

Marxism and feminism: ‘unhappy marriage’ or creative partnership?

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Introduction

Scholarly attempts to understand the relation between class and gender oppression in different societies and historical periods has meant that the relationship between Marxism and feminism has been a long standing preoccupation among progressive feminist analysts. In an influential intervention published thirty years ago Heidi Hartmann complained that the relationship between Marxism and feminism was marked by extreme inequality. She compared it to the marriage between husband and wife depicted in English common law at the time: ‘Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism’. She concluded that “either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce’ (Hartmann, 1981:2).

This article argues that it is only very recently that the ‘marriage’ between Marxism and feminism has become ‘healthier’. The relationship has always involved tensions, partly because of radically different objects of analysis. However a connection is necessary because, as Hartmann wrote, ‘while Marxist analysis offers essential insight into the laws of historical development, and those of capital in particular, the categories of marxism are sex -blind. Only a specifically feminist analysis reveals the systemic character of relations between men and women. Yet feminist analysis by itself is inadequate because it has been blind to history and insufficiently materialist’ (Hartmann, 1981:2). Furthermore, particularly in the South African context, an analysis centered on the primary contradiction between capital and labour using categories which are *also* ‘race-blind’ is particularly problematic.

Classical Marxist analysis

Classical Marxism recognized women’s oppression, but the focus in the treatment of ‘the women question’ was the relationship of women to the economic system rather than gender relations. These early marxists failed to focus sufficiently on gender differences; on the difference between women’s and men’s experiences under capitalism. Generally women’s participation in the labour force was understood as the key to their emancipation. In his *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels argued that as women were incorporated into wage labour, they would become economically independent, the authority of the male head of the household would be weakened and patriarchal relations destroyed.

In similar terms Alexandra Kollontai understood the family as the source of women’s oppression. Remembered largely as the proponent of the ‘glass of water theory’, the theory that sex should be as easy and uncomplicated as drinking a glass of water, she wrote of the necessity of introducing public services of every kind that would free women, from the petty cares of every day life involved in social reproduction. Sensitive

to the double load of housework and wage work, she emphasized the solution to women's oppression as the collectivization of domestic labour under socialism. This provision of such public services were necessary to bring women into politics. She argued that 'society should relieve women of all those petty household cares which are at present unavoidable (given the existence of individual, scattered, domestic economies)' and take over 'responsibility for the younger generation..' (Kollontai, 1911, 1977: .68) But for Kollontai the struggle for women's liberation was part of the struggle for socialism. In her view there should be no separate women's movement. She was dismissive of 'the feminists' because "they seek equality in the framework of the existing class society; in no way do they attack the basis of this society' (Kollontai, 1909:59).

Lenin was similarly dismissive of feminism but understood women's position in both the household and the paid workforce as problematic. For Lenin a housewife was a domestic 'slave', and women's unpaid labour within the family was a major obstacle to progress. Writing in 1919 Lenin points out that despite "all the laws emancipating women, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery" (Lenin, Cited by Vogel, 1983:121). "No matter how much democracy there is under capitalism, the woman remains a 'domestic slave', a slave locked up in the bedroom, nursery, kitchen" (Cited by Vogel, 1983:119). Hence Lenin argued strongly for the socialization of domestic labour, to "transform petty housekeeping into a series of large-scale socialized services: community kitchens, public dining rooms, laundries, repair shops, nurseries, kindergardens and so forth." (Cited by Vogel, 1983:122). However only a specifically feminist politics can ensure that these 'socialized services' are not performed exclusively by women workers – women perhaps vulnerable to low wages and sexual harassment.

This narrow legacy of the 'women question' of classical Marxism was not the only problem for feminists of the twentieth century. Throughout throughout the century a 'specifically feminist politics' has been weakened, not only by those Marxists who dismissed women's concerns as of secondary import and divisive of working class struggles, but by sectarianism and fragmentation within feminism.

Many varieties of feminism

A major source of difficulty in constructing a 'creative partnership' between Marxism and feminism is that there are many varieties of both. The history of twentieth century feminism has been scarred by struggles for primacy: struggles over whether class or sex is the determinant feature of social organization. These could be divided into three strands: liberal feminists seeking equality within the existing order, Marxist or socialist feminists prioritising class inequalities and radical feminists such as Millett (1971) and Firestone (1972) who located unequal gender relations as the primary contradiction of social organisation. For example drawing on how the term 'patriarchy' was used by Weber to describe a particular form of household organization in which the father dominated and controlled the economic production of the household, Millet argues for

patriarchy as a system of male domination that is analytically independent of capitalism. In capitalist society all women are characterised by an economic dependency which 'renders her affiliation with any class a tangential, vicarious and temporary matter' (Millett, 1971:32). Both Firestone and Millet give patriarchy an analytical primacy. Their project is to substitute sex for class as the driver of history. Many feminists rejected this 'radical feminism' and claimed the identify of socialist feminists.

Dualistic analysis

Most of the attempts of these socialist feminists to integrate Marxism and feminism involved a dualistic form of analysis which posits two separate structures: the mode of production and patriarchy. Some of the attempts at developing a more cohesive Marxist-feminist framework have involved some very convoluted theoretical formulations. For example in attempting such an integration the concept of a 'patriarchal mode of production' has been proposed. This 'is a theoretical model of class relations between a class of patriarchs who, as heads of households, control the access of other household members to the means of production and a class of patriarchal dependents, wives and working children, who gain access to the means of production and consumption by providing surplus labour to the class of patriarchs' (Henn,1988:28).

In another variant of this dualistic analysis, reducing patriarchy to an ideological structure, Juliet Mitchell wrote of 'two autonomous areas: the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy' (Mitchell, 1974:412). A more materialist definition is provided by Hartman who defines patriarchy in terms of men's control of women's labour power both in terms of their sexuality and access to resources. However patriarchy remains a universal, trans-historical category.

Besides the problem of dualism, there are other criticisms which have been made of attempts to provide a coherent Marxist-feminist analysis such as an essentialism, a tendency to universalize the experiences of women in the Global North (in the seventies derided as 'western feminism') and – most extensive- a Marxist functionalism or reductionism which reduces women's oppression to an effect of the operations of capital (Barrett, 1980). As Bozzoli wrote, 'The problem of functionalism rests in the fact that descriptions are presented as explanations. Because female oppression performs certain functions for capitalism, this does not mean that it was a pre creation of capitalism (Bozzoli, 1983:142).

Many of these weaknesses, especially a crude Marxist functionalism, are apparent in the Marxist feminist concern with the relation of housework to capital, what came to be called, 'the domestic labour debate'. This became a major preoccupation of Marxist feminists.

The domestic labour debate.

This focused mainly on the contribution of domestic labour to the circuit of capitalist accumulation. Central to this debate was the observation by Marx that 'the most

indispensable means of production' is the worker and that the 'maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital' (Marx, (1867) 1976:718). What he neglected was that this 'maintenance' and 'reproduction' involved a great deal of work done by women. Contributors to the domestic labour debate tried to bring this work - housework and childrearing - into the sphere of Marxist analysis by arguing that housewives' unpaid labour reduces the value of labour power and thus cheapens the cost of wage labour to capital. (Dalla Costa and James 1970; Zaretsky, 1973; Seccombe, 1974). But their analysis of the reproduction of labour power failed to explain the sexual division of labour whereby it is women who perform the domestic work involved.

In this way most contributors tended to subsume the feminist struggle into the struggle against capital. For example, Dalla Costa claimed that housewives were not only essential to capital by reproducing the labour force, but also produced surplus value. The implication was that women should demand wages for housework. The focus in this debate was on capital – not on relations between men and women. Hartman stresses that for most contributors their Marxism dominated their feminism, they failed to recognise how women's domestic labour benefited men 'who as husbands and fathers receive personalized services at home (Hartman, 1981:9).

But fortunately the domestic labour debate reached a dead end. It 'came to an impasse when most participants accepted the orthodox marxist assertion that non-commodity producing labour (housework, childcare, subsistence agriculture, etc) is incommensurable with capitalist wage labour' (Henn, 1988:29).

It has been replaced by the contemporary debate on social reproduction.

Social reproduction

This locates domestic labour in a broader notion of 'social reproduction'. Feminists have defined social reproduction in contested ways but Bakker points out that most identify three dimensions: firstly, 'the biological reproduction of the species'. This involves both the material and cultural aspects of giving birth and child raising in different social contexts. According to Bakker it includes 'the social constructions of motherhood in different societies' (Bakker, 2003:32). The second aspect or component of social reproduction involves the reproduction of the labour force. This involves a range of social institutions including the family and various educational institutions to provide the necessary informal socialisation as well as formal education and training. The third aspect Bakker points to is 'the reproduction of provisioning and caring needs that may be wholly privatized within families, or socialized or, indeed provided through a combination of the two' (Bakker, 2003:32)

She stresses that each of these dimensions relates to a 'gender order' which refers to a set of social relations grounded in a sexual division of labour. These are the analytical tools used to examine the transnational process of neoliberal restructuring which has exacerbated inequalities in many parts of the world.

This approach is taken further by Bezanson and Luxton who argue that an analytical framework based on social reproduction leads to new ways of understanding women's situation in capitalist society. The "concept builds on and deepens debates about domestic labour and women's economic roles in capitalist societies... it offers a basis for understanding how various institutions (such as the state, the market, the family/household) interact and balance power so that the work involved in the daily and generational production and maintenance of people is completed." (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006:3) The emphasis is on analyzing society as a totality, a totality in which social reproduction is central at various levels:

As Bezanson writes, 'Social reproduction is .. a central aspect of the capitalist economic system:

1. At the level of *production* because labour is considered a produced input to production but one that is produced outside that sphere
 2. at the level of *distribution*, because savings on the costs of social reproduction of the labouring population lead to higher profits
 3. at the level of *circulation*, because the consumption of wage goods is the largest component of aggregate demand.
 4. at the *institutional level* because insecurity of access to the means of reproduction is the fundamental source of command over work processes
 5. at the *political level* because the process of social reproduction implies a radical conflict between profit and the living standards of the whole labouring population'.
- (Bezanson, 2006:28).

It is claimed that the concept provides a way out of the dualism which has scarred much Marxist-feminist analysis. Drawing on Marxism's central concepts – the mode of production and the class relations and struggles it generates – Luxton (2006) points out that many attempts to examine the relation between gender and class involve 'a dual systems model' of production and reproduction in which production refers to production for the market and reproduction, referring to the production of life itself, which involves the sexual division of labour.

In her view, this dualistic analysis is incoherent. 'The production/reproduction formulation retains a theoretical incoherence that creates several serious problems. Like Engels, many feminists tend to equate production, labour and men with the economy and reproduction and women with the family, even while they recognize women's involvement in subsistence economies or in the paid labour force. That formulation fails to understand the family as both a set of economic relations and a part of the economic workings of society. It also generates conceptual chaos as 'reproduction' embodies several overlapping but contradictory meanings, including human biological reproduction, the socialisation of children, the reproduction of labour power and the reproduction of the mode of production or of the society as a whole (Luxton, 2006:27).

In contrast to those marxist feminists arguing for patriarchy as a mode of reproduction and capitalism as a mode of production as two separate systems of domination operating

in relation to each other, Luxton argues for an alternative approach which she terms an 'integrated system or expanded mode of production model'. She writes,

'An alternative approach argues for a single system based on an expanded concept of mode of production that includes the propagation of the species, particularly the production and reproduction of people on a daily and generational basis' (Luxton, 2006:27). This integrated set of social processes involves a sexual division of labour which, drawing on the anthropologist Gayle Rubin, Luxton, conceptualises as a 'sex/gender system'.

This interrelationship defines the totality. Luxton quotes how in his analysis of capitalism Marx notes, 'When viewed.... as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction' (1887,1976:711 cited by Luxton, 2006:29) The implication is that 'The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total connected process, i.e, a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus value but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself: on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer' (Marx,1887,1976:724) (Cited by Luxton, 2006:29). Luxton maintains that this framework: this expanded mode of production combined with her notion of a sex/gender system gives a centrality to women's oppression.

This is the value of the concept of social reproduction which, for Luxton, refers 'to the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis and intergenerationally. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provide, the care of the infirm and the elderly, and the social organisation of sexuality. Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of work ... aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation' (Laslett and Benner, 1989:382, cited by Luxton, 2006:36). Not all the work involved takes place in the family-household. There is the complementary work provided by state services such as education and health care or in the market.

A class analysis is necessary to understand how production and reproduction are linked in a single process. 'By developing a class analysis that shows how the production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process, social reproduction does more than identify the activities involved in the daily and generational reproduction of daily life. It allows for an explanation of the structures, relationships and dynamics that produce those activities'(Luxton, 2006:37).

Further drawing from Marx means recognising that these class relations render the capitalist totality fundamentally unstable. This is because there is a central contradiction between capital accumulation and social reproduction which is anchored in the capital - labour contradiction. '.....it is expressed when workers through their unions try to improve working conditions, pay and benefits to ameliorate their livelihood, while

employers resist and, under pressure to make profits, try to cut labour costs by reducing pay, benefits and working conditions' (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006:8).

This expanded concept of social reproduction mobilized 'for an analysis of the ways in which the labouring population is produced, sustained and reproduced on a daily and generational basis' gives us the analytical tools to understand "society from a materialist perspective that puts women, gender, race and class at the heart of its analysis' (Luxton, 2006:40).

Following this approach means that contemporary analyses of institutions such as commodified domestic labour pay close attention to the race, class, ethnic and gendered dimensions involved. Furthermore the scope of analysis is expanded: for instance on how domestic labour is increasingly globalised, as women from the global South and European postsocialist countries have been recruited to service an exploding demand for domestic labour in the United States, Canada, the European Union, Hong Kong and the Middle East. This is 'the global care chain' of women moving from poor to rich countries (Hothschild, 2000), involving work for low wages under poor working conditions in what has been termed 'the feminisation of survival' (Sassen, 2000). It is part of a rich and growing scholarship on the 'care economy'.

Conclusion

Clearly Marxist- feminism is not a monolithic theoretical entity. However much progress has been made in the relation between Marxism and feminism since Bozzoli's claim that in Southern African studies 'no substantial challenges to androcentric tendencies within Marxism have been made' (Bozzoli, 1983:140). No longer is the 'collapsing of female oppression into the capitalist mode of production', the 'dominant tendency in analyses of women in South Africa' (Bozzoli, 1983:142). No one now attempts to appropriate Marxist concepts of value or productive and unproductive work and apply them uncritically in an attempt to establish the value of domestic work (Cock,1981). The accusations of a white-feminist epistemological imperialism are no longer apt. No one assumes that a socialist order will necessarily guarantee gender equality. No one now presents women, irrespective of class, race, nationality, ethnicity, or sexual preference as comprising a homogeneous group bound together by their shared 'oppression'.

But much has also been lost. The early feminist emphasis on solidarity, the importance of group discussion and collective work has been eroded by the individualism spread by neo-liberal capitalism. Many challenges lie ahead as the feminisation of poverty proceeds as part of deepening forms of inequality..

Hartman's solution to a 'healthier marriage' lay in giving equal weight to patriarchy and capitalism. But this kind of dualistic analysis dehistoricizes women's oppression. Patriarchy is not a universal system and cannot be understood as distinct from the relations of production or outside of a specific historical context. To reclaim the Marxist-feminist 'marriage' feminism had to abandon its dualistic forms of analysis and

universalistic claims. Marxism has had to confront the specificity of *different* women's oppression in specific historical contexts. Especially in contemporary South Africa an analysis of racialised as well as gendered forms of domination are necessary to explain why particular people occupy particular class positions and what the possibilities are for struggle. "...neither radical, separatist, feminist approaches, nor economic, functionalist and reductionist approaches will suffice in advancing our understanding of female oppression and its relationship to capitalism" (Bozzoli, 1983:168). Ultimately a 'creative partnership' between Marxism and feminism depended on the further transformation of both parties.

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