) and male bodies (see Mau on the 'Body' in this volume) that occur particularly under Taylorism and Fordism. In such contexts, desire, Floyd argues, becomes "an isolated, autonomous epistemological object; it is dissociated from, made independent of and irreducible to, any particular subject" (Floyd 2009: 62). As desire becomes external to the desiring

subject, it is “reified”. But such “reification of desire” can be understood only in connection with the reconceptualization of male and female bodies that occurs towards the turn of the nineteenth century. Here Floyd analyses how the deskilling of male labour that characterised the advanced stage of capitalism in the early 1900s is accompanied by a crucial shift in gender roles – from manhood to masculinity. While “the opposite of manhood” in the 19th century was childhood, the distinction pivotal to twentieth century masculinity is the dissociation from femininity. Men are now required to abide by a hetero-normative gender regime of performance in different ways. These requirements to masculine men are strictly linked to the deskilling of labour. While manhood was the reflection of an economic period in which industrial manufacture still demanded skilled male labour, masculinity instead, is the product of the deskilling of labour that occurs under Taylorism and Fordism. Deskilled labour at work is matched by the requirements of consumption at home. And consumption patterns are now entirely geared towards masculine males and feminine females – the drill for DIY enables suburban white men to perform the illusion of skilled labour at home, while their wives take pleasure in the kitchen mixer enabling them to perfection their caring tasks. The performative “character of masculinity in the US within the Fordist regime of capitalist accumulation is the outcome of a series of prescribed behaviours and patterns of consumption within a leisure time rigidly regulated by the commodity form” (Arruzza 2015: 48).

The historical materialist method applied by Hennessy and Floyd to foreground the concept of gender, enables us to analyse how capitalism transforms gender and shapes and re-shapes gender hierarchies. While Floyd in particular specifically treats the sexual and gender identity formations he studied as rooted in white, American Taylorist and Fordist settings, the discussion of how changes in capitalist regimes differentially impact different populations did not receive sustained attention from Marxists. One partial exception is the work of Jordanna Matlon, who employs the racial capitalism framework and Gramscian concept of hegemony to understand the shifts that have invested Black masculinity in Africa under neoliberalism. Matlon analyses in particular the masculine gender roles available to African urban men in the context of neoliberal crisis and mass un- and under-employment. For Matlon, capitalism is that system that mediates gender relations. In the context of racial capitalism in Africa, this has meant on the one hand that ideals of male breadwinner-provider have been increasingly unavailable for most marginalised black men. On the other hand, successful Black masculinity has become the new ideal which is performed by Black African men through over-consumption. The identification with a masculine, capital-owner male ideal which is unattainable has led to what Matlon calls “complicit masculinity”. As she put it:

Complicit masculinity underscores the reality of differential aspirational models in the context of severe un- and underemployment and the failure of the classic breadwinner model for black men globally (...) I return to the Gramscian origins of hegemony to suggest that complicit masculinity is a gendered analogue to *consent*, and consider masculine identities and practices in the context of “the common sense about breadwinning and manhood”. (...) Complicit masculinity represents ideologies that foster consent, ideologies through which structurally dislocated men reinforce hegemonic norms. In short, complicit masculinity affirms that masculine agency is located within capitalism” (Matlon 2016: 1017).

Gender subjectivity as a classed moral formation.

In *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997), Beverley Skeggs partly builds on Marx's insight in *Capital Volume 1* that working class femininity and moral codes had been singularly produced and shaped by capitalist social relations. For Skeggs, gender subjectivity is an empty abstraction if detached from class. But to understand gender as a 'classed formation', we need to foreground the ways in which ideals of femininity (and masculinity) from the 19th century onwards where both circulated as moral codes for respectable behaviour, and built upon classed bodies. For Skeggs, gender classed formations are sensuous constellations in which the body itself (its shape, smell, clothing, gesturing) functions as a proxy for class, thereby foregrounding class subjectivity as the result (and process) of internationalisation of class morality.

In the 19th century, gendered notions of sexual propriety (Nead, 1988; Pollock, 1989) were encapsulated in the ideal of the middle-class lady, the embodiment of middle-class femininity. As Skeggs put it: "Femininity was seen to be the *property* of middle-class women who could *prove* themselves to be respectable through their appearance and conduct" (Skeggs 1997: 99), a gendered version of the possessive individual. White middle-class femininity was coded as frail, soft, passive, while working class women – both white and black – were coded as hardy and robust. But while these codes have changed over time, it was the relation to sexuality that signalled the most important distinction between different classed genders. At the same time as represented as strong and hardy in the realm of labour, "working-class women — both Black and White — were coded as the sexual and deviant other against which femininity was defined" (Skeggs 1997: 99).

Relations to work and the sexual have continued to define gender as a classed and raced formation, albeit in different ways and depending upon specific contexts. Skeggs offers a longitudinal ethnographic account of living gender through class with and against a moral symbolic economy. Focusing on white-working class bodies in the neoliberal UK, Skeggs highlights how working-class women's bodies are always represented as in excess and pathological. They are associated with the "lower unruly order of bodily functions" which is then linked with moral codes of vulgarity and lack of taste. The body signals class through moral euphemisms which are not named directly but work through ideological associations. This leads to everyday moral class battles between middle class representatives of state institutions (welfare, education, law) who repeatedly pathologise working-class women. The working-class women produce a strong defence by developing their own standards of care by which they reverse the moral-classed judgement, naming middle-class women's care as of poor quality and claiming "real" respectability. But only one group has the backing of symbolic and institutional power and the working-class women's investment in care locks them into a specific position in the division of labour, ripe for exploitation across work, family and community. It is a study of the inseparability of class and gender, where struggles lived through gender generate investment in exploitative relations (for a further discussion of the relationship between gender and class see Skeggs in this volume).

Gender and race.

Most Marxist and socialist feminist analyses on gender I have reconstructed so far did, wittingly or unwittingly, presuppose and focus on white women's life-experiences, practices and institutions in western contexts. Yet, with a few exceptions, they tended to pose themselves as universal. Black Marxist and socialist feminists, particularly in the US, strongly challenged this assumption of universality.

In 1981 Angela Davis published one of the most profound and detailed analysis of the intermingling of class, gender and race in the US context and one of the best examples of ‘intersectional’ analysis from a Marxist feminist viewpoint (see Bohrer on ‘Intersectionality’ in this volume). Davis is of great relevance in the context of a discussion of Marxist approaches to gender and race because she devoted a great deal of attention to the formations of femininity and masculinity among Black people under slavery. In many ways, according to Davis, slavery had been characterised by the absence of distinct gender formations, to the extent that women and men in many ways were “gender-less”. As she put it:

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned. In the words of one scholar, ‘the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker.’ Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies (Davis 1981: 75).

The conceptualisations of gender relations and formations I discussed in previous sections were largely based upon analyses of gendered division of labour and ideals of femininity and masculinity rooted in their different roles as male breadwinners and female carers. Such conceptualisations could not apply to Black women who had always worked outside their homes and had often been the sole breadwinners in their households. For Davis, the place occupied by work in Black women’s lives followed a pattern established during slavery. For slaves, men and women alike, work overshadowed everything else, there was neither time nor room for considerations of sex. In such a context, “the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.” (Ibid.) But Black women, Davis reminds us, also suffered in different ways as victims of sexual abuse and torturous punishments. Work exploitation made them genderless, while oppression and violence was inflicted on them in their “exclusively female roles” (Ibid.)

Ultimately, the ideology of bourgeois femininity that associated women with domesticity and caring and that impacted women in working class households as well, was completely alien to Black women. Such an ideology allocated women to the essential, but inferior world of motherhood and housewifery, which hold true for working class women too at certain stages of capitalist accumulation. However, the economic arrangements of slavery first, and work later contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in such a feminine ideology. “Male-female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern.” (Ibid: 16). For Davis, the only exception to the representation and reality of Black women primarily as workers occurred after the abolition of the international slave trade, when slaveholders found harder to import slaves from Africa and began incentivising enslaved women to reproduce in order to sustain the demand for labour force. Black women were increasingly appraised for their fertility, but that did not translate in an exaltation of motherhood. They were not to enjoy their condition of mothers, for they were treated as breeders, and their children sold as soon as they were old enough to work. Davis’s careful analysis of Black female roles here offers a lucid and powerful reminder of another key difference between white and black gender formations related to the realm of reproduction. As Françoise Vergès discusses in *The Wombs of Women* (2020), reproductive injunctions for non-white women are not so much a matter of ideological persuasion and interpellation, but of sheer violence.

Davis's powerful analysis of the inapplicability of gender categories rooted in white life experiences to the lives of Black women had an enormous influence on subsequent Black Marxist and socialist feminists. These feminists knew they could not rely on Marxist frameworks to understand their condition; they had to analyse it on their own. Responding to Heidi Hartmann's provocative article on the unhappy marriage between Marxism and feminism, Gloria Joseph talked of an incomplete *ménage à trois*, where the third partner was race. For Joseph, while Hartmann had rightly acknowledged that Marxist categories were gender blind, she had not highlighted how they were race-blind as well. But so were Marxist feminist categories too. Like Davis and others beforehand, Yoseph foregrounds the differences in work and life experiences, and thus, the different roots of inequality that impact Black women. Importantly, the main cause of Black women's oppression were not (Black) men, as Hartmann had posited, but rather white men and women and the racial capitalist system they had established. In this sense, Black women and men shared a history of brutalisation and de-humanisation that brought them together, rather than dividing them. As she put it: "Capitalism and patriarchy simply do not offer to share with Black males the seat of power in their regal solidarity. (...) here is more solidarity between white males and females than between white males and Black males" (Joseph 1981: 101).

If Black women did not share with white women the *gender* of their oppressor, for white women, just as much as men, could be Black women's enemies, they did not share the *place* of their oppression either. Whereas most Marxist and socialist feminist analysis, from Engels to Hartmann and Barret, had identified the family as the quintessential receptacle and reproducer of an oppressive gender ideology that locked women into their inferior roles, Black women did not experience the same. Under slavery, the family for Black women and men was the place where they could "exercise a modicum of autonomy" (Joseph 1981: 95).

As Hazel Carby effectively put it, the three concepts which were "central to feminist theory become problematic in their application to black women's lives: 'the family', 'patriarchy' and 'reproduction'. When used they are placed in a context of the herstory of white (frequently middle-class) women and become contradictory when applied to the lives and experiences of black women" (Carby 1982: 213). Bhavnani and Coulson (2005) address another issue which has framed Marxist and socialist feminist analyses, even those that have been more attentive to the issue of race. As I will discuss in more detail in the next section, Marxists have often treated the categories of gender and race as fundamentally rooted in capitalist social relations at best, or as secondary contradictions at worst. But in both cases, they tended to overlap the two. Instead, Bhavnani and Coulson argue, while racism and sexism can look like similar processes, for they both rely on ideas of 'natural' and 'biological' differences, gender and race are fundamentally different experiences. Bhavnani and Coulson argue that such experiences are organised through different institutions and need different forms of analysis to be understood. As Carby put it:

The experience of black women does not enter the parameters of parallelism. The fact that black women are subject to the *simultaneous* oppression of patriarchy, class and 'race' is the prime reason for not employing parallels that render their position and experience not only marginal but also invisible (Carby 1982: 2012).

The question of how racism shapes gender identity, how gender is experienced through racism and how class is shaped by gender and 'race' remain the fundamental

questions that interrogate Marxist feminists today (see Bandhar on 'Race' in this volume).

Gender and capitalism.

As I mentioned above, several Marxists maintained for a long time that Marx's categories to describe the inner laws and functioning of capitalist exploitation are fundamentally gender- and race-blind (Harvey, 2014; Eagleton 1996). For them, capitalism is a system that inherits and exploits gendered and racial oppression, but not one that gives rise to them specifically or that is in particular need of them at its core. This position is perhaps best expressed with the words of the late Ellen Meiksins Wood who maintained that: "If capital derives advantages from racism or sexism, it is not because of any structural tendency in capitalism toward racial inequality or gender oppression, but on the contrary because they disguise the structural realities of the capitalist system and because they divide the working class"(Wood 1988: 6).

Meiksins Wood, like others, did not intend to underestimate the importance of gendered and racial oppression for capitalism, for she well recognized that the history of capitalism is replete with racism and sexism. What she was trying to say, rather, is that what makes the capitalist mode of production absolutely novel and unprecedented in the history of modes of production is exploitation as a specific economic and juridical formula that allows certain individuals to own the means of production and to purchase the labour power of "formally free" workers in order to use this legally purchased labor power to produce commodities and sell them on the market, with the aim of deriving a perfectly legal profit from this sale. In other words, Meiksins Wood, like Harvey and others, operates with an "ideal type" of capitalism as an abstract "marketplace" in which the race and gender of the people involved – whether buyers or sellers – does not really matter for the capitalist machine to work. According to them, then, we could think of capitalism as "indifferent" to gender (and race), but we could not really imagine it without class exploitation.

The "indifferent capitalism" thesis – as Arruzza called it (2014) – is entirely specular to the dual systems analysis proposed by Hartmann and others, for they both agree that Marx's categories are gender-blind and thus unable to address the specificities of gender under capitalism. The new wave of Marxist feminist theorizing that has witnessed a renaissance in the last decade has begun to strongly contest these two positions. One such attempt is the publication by Cinzia Arruzza of 'Remarks on gender' (2014). Here Arruzza's attempt is to contribute toward reopening a debate about how "we should conceptualize the structural relationship between gender oppression and capitalism." Departing from a critical reconstruction of dual system analyses and an engagement with what she names Meiksins Wood's "indifferent capitalism" theory, Arruzza sets to understand what is the role of gender and women's oppression within capitalism. For Arruzza, gender and racial oppression have become "an integral part of capitalist society through a long historical process that has dissolved preceding forms of social life." Theoretically, she insists that we have to understand capitalism not merely as an economic system or a distinct mode of production, but as a complex and articulated social order that essentially consists of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation. Such an enlarged conception of capitalism allows us to recognize the irreplaceable role of social reproduction in it – the daily and intergenerational maintenance and reproduction of social life. From such a theoretical perspective, patriarchal gender relations appear intrinsic, rather than merely contingent or instrumental for the way that social reproduction is organized in capitalist societies.

Arruzza's remarks gave rise to an engaged dialogue which included Marxist feminists from different approaches including Johanna Oksala (2015), F. T. Manning (2015) and myself (Farris 2015). Even though in all these interventions we were more concerned with attempting to theorise the place of gender within capitalism, than with a systematic discussion or definition of the concept of gender itself (which we all took to stand for women's oppression), there are several aspects of this debate that are of particular interest in the context of this entry.

In spite of the important differences between them, all authors agree – contra Meiksins Wood – that gender oppression has been pivotal to capitalism and that its relegation to secondary contradiction has led to the downgrading of feminism by many Marxists. All authors, furthermore, agree that gender oppression is an historical configuration that assumes different forms according to the different phases and places of capital accumulation. Finally, all authors seem to reject (synonym) the dual systems analyses that characterised Marxist feminist debates in the 1970s and 1980s and aim at an integrated analysis of gender, class and race, even though they propose different ways of thinking through such an integration.

In a separate, but related attempt at thinking through the relationship between gender, class and race, Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton propose to bridge the subjective and economic levels of analysis by advancing an analogy between gender and the Fetshism of the commodity. For them, gender is the process of anchoring individuals to certain activities which results in the production and reproduction of two genders – masculine and feminine. While they follow Judith Butler in maintaining that both sex and gender are social constructions, and that the binary gender/sex de-naturalises gender while naturalising sex, they apply Marx's concept of commodity fetishism to unravel the relationship between the two terms of the binary. That is, they conceive of gender and sex as two sides of the same coin in which gender (exchange value) attaches itself to sex (use-value), as if the value (i.e., meaning) of the former originated in the latter as some sort of inner substance. Gonzalez and Neton thus see gender as an external constrain imposed on naturalised sexed bodies that capitalism simultaneously de-naturalises – through process of care commodification that appear to detach gender from biological concerns – and re-naturalises through the re-allocation of (certain) women to the abject role of reproducers, with the abject being “what no one else is willing to do” (Gonzalez and Neton 2013).

Transgender Marxism

Marxist transgender theorists have produced some of the most compelling and challenging conceptualisations of gender, recently brought together in a collective volume (Gleeson and O'Rourke 2021). For some of these authors, Judith Butler's theory of performativity and her denaturalization of sex is the necessary point of departure for an epistemic shift within Marxist understandings of gender. Rosa Lee, for instance, writes that “the categories Marx presents in *Capital* — commodity, capital, money — are performatives (...) What was thought to be an abiding substance, *value*, is in fact the result of contingent social practices. Rather than being natural or reliable, value is revealed to be processual and relational. And rather than appearing obviously, value's origins mean it will always remain unstable and subject to continual change and transformation.”

For Lee, then, Marx's critique of political economy as one that unravels the contingent and historical variability of value and our mode of production, is “uniquely useful” for transgender theory, for it highlights gender's temporal dynamics.

For the authors of *Transgender Marxism*, “the regulation of gender and sexuality must be understood as integral to capitalism as it survives across time.” As the capitalist state constantly tries to domesticate gender roles and sexuality, transgender politics allows for an analysis of how the state and capital turns ascriptive distinctions into a material force.

According to their analysis, gender then is not merely “a site of expressive potential — of self realisation and self-fashioning — but also, and equally, a site bounded by property relations.” Through patterns of ownership and entitlement, property seems to be naturalized even though it is in fact deeply gendered and racialized. That is how transgenderism represents a threat for capitalism, for it breaks with the ascribed roles and continuities on which capitalism relies. “To transition”, the authors argue, “is to renege on agreements that were previously assumed, albeit never actually signed for.” In the same volume’s afterward, Rosenberg outlines a materialist understanding of gender as the mediating link between the sexed body and nature, through the concept of metabolism. By stressing the troubled history of the term *Stoffwechsel* (metabolism) and its translation into English in *Capital* volume one, Rosenberg aims to show how Marx’s own rumination on this concept unwittingly “overcodes the sexual division of labor, the abstraction of metabolics, and the question of social reproduction alike” (Rosenberg 2021). Transness, or transgenderism, in this light becomes the locus par excellence in which the metabolic process that mediates the social and the natural, the body and its significations, sex and gender, takes place most clearly.

Conclusion.

The outright rejection of dual system analyses and the de-naturalisation of sex seem to me to represent some of the most prominent features of recent theorisations of gender within the Marxist field. On the one hand, dual system analyses do not appeal any longer to a generation of Marxist scholars who have grown under the aegis of neoliberal and globalised capitalism. In a way, the universalisation of the law of profit across the globe, has been accompanied by the de-universalisation of gender, previously conceived as the analytic descriptor of white, middle-class femininity. In other words, the more the lives of the world population are brought together under the common denominator of capitalism, the more we see the multifarious ways in which gender is ‘experienced’ and coopted, colonised and re-appropriated, but hardly ever reducible to an established binary pattern. On the other hand, queer and transgender scholars have pushed Marxists to question the often implicit assumption that gender operates as a kind of super-structure above somewhat stable sexed bases.

Several factors, in my view, have led to these developments in the contemporary Marxist theorisations of gender.

First, albeit running the risk of proposing a triple systems analysis in some versions of it, intersectionality theory has represented a fundamental challenge for Marxist feminists as it has forced them to look at economic exploitation and gender oppression as ‘interlocked’ and equally important expressions of capitalism (abandoning both the hierarchies of primary and secondary contradiction and the divisions of the dual systems analysis). Second, the changes undergone by the family form since the 1970s in many western countries and the increasing participation of women in paid labour have pushed feminists writing from a Marxist viewpoint to revisit an historical materialist understanding of gender oppression as one that manifests itself mainly through the relegation of women to domestic, unpaid labour. This shift has fundamentally undermined dual system attempts to theorise a domestic mode of production as opposed to a capitalist one. Thirdly, and connected to the point above,

the commodification of socially reproductive labour that has intensified in the last thirty years, and which has shown the importance of care chains and the racialisation of care labour (through the employment of migrant women from the Global South in particular), is showing the various articulations of gender not only in time – from Fordism to post-Fordism, for instance – but also in space. The penetration of capitalism in the global south, the growth and feminisation of international migratory movements, are all phenomena that have complexified our understanding of gender oppression in multiple directions. The simultaneous mass commodification and racialisation of social reproduction are processes deeply invested in the doing and un-doing of gender. While the employment of racialised women in socially reproductive activities continues *to do* gender, as it is women who are still required to undertake caring and traditionally feminine jobs, these same racialised women enable their female employers (often middle-class, but also working class women) to *un-do* gender by allowing them to undertake other non-feminised activities outside the household (Farris 2017).

Finally, the growing scientific evidence that the instability and plasticity of sex is not an anomaly (as it used to be understood in the past by clinicians and scientists), is profoundly changing our understanding of gender too. According to Jordy Rosenberg (2021), the history of the medicalisation of transness could shed a different light on gender itself. For Rosenberg, in the process to reassign a sex to intersex infants, medical transition became a way “to align the plasticity of sex with the intractability of gender.” It is gender, thus, that comes to be understood as “a kind of characterological predisposition that — unlike the plasticity of sex — is immovable”. Gender, in other words, is the social construct that is fixed as binary in order to stabilise the instability of sex.

All in all, I believe these will be the main terrains on which Marxist theorisations of gender will develop in the future. As capitalist social relations continue to deepen social divides centred on sexuality and reproduction, the category of gender will inevitably be one of the central theoretical and practical battlefields on which we will be defining our political strategies.

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ⁱ Related to this discussion, albeit not immediately on the concept of gender, see Nancy Holmstrom, 1984.