36

MARXISM, FEMINISM AND THE HOUSEHOLD

Drucilla K. Barker and Suzanne Bergeron

At the intersection of Marxism and feminism lies a rich and diverse set of perspectives on the question of women, class and the household. Over the past fifty years, there have been significant debates within this literature about issues such as the conceptualization of work, the value of non-market production, the role of the household in the economy, the nature of instability and change in society, and the role of social reproduction in our vision of an equitable future. In this chapter, we provide a broad overview of these debates.

We begin by noting that Marx did not focus much on this issue in his published theories of capitalism and class. However, he did offer some discussion on the topic, for instance when discussing the tensions that working class women face in the household in *Capital Vol. 1* (Marx [1876] 1976) and critiquing the bourgeois family as oppressive to women in the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1998). Engels’ *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* more directly addresses the location of women in and households in capitalist societies (Engels [1884] 2010). It is often viewed by Marxist-feminists as a foundational text (Benston 1969; Leacock 1974). In *Origins*, Engels challenges the commonly held idea that eternal and universal patriarchal power dynamics are the cause of gender inequity, replacing it with a historical view. Prior to the emergence of private property, he contends, societies were largely egalitarian when it came to gender. But with the emergence of private property and capitalism, this changed for a number of reasons. First, with the rise of private property, production for exchange replaced the production of use values that characterized primitive communism. With this shift production also increasingly occurred outside of the household and became intensified. This excluded women because they were no longer able to combine productive and reproductive work in use-value production as they had in the past. Second, private property ushered in a nuclear family form aimed at controlling women’s sexuality and thus ensuring the legitimacy of heirs. While initially instituted among the propertied classes, the patriarchal family ideal eventually spread through society. While these shifts were uneven and contested, the household eventually became a place to which most women were relegated to a life of relative drudgery.

In the 1960s and 1970s, an emerging Marxist-feminist scholarship drew upon Engels’ analysis to explain women’s oppression, but with an important twist. It identified the household not only as a site of reproductive labor but as a site of production itself, where women’s unpaid labor made an essential yet neglected contribution to the economy (Oakley 1974).
Feminists working in this vein coined the term “domestic labor” to describe unpaid housework and care work, labor that was both devalued and necessary for the support and maintenance of productive labor within capitalism. Their strategies focused on making this work visible and valuable. The “Wages for Housework” movement, for instance, argued that because domestic labor contributed to production and surplus value by reproducing labor power, it should be compensated within the capitalist system (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 1975). One conclusion that seemed to follow was that women getting wages for housework would have the bargaining power of waged workers and thus be able to wrest some surplus back from the capitalist class. Not all feminists working on these topics called for wages for housework, but many argued in a similar manner that the exploitation of women’s work in the household was analogous to the exploitation of the proletariat and contributed to surplus value. Others, however, challenged this analogy between the proletariat and housewives on various grounds related to the calculability of women’s household labor and the method by which surplus was extracted in the household. For instance, some argued that the household sphere, because it fosters relationships and emotional attachment, is not analogous to detached, commodified market labor (Himmelweit and Mohun 1977; Himmelweit 1995). These differences have been dubbed the “domestic labor debates” and generated a significant literature on whether Marxian measures of value and surplus value extraction could be extended to women’s work in the household (see Delphy and Leonard 1980; Gardiner 1975; Himmelweit 1995; Molyneux 1979; Seccombe 1974).

By the late 1970s another strand of analysis emerged to challenge what was seen as the class-determinist frame of the earlier Marxist-feminist approach. These writers, often referred to as “socialist feminists,” argued that reference to capitalist logic alone fails to identify why women are oppressed specifically as women. As the anthropologist Gayle Rubin put it,

> to explain women’s usefulness to capitalism is one thing. To argue that this usefulness explains the genesis of the oppression of women is quite another…Women are oppressed in societies which can by no stretch of the imagination be described as capitalist.

(Rubin 1975, 163)

In a similar vein, Heidi Hartmann (1979) notes that is not only capitalists who benefit from women’s household labor in contemporary society, but that men as a group also benefit from the gender division of labor in which women’s devalued efforts produce goods and services in the home.

Lourdes Benería (1979) points out the basic contradiction facing women arises from the fact of their shared interests with men and their subordinate status to them. Thus it is not only the capitalist system that is at the source of women’s oppression, but a dual system of capitalism and patriarchy at work (see also Eisenstein 1978). By positing the relationship between gender and class in two separate spheres, Hartmann and others working in this “dual systems” tradition have been able to theorize about the complex and contested relationship between capitalism and patriarchal household divisions of labor. For instance, as Nancy Folbre (1994) points out, the gender division of labor that relegates women to unpaid care work also makes a link between the masculinity and individual self-reliance, which masks capitalist exploitation. At the same time, this privileges paid labor as the source of wealth and human well-being. These processes also render invisible and devalue women’s unpaid domestic labor, and further, even when this caring labor is performed by paid workers it is feminized, thus retaining its undervalued status.
Fraad, Resnick and Wolff (1994) build upon earlier Marxist-feminist and socialist-feminist insights regarding points of contact, complexity and contradiction between the spheres of capitalism and the household, but offer another way to make sense of how this might structure and/or undermine women’s oppression. Taking an anti-essentialist class analytic approach, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff posit a landscape of economic difference in which there can exist multiple class processes within a complexly constituted economic and social system that it not entirely determined by capitalism. They then use that framework to analyze the ways in which surplus labor is produced, appropriated and distributed in households in the United States. Unlike many other theorists working on these topics, they do not posit any essential relationship between the class formation of the household, patriarchal power relations, and the needs of capitalist profitability. Rather they highlight the ways that the articulation of different economic spheres—as well as the power dynamics that underlie women’s subordination—are changing, contextual and contradictory.

Further, unlike dual systems approaches, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff write about economic processes as distinct—although by no means determinant—from the political (such as patriarchal power dynamics) and social. While they identify the feudal class process in which dependent wives have their housework appropriated by husbands as the dominant form of household class system in the United States, they also discuss the existence of communal households, single adults who self-appropriate their surplus labor, and so forth. This focus on a variety of possible class processes, which are themselves relatively autonomous from capitalist class processes and for which capitalism is not determinant, challenges both singular-logic and dual-logic explanations for the exploitation of women’s labor. It also creates space for examining interactions and contradictions among the mix of class processes and non-class processes—such as gender ideologies—that structure women’s oppression.

The development of Fraad, Resnick and Wolff’s anti-essentialist notion of class in the 1980s occurred at the same time that feminist theorists were questioning essentialist framings of gender itself, and positing new models that stressed the diversity of women’s experiences (Spelman 1988). Increasingly, feminists examining the impact of class and gender on women’s lives recognized that women are not a unified class, but face intersecting oppressions based on gender, race, sexuality and class differences (e.g. Joseph 1981; Molyneux 1979). bell hooks (1984), for instance, noted famously that the dominant feminist idea of women’s liberation through equality in the labor force ignored the questions of which particular women had always engaged in paid labor and which had not, which had access to the “good jobs,” and which would take care of the children and do the housework that those (white, middle class) women left behind. As Angela Davis (1983) argued, too often it was turning out that black women in the United States had to do their own housework and other women’s as well. Attention to racial and class differences in relation to household labor is therefore crucial to both understanding and transforming conditions of class exploitation and gender oppression at the nexus of the household and the capitalist firm.

By the late 1980s, there was waning interest in the terms of the domestic labor debate around the role of women’s unpaid labor in the capitalist economy and the household, and new ways of integrating Marxism and feminism emerged. In part, the abstractions involved in analyzing necessary and surplus labor were at odds with the complexities of concrete historical analysis and issues of agency and subjectivity that were increasingly being centered in studies of exploitation by both gender and class (Vogel 2000). In addition, by the 1970s and 1980s in the global North there was a decline in industry and a corresponding expansion of the service sector, including paid care work, that increasingly
blurred the binaries of market/household, capitalism/reproduction upon which domestic labor theories rest (Weeks 2007). Further, global restructuring transformed the nature of domestic labor and social reproduction. The declining dominance of the male breadwinner household and nuclear family form, rising global women’s labor force participation, increased labor migration and global householding contributed to the emergence of other ways of thinking through the relationship between gender, household labor and capitalism.

This shift led to a number of different strands of analysis at the intersection of Marxism and feminism. The concept of social reproduction emerged to capture what had previously been termed domestic labor and to more broadly conceptualize the unpaid and paid reproduction of the labor force, such as meeting the care needs for children, adults, appropriately socializing children, and even necessary care of the self (Bakker and Gill 2003; March and Runyan 2000; Nakano Glenn 1992; Peterson 2003). Some work in this area focused on the ways that capitalism was depleting social reproductive labor by placing more and more burdens on women. For instance, neoliberal restructuring policies in the 1980s and 1990s cut government supports for care work and put the burden onto women’s unpaid labor in households to pick up the slack (Elson and Cagatay 2000), creating a depletion of care on the global stage (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). At the same time, women were increasingly drawn into low-paid service jobs as this work was shifted to the market. This rearranging of boundaries between household/market and reproductive/productive work thus resulted in both a privatization of reproductive work formerly provided socially, and a commodification of care work (Barker and Feiner 2004).

In the wake of these crises of care and new forms of gender and class exploitation related to women’s role in social reproduction, the issues initially raised in the domestic labor debates have recently seen a resurgence (Weeks 2011; Federici 2012; Vogel 2000; Vrasti 2016). These scholars contend that the quotidian tasks of cooking, cleaning, raising children, caring for the elderly, and caring for one’s self are central not only to the workings of capitalism but also to the functioning of any society regardless of its economic organization. Confining them to the boundaries of the patriarchal family, however veils their importance. In the current conjuncture, this justifies the neoliberal indifference of capital and the state to the costs of social reproduction.

For example, in the introduction to her book Revolution at Point Zero, Silvia Federici (2012) revisits her involvement in the Wages for Housework (WfH) movement in the 1970s. In her telling of the story, proponents WfH viewed housework as the foundation for capitalism and saw class struggle not only among the male proletariat but also among the “enslaved, the colonized, the world of wageless workers…and the proletarian housewife” (Federici 2012, 7). WfH was informed by the Italian concept of the “social factory,” a stage in capitalism wherein “every social relation is subsumed under capital and the distinction between society and factory collapses” (Ibid.). That is, exploitation is not confined to the work-place but in the constitution of everyday life. The social factory began and was centered in the kitchen, the bedroom, and the home. In Federici’s telling, WfH was not a demand for actual wages as it was a call for revolution. In her 1975 essay, “Wages Against Housework,” she argued,

Many times the difficulties and ambiguities which women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the fact that they reduce wages for housework to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective…

(Federici 1975, 75)
The movement, then, was about the dual goals of demystifying women’s subordination and revealing the mechanisms through which capitalism maintains its power and keeps the working class divided. Understanding the movement as a revolutionary gesture aimed at undermining capitalism is quite different from thinking about it in terms of paying wages to housewives. The demand for wages for housework was, then, a demand for the ability to refuse housework and to refuse the privatized form of the family as the sole guarantor of reproductive labor. Kathi Weeks has a similar reading of the WfH literature informed by Hardt and Negri’s autonomous Marxism and stated in terms of the demand for basic income (Weeks 2011). In the structural shifts that have characterized the past fifty years, the relationship between production and reproduction has become far more complex than the one mapped by the WfH movement in the 1970s. As discussed above, the line between production and reproduction has become blurred as the goods formally provided by the family are replaced by commodities and services such as eldercare and childcare are now forms of waged employment. Just as reproduction has come to more closely resemble production, production has come to resemble reproduction in the sense that not only are physical goods produced but also immaterial affects, “social landscapes, communicative contexts and cultural forms” (Weeks 2011, 141). Affective labor is one type of immaterial labor, the labor of human contact and interaction. It is both corporeal and affective in the sense that its products are intangible feelings of well-being, satisfaction, and so forth, producing social networks and forms of community. Thus reproductive labor, the production of producers and consumers with the attitude, affective capacities, and communication skills required by a post-industrial economy is no longer confined to the family or household, but rather is the result of larger social processes (Hardt and Negri 2000).

This point about production is crucial to Week’s call for a basic income as it is has become more and more difficult to identify precisely who the workers are who have created the tangible and intangible products of immaterial labor. Just as the demand for wages for housework revealed the dependence of waged labor on reproductive labor, the demand for basic income reveals the ways that all people contribute to society in various ways regardless of whether they have monetary value or even measurable (McKay and Vanevery 2000, cited in Weeks 2011). The demand for basic income breaks the link between wages and income and reveals the arbitrariness of which activities are waged and which are not. This move has the potential to reveal the workings of gender, class, race and colonial power that have resulted in an ever increasing disparity between the rich and poor.

The post-industrial, informational economy described by Weeks is also a global economy. Globalization, guided by neoliberal policy agendas, has led to dramatic changes in the ways that social reproduction is structured. Although the processes through which labor power is reproduced are undergoing dramatic changes, domestic labor remains at the center (Federici 2012; Vogel 2000; Vrasti 2016). Globalization has resulted in an increase in the participation of women all over the world in waged labor, but on a highly unequal basis. The women who hold good jobs—whether as knowledge workers in the information economy, as executives and managers in traditional industries, or as professionals in the service sector—are well compensated for their labor, while other, feminized workers—male as well as female—assemble products or provide services necessary for the daily functioning of highly paid workers (Peterson 2003). These services are provided by women and men on the bottom of the ladder of privilege, many of whom are migrant workers from the global South. While partially alleviating the crises of social reproduction in the global North, their own lives are marked by poverty and precarity. These workers are what have been termed “disposable
populations”—dangerous, disenfranchised and undeserving of the rights and privileges of human dignity (Chang 2000). As Gutiérrez-Rodríguez notes, waged domestic work is linked to the “dehumanization of those who work to ensure that others have agreeable surroundings for living and recreating life” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2007, 72).

A different approach is taken by J.K. Gibson-Graham, who holds that much of the feminist literature on social reproduction, while highly imaginative and politically powerful, also troublingly represents the economy as a singular space of capitalist logic. For example, the social reproduction and globalization literature described above typically adds reproductive labor to the equation in order get a more complete picture of the “logic” of capitalism, rather than taking the opening to challenge the idea of a singular logic itself (Gibson-Graham 2008). In contrast, Gibson-Graham, drawing upon the anti-essentialist class theoretic approach of Resnick and Wolff (1987) and Fraad, Resnick and Wolff (1994) explicitly emphasizes economic difference to signify the possibility for enacting post-capitalist alternatives. For example, rather than presenting the super-exploitation of women as an inevitability of crises of capitalism, Gibson-Graham highlights the unevenness of these processes and the diversity of responses. While it is true that women in some households may be squeezed in terms of increased reproductive labor burdens, other households may also be transformed to more egalitarian structures, while still others may turn away from capitalist and/or patriarchal relations to create alternative paid and unpaid ways of meeting care needs such as through cooperatives and gift economies in ways that challenge capitalist subjectivities and goals. Jenny Cameron’s (1996) research on households in Australia, for instance, highlights a diversity of class forms that include some divisions of labor in which women assume the care role, others in which men and women head independent households, and partner households that have a more cooperative structure. Maliha Safri and Julie Graham’s (2010) research on global households highlights the emergence of communal householding and post-capitalist subjectivities among Mexican men who have migrated to the United States. Stephen Healy (2008) has examined how informal caregiving for the elderly has introduced a new division of labor in households that is not limited to a privatized care squeeze, but includes community-based mutual aid practices. McKay (2004) finds that structural changes have taken place in Filipino transnational families with men taking up traditionally female tasks such as child care and laundry, while returned women enter the traditionally masculine sphere of government. This suggests that the contours of household production may, in a range of different contexts, be shifting away from a gender division of labor, organized under a patriarchal mode of production, toward a collective or communal mode of production in which men and women share decision making and production responsibilities.

Looking at the relationship between the market and household in this way allows for the household itself to register as a site of class struggle and possibility for reducing care burdens, rather than a ready-made site for capitalist exploitation. Using this diverse economy lens also moves us away from essentialist gendered framings of women as always already careers in presumably heterosexual households (Bedford 2009; Bergeron 2011). Further de-essentializing both gender and class, this recognition that many households represent alternative forms of economy outside of the patriarchal and heterosexual norm such as individually-headed, cooperative, care among friends, etc., makes it becomes impossible to assume a particular division of labor from which a feminized caring subjectivity springs.

Rethinking the class system and the gender division of labor is also the project of Wanda Vrasti (2016). She begins by noting that today’s economic crises are simultaneously a crisis of social reproduction and a crisis of imagination. Social reproduction is no longer the
exclusive concern of women, and really it never was. It is more than just domestic labor; it includes the provision of housing, education, health care, municipal services including transportation, sanitation and utilities, and old age security. One of the consequences of neoliberal policy making is that the costs of social reproduction previously assumed by governments and employers are shifted onto individuals and families, making it increasingly difficult to meet their basic needs (Roberts 2013). The crisis of imagination identified by Vrasti is that neoliberal dogma about the naturalness of capitalist market relations as best way to organize society still holds despite all evidence to the contrary. The two crises are complementary; an answer to the crisis of imagination lies in conceiving of a politics of resistance that is also a politics of reconstruction and reproduction. Anti-capitalist strategies must work toward a form life that is opposed to “the individualizing morality of debt and work” (Vrasti 2016, 249). She proposes that the feminist perspectives and practices engaged by the materialist feminism of the 1970s, especially the WfH contributions, are tools for combating the isolation and fractures imposed by capitalism. Contesting the gender division of labor, by making reproductive work a central, equally shared, and valued activity is necessary to creating sustainable cultures of resistance, or what Federici (2008) calls, self-reproducing movements. In this vision reproductive labor contains the resources and relations necessary to build solidarity among people and connect them to the world. A guiding principle of a self-reproducing movement would not be to do away with the quotidian tasks of reproduction, but to reorganize them along more participatory and egalitarian lines. It is also to do away with the distinction between production and reproduction. Examples of self-reproducing movements can be found in prefigurative communities ranging from the Black Panthers with their free breakfasts for children, to intentional communities like The Farm in Tennessee, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, the *buen vivir* movement in Latin America, and most recently the Occupy Movement. Self-reproducing movements place care and reproduction at the center of life, value and thus have the power to bring people together and promote a dimension of collective living that is fast disappearing under capitalism. Although some of these movements have been more successful than others, Vastri argues that the principles and values associated with feminism, gender equality, the provision of basic needs, socialization and care of children, and attention to emotion, have to be part of a radical politics.

In conclusion, the critical engagements of those working at the intersection of Marxism and feminism over the past fifty years has identified and challenged multiple forms of injustice in contemporary societies. By bringing together a class analysis of surplus labor production and exploitation with a feminist analysis of how power operates at the intersection of gender, class, race, nationality and sexuality, scholarship in this tradition has been able to transform the way that work and its value has been conceptualized. Further, Marxist-feminists have not simply added domestic labor to the equation, although that in itself is an important contribution. They have also transformed our vision of the entire economic landscape. Work in this tradition has, for instance, highlighted the diversity of class forms in society, including previously neglected feudal and patriarchal as well as communal and egalitarian class relationships in households. In addition, by foregrounding the relationship between social reproduction and production, Marxist-feminism has offered powerful insights into the connections and slippages between capitalism and household economic forms. In doing this it has also created space for identifying instabilities and fractures within our current gender and class systems from which we can create effective movements for social change. Finally, by centering reproductive activities in our future visions, Marxist-feminism has contributed to the emergence of just, sustainable, post-capitalist alternatives.
References


