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Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited*

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ABSTRACT: Marx's methodology is indispensable for identifying a) the capitalist structural conditions and macro-level processes that are the foundations of the inequality between men and women in capitalist societies; and b) the limits of political and legal changes to end gender inequality. The oppression of women is the visible, observable effect (*e.g.*, in the labor market, in socioeconomic stratification, the domestic division of labor, bureaucratic authority structures, etc.) of underlying relations between men and women determined by the articulation between the capitalist mode of production, and the organization of physical and social reproduction among those who must sell their labor power to survive. Feminism, to remain relevant to the majority of women, must, therefore, acknowledge that most women are working women whose fate, and that of their families, are shaped both by gender oppression and class exploitation.

SINCE THE END OF THE SOVIET UNION and the socialist bloc, capitalism has intensified its grasp over the entire world, unleashing processes of economic change that intensify and render increasingly visible the links between the fate of people in the advanced capitalist countries and the rest of the world's population. In this historical context, a return to an examination of the relevance of Marx for feminism makes sense — despite the now fashionable academic belief in its irrelevance — because, as long as capitalism remains the dominant mode of production, it is impossible fully to understand

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the forces that oppress women and shape the relations between men and women without grounding the analysis in Marx's work.

Like the social sciences, second wave feminist thought developed largely in a dialog with Marx; not with the real Marx, however, but with a "straw Marx" whose work is riddled with failures (*e.g.*, failure to theorize childbirth, women's labor, the oppression of women), determinisms and reductionisms (*e.g.*, class reductionism, economic determinism, vulgar materialism), disregard for "agency," "sex blind categories," and "misogyny."[1] If Marx's work (and the Marxist tradition, by implication) were indeed substantively afflicted by all the shortcomings that social scientists and feminists attribute to it, it would have been long forgotten. But Marx's intellectual power and vitality remain undiminished, as demonstrated in the extent to which even scholars who reject it must grapple with his work's challenge, so much so that their theories are shaped by the very process of negating it. For example, early feminist rejection of Marx's "economic determinism" led to the production of ahistorical theories of patriarchy that sought the origins of male domination outside modes of production.[2] More recent feminist theories (grounded in the post-structuralist rejection of Marxism) have, paradoxically, turned to discourse determinism in their efforts to reject Marx's alleged "economic deter-

1 See, for example, Eisenstein, 1979; Hartmann, 1981; O'Brien, 1981. Lise Vogel's point, that socialist feminists "have worked with a conception of marxism that is itself inadequate and largely economistic" (Vogel, 1981, 197) is relevant to earlier and more recent feminist critiques of Marx and Marxist thought. See also Benhabib and Cornell, 1987; Nicholson, 1987; DiStefano, 1991. With the exception of Nicholson and DiStefano, most feminist writings since the late 1960s offer unsupported assertions about standardized flaws (class reductionism, economic determinism, etc.) in Marx and in Marxist theory in general. This practice indicates that many feminist writers and their editors share a set of taken-for-granted stereotypical beliefs about Marx and Marxism such that editors do not insist on citations to support the standard criticisms.

2 Once patriarchy was conceptualized as a system of domination analytically separate and independent from modes of production, its origins had to be found in abstract, universal, ahistorical factors: biological differences in reproduction, men's need to control women's sexuality, reproductive capacities and/or their labor and their children's labor; men's drive for power over women; men's intentional interpretation of biological differences in reproduction; the sexual division of labor; the psychosexual effects of mothering; the exchange of women by men; the "sex/gender system," etc. See, for example, Firestone, 1971; Millet, 1971; Eisenstein, 1979, 5–40); Chodorow, 1978; Rubin, 1975. For a critical assessment of ahistorical theories of patriarchy see Barrett, 1980; McDonough and Harrison, 1978; Beechey, 1987. Attempts to historicize patriarchy (*e.g.*, McDonough and Harrison, 1978; Hartmann, 1976) result in the study of its changing forms while patriarchy itself remains constant. For a critique of theories of patriarchy as an ahistorical and tautological attempt to account for the ubiquitous nature of gender inequality see Middleton, 1988, 41–45.

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minism" and "class reductionism."[3] The deconstruction of "women" as a category of analysis, the focus on "discursively constructed" genders, sexualities, bodies, and manifold differences among women seem to have severed the links between Marx's work, feminist theory and women's liberation. As Epstein argues, "feminist theory has come to mean feminist post-structuralism" and this entails the adoption of principles (*e.g.*, anti-essentialism, social constructionism, the reduction of social reality to discourse, relativism, the rejection of macro-level theories, the so-called "metanarratives") antithetical to the development of social analyses and political strategies useful for all social movements, including women's liberation.[4] The very idea of women's oppression and struggles for liberation presupposes the material reality of their plight and the validity of their claims, notions outside the purview of theories for which everything is relative and discursively constructed.

Equally important as a barrier to the development of Marxist feminism is the belief, widespread among Marxist scholars, students, and academics in general, that while Marx's work might be important for the study of political economy, the state, ideology, social class and other aspects of capitalist societies, it has little to contribute to feminism, beyond the awareness that it is important to examine the ways capitalism, in addition to patriarchy, or to systems of male dominance, contributes to the oppression of women.

It is not my goal, however, to engage in a critique of feminist post-structuralism, the feminist literature about/against Marx, or the views of those who, though knowledgeable about Marx's work, have a relatively narrow view of its theoretical scope. Instead, I will present my understanding of the usefulness of some aspects of Marx's work that are theoretically and politically important for feminists.[5]

3 The post-structuralist reduction of social reality to discourse or text has been critiqued as discourse determinism or reductionism by, for example, Alcoff, 1989 and Ebert, 1995. For a critical understanding of discourse that links it to the workings of capitalism, see Hennessy, 1993.

4 Epstein, 1995, 83; see also DiStefano, 1990, 75–76.

5 My work, influenced by my training as a sociologist and by Althusser's and Godelier's work (Althusser, 1970; Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Godelier, 1972; 1973), shares their interest in Marx's methodology. Like Lise Vogel, I give importance to the organization of reproduction as one of the foundations of the oppression of women but my writings have been more self-consciously methodological. I have explored the relevance of Marx's method, as developed by Marx and elaborated by Althusser and Godelier, to identify the non-observable structures and social relations underlying the visible patterns of interaction between men and women that place the latter in a subordinate position.

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Marx's Method and Its Relevance for Understanding How Capitalism Oppresses Women

Although Marx did not write specifically and at length about the oppression of women, his work is a source of methodological and theoretical insights necessary to grapple with the oppression of women under capitalism, and with the limitations capitalism poses to feminist politics.

Any consideration of the oppression of women brings to mind a variety of psychological, economic, social and political phenomena affecting women's lives, ranging from rape, incest, domestic violence and sexual harassment, to social stereotyping, low-paid and gender-segregated employment, discrimination in educational and occupational institutions, the sexual division of labor, domestic labor and the contradiction between domestic and work demands, reproductive issues and the struggle for reproductive self-determination, the under-representation of women in political offices and public leadership roles and, unavoidably, patriarchy.

In its various formulations, patriarchy posits men's traits and/or intentions as the cause of women's oppression. This way of thinking diverts attention from theorizing the social relations that place women in a disadvantageous position in every sphere of life and channels it towards men as the cause of women's oppression. But men do not have a privileged position in history such that, independent of social determinations, they have the foresight and power consciously to shape the social organization in their favor. Men, like women, are social beings whose characteristics reflect the social formation within which they emerge as social agents.

Marx cautions us to avoid projecting into the past or into a universal human nature the attributes people exhibit in the present; *e.g.*, the individual for whom it is natural to engage in market competition and utility maximization is the product of bourgeois society, of a particular historical epoch (Marx, 1970, 189). Likewise, we have to examine the historical conditions that produce and reproduce current unequal social relations and forms of consciousness among men and women[6] resulting in the various phenomena listed above, and

6 I am aware of the problematic implications of using men and women as categories of analysis. But to consider that one's only theoretical options are essentialism and its negation, the fragmented and decentered postmodern subject, is to remain mired in un-

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this entails examination of their capitalist conditions of possibility. To do so from within Marx's theoretical and methodological standpoint requires an understanding of the relevance, for the analysis of the oppression of women, of Marx's dialectical and materialist ontology and methodology as well as of the basic premises of historical materialism. What follows is my interpretation of some of Marx's texts on methodology, political rights, historical materialism and capitalism to show their relevance for both Marxist and feminist theory and politics.

To grasp the capitalist determinants of the oppression of women it is indispensable to follow Marx's methodology; *i.e.*, his dialectical understanding of abstraction, his critique of the search for origins in isolation from and prior to the analysis of the historically specific structures and relations underlying the phenomena under consideration, his conception of history and the dialectics of the general and the particular. I believe that Marx's most important potential contributions to feminist theory and politics reside precisely in the aspect of his work that most feminists ignored: his methodology. Exclusive focus on what he said and did not say about women kept feminist theorists from exploring the potential of his methodological insights to deepen our understanding of the phenomena called "the oppression of women" or, in earlier times, the "woman question."

In his only explicitly methodological statement, Marx argues that those aspects of social reality that seem to us the most concrete and obvious, the starting point of our investigations are, however, the least informative because they presuppose multiple historical conditions of possibility that cannot be grasped without further theoretical and historical analysis (Marx, 1970, 205). We attain knowledge when we advance from those "imaginary concrete concepts" (*e.g.*, women, men, family, childcare, etc.) to "increasingly simple concepts"or abstractions, meaning partial, one-sided aspects of complex phenomena such as, for example, domestic labor, sexual division of labor, and gender. Then, after theoretical and empirical investigation of the historical social relations or conditions of possibility of these abstractions,

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dialectical thinking. I view "men" and "women" as universal concretes (Marx, 1970, 188–214), as the unity of the universal material aspects of the human species (*i.e.*, the ways in which humans are conditioned by their biology and the natural environment), and the historically specific ensemble of social relations within which people live their lives and organize production and reproduction.

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we return to the phenomena that concerned us, now understood as "a totality comprising many determinations and relations." The concept is now a "real concrete" because it is "a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects" (Marx, 1970, 205–206).

Marx's dialectical ontology posits that every abstraction or category of analysis captures only a moment or aspect of a complex totality; things are what they are because of their relationships with other things, which are not always visible to immediate perception but can be identified if, instead of taking for granted the empirically observable in itself, as all there is, we inquire instead about its conditions of possibility and change. This methodological stance entails a distinction between the observable and the unobservable aspects of social reality and directs us to the search for the underlying conditions and social relations that render possible that which we are able to observe; "all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" (Marx, 1968, 817).

For example, we become aware of the inequality between men and women through its observable forms: unequal pay, unequal education and opportunities, domestic violence, women's main responsibility for children and domestic work, etc. Feminists, working mainly with the theoretical tools of the social sciences, produced "simple abstractions;" *e.g.*, sexual division of labor, sexual stratification, gender, gender stratification, patriarchy, sex/gender system, the exchange of women, etc. The feminist question, Why are women oppressed "as women"? — women being an abstraction that not only ignores the heterogeneity of the population it describes, but also fails to interrogate the conditions under which females would self-identify as such rather than in terms of class, national origin or other possible identities — together with the political rejection of Marxism's alleged class reductionism and economism, produced ahistorical answers; *e.g.*, biological inequality in procreation (Firestone, 1971); men's exchange of women (Rubin, 1975, 157–210); men's decision to control reproduction in order to oppress women (Eisenstein, 1979); mothering (Chodorow, 1978), and patriarchy or men's desire to control and benefit from women's domestic services (Hartmann, 1981).

Marx's methodological insights suggest that we need to look at the inequality between men and women in their historical context. In the Marxist sense, this does not mean a search for origins or a

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chronological account of changes in, for example, the sexual division of labor, sexual or gender stratification, ideological or discursive constructions of gender, etc. To place a phenomenon and the categories with which we attempt to characterize it in their historical context means first, to elucidate its conditions of possibility and supports within a given mode of production (*e.g.*, capitalism) and second, to investigate the historical processes leading to its capitalist form. Marx (1970, 213) states:

> It would be inexpedient and wrong . . . to present the economic categories successively in the order in which they have played the dominant role in history. On the contrary, their order of succession is determined by their mutual relation in modern bourgeois society and this is quite the reverse of what appears to be natural to them or in accordance with the sequence of historical development. The point at issue is . . . their position within modern bourgeois society.

Marx acknowledges that all modes of production have common features, the basis for general categories of analysis that social scientists identify through historical and cross-cultural comparisons. However, these general concepts (*e.g.*, sexual division of labor, sexual inequality, etc.) are themselves "a multifarious compound comprising divergent categories. . . . The most modern periods and the most ancient periods will have (certain) categories in common," a commonality that follows "from the very fact that the subject, mankind, and the object, nature, are the same"; but what matters, what constitutes the development of these categories is "precisely their divergence from those general and common features . . . their essential differences" (Marx, 1970, 190).

Production and Reproduction as Historically Specific Phenomena

For Marx, simple abstractions or general categories yield only partial and misleading knowledge, misleading because they universalize that which is historically specific to a given mode of production. He gives the example of capital; if the specific relations of production and the specific form of surplus appropriation are omitted, any accumulation of wealth can be viewed as capital which, then, appears as "a universal and eternal relation given by nature" (Marx, 1970, 190). In the case of the reproduction of human beings, if the historically

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specific social relations within which biological, physical and social reproduction occur are omitted, it appears as if human reproduction (and the relations between men and women, parents and children it entails) is an unchanging societal universal so powerful, in the eyes of some feminists, that equality between the sexes might require the use of technology to abolish biological reproduction (Firestone, 1971).

More precise knowledge, Marx argues, is produced through recognition of the historical specificity of the phenomena we intend to understand with the use of general categories (Marx, 1970, 191); there is *no production in general* and, likewise, *no human reproduction in general*; instead, there is capitalist or feudal or subsistence production (or reproduction) and so forth. Also, there is *no general production or general reproduction*; production and reproduction are always *particular*, *e.g.*, industrial production, reproduction of specific social classes, etc.

True, Marx did not write at length about the inequality between men and women; nevertheless, his views on the logic of inquiry are important to help us theorize the capitalist structures, processes and contradictions that underlie the observable phenomena called the oppression of women or gender inequality. Marx historicizes competitive market relations and their corresponding political and legal frameworks by identifying the capitalist coercive (*i.e.*, independent of people's will), unequal and exploitative relations of production underlying the sphere of "Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham" (Marx, 1967, 176). Likewise, it is possible to historicize the observable market, social stratification and household forms of inequality between men and women (*e.g.*, sex segregated employment, the sexual division of labor within and outside households) by identifying their conditions of possibility in underlying historically specific (capitalist) relations among men and women, as producers and reproducers. These capitalist social relations of reproduction are not intersubjective relations; they are relations between men and women mediated by their relations to the conditions of production and reproduction.[7] Just as the relations between social classes are mediated by people's relation-

7 Mediation, as a mode of determination, refers to the way the relationship between two variables is shaped by the relationship between each one and a third variable. For example, the relationship between capitalists and workers is the effect of their respective relations (ownership and non-ownership) to the means of production. Among people who need to work for a living, on the average, men earn higher wages or salaries than women; this places women, especially single women and single mothers, in a dependent, subordinate position. For further discussion of this mode of determination, see Wright, 1978, 23.

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ship to the means of production (the material basis of the power the owners of the means of production exert over the non-owners), the relationships between men and women under capitalism are mediated by their differential access to the conditions necessary for their physical and social reproduction, daily and generationally.

The fundamental principle underlying this analysis is that, in the social formations where capitalism is the dominant mode of production, the functioning of the mode of production determines the social organization (establishes historical limits for its variability) and the economic foundations of human reproduction or mode of reproduction.[8] The mode of reproduction, in the context of this analysis, is the historically specific combination of labor, and the conditions and means of reproduction (the material basis — biological and economic — for the performance of reproductive tasks) in the context of relations among the agents of reproduction.

There is no historically specific name for the mode of reproduction, except the common sense, ahistorical concept of "family," which denotes its most widespread observable forms. Though awkward, in light of the ease with which it is possible to think about family and domestic relations, the concepts of mode of reproduction and agents of reproduction are important because they shift attention from "the family" and different or "deviant" (depending on the observer's values) family forms to a different object of theorizing and research: the transhistorical, necessary process of human physical and social reproduction and the capitalist underpinnings of its observable forms within societies where the capitalist mode of production is dominant; *e.g.*, nuclear families, single parent households, orphanages, etc.

While the vast majority of households start as heterosexual unions, whether or not the actual organization of reproduction takes the form of a nuclear family (parents and children only) or includes other biologically related and/or unrelated members, varies according to social class, marital status, socioeconomic status, sexual preference, employment, culture, race, ethnicity, the relative powers of classes reflected in state welfare and family policies, and so forth.

8 For other Marxist–feminist analyses of the role of reproduction in the oppression of women see Lise Vogel, 1983; Johanna Brenner and Maria Ramas, 1984. Friedrich Engels (1972) argued that production is always twofold, for it entails the production of things and, at the same time, the production of human life; his work established the theoretical foundations for Marxist feminism.

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Furthermore, changes in the "forces of reproduction" (*i.e.*, changes in reproductive technologies) have been instrumental in creating conditions for novel forms of separation between social relations of reproduction and procreation, so that at this time we are confronting the emergence of new agents of procreation (*i.e.*, agents involved only in the process of physical reproduction) related only through market exchanges which entail the buying and selling of the biological elements of generational physical reproduction.[9]

Production, Reproduction and the Oppression of Women

The notion that under capitalism the mode of production determines the mode of reproduction and, consequently, observable unequal relations between men and women is not a form of "economism" or "class reductionism," but the recognition of the complex network of macro-level effects, upon male–female relationships, of a mode of production driven by capital accumulation rather than by the goal of satisfying people's needs. To argue otherwise, postulating the "mutual interaction" between the organization of production and the organization of reproduction, or giving causal primacy to the latter, is to overlook the theoretical significance of the overwhelming evidence documenting the capitalist subordination of reproduction to production.

Production determines reproduction because it establishes its material conditions of possibility within relatively narrow structural limits; this implies that some forms of the mode of reproduction are structurally excluded, while some possible forms are more likely than others. For example, while it is logically possible for sets of households to pool resources, live together and raise children collectively, it is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain such alternative forms within a mode of social and legal organization that rests on private property and individual responsibility. Communal or collective living arrangements are, consequently, fated to be the exception rather than the rule, and do not substantially challenge the social order because people, while willing to share cooking and childcare, are unlikely to go as far as to share their economic assets.

9 For further elaboration of these issues see Gimenez, 1991.

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Production subordinates reproduction to itself because, whether or not individuals have access to the necessary conditions for reproduction (employment with a wage or salary sufficient to support parents and children) shapes their reproductive strategies and their outcome. The consequences of these relations of determination and subordination, which make reproduction contingent on the vagaries of the accumulation process, are the creation of intractable problems and enormous suffering among a large proportion of the population. For example, among the poor, sex and procreation go on, but the reproduction of labor power (which entails the reproduction of social and work skills) is not funded or funded only to a minimum extent. Hence the growth, in all capitalist societies, in the proportion of families headed by women and of populations excluded from present and future labor force participation. The subordination of reproduction to production means that the satisfaction of people's needs and the needs of the future generations of workers are dependent on the ups and downs of the business cycle and business decisions aimed at profit maximization. The emergence of the welfare state in its various forms: poverty, unemployment, class differences in fertility, mortality and morbidity; the never-ending struggles around wages, etc. These are some of the ways in which the subordination of reproduction to profit-making is manifested.

Production determines reproduction through the narrowing of the choices open to propertyless men and women (those who do not own means of production and must sell their labor for wages or salaries); they are able to sustain themselves and establish stable relations of reproduction to the extent they have access to the material conditions necessary to sustain life, something that depends, ultimately, on complex processes beyond the control of individuals. The combined effects of proletarianization, universalization of commodity production, and chronic unemployment and underemployment compel men and women to sell their labor to earn the money necessary to purchase those basic necessities. Employment is chronically scarce and changes in the forces of production result in a social and technical division of labor characterized by a complex gradation of skills and remunerations. It is therefore *structurally impossible* for capitalism to provide full employment and to pay all workers, regardless of gender (or any other socially relevant attribute), a wage sufficient to support themselves and their families. Male and female workers

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are forced to compete with each other for scarce jobs, a competition tempered by the development of sex-segregated labor markets but intensified when women's political struggles result in policies that further women's access to educational and occupational opportunities traditionally reserved for men.

Competition among workers is also intensified by constant changes in the division of labor, which segment the labor force and periodically render workers' skills obsolete, and by ideological legitimations evolved around racial, ethnic, gender, national origin and other politically constructed differences.

While the subordination of reproduction to production is a feature of the capitalist mode of production and is therefore common to all capitalist societies, its observable manifestations will vary according to their historical and environmental conditions and location within the world capitalist economy. For example, the proliferation of shanty towns in less developed nations has its counterpart in the housing projects that warehouse the poor in the wealthier nations; underlying the so-called "feminization of poverty" are capitalist relations of production that systematically deny access to well-paid employment to a substantial proportion of the propertyless population, male and female, so that their ability to reproduce themselves and the future generation is seriously impaired and their subordination is self-perpetuating. From this standpoint, the poverty of women is one aspect of a broader phenomenon: the exclusion of a growing proportion of the propertyless population, male and female, from access to the minimum conditions necessary for their reproduction.

At the level of observable market relations, men and women workers are objectively placed in competitive relations, somewhat ameliorated in the more sex-segregated sectors of the labor market, which are spontaneously understood and fought through a variety of ideologies, including ideologies about gender. But male and female relationships are not exclusively social or historical; biologically, and as long as the "forces of reproduction" remain largely unchanged for the vast majority of people, men and women are placed in complementary sexual and procreative relations. This is the material basis for the fact that they do not confront each other purely as competitors in the market, but also as potential sexual partners and potential parents — *i.e.*, as potential agents of reproduction. Other divisions among workers can be overcome through labor unions and other

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organizations. The family, which is the site where the labor force is reproduced daily and generationally, is the main institution bringing sexual partners and parents and children together. Given the structurally produced poverty and exclusion from employment and from a living wage of a large and fluctuating population, at any given time a substantial proportion of propertyless people can satisfy their material needs through claims upon the resources of salaried and waged workers, or with the help of charities and state subsidies. At the present time, it is through marriage and kinship relations that many people who are unable to work (for whatever reasons, including the effects of capitalist restructuring, downsizing, etc.) or unable to support themselves despite working full time, can have access to the resources necessary to satisfy their needs. This is why the family wage, usually criticized as a prime example of male workers' interest in appropriating women's labor for themselves, should be also dialectically understood as a working-class survival strategy which made a great deal of sense in the conditions affecting the working class in the 19th century (see, *e.g.*, Humphreys, 1977), while today it remains as a relatively unattainable ideal basis for a higher standard of living for workers, although it has never been available to the majority of workers at any given time.

Within the constraints imposed by capital accumulation, then, male workers have one major source of economic survival — waged or salaried labor — whereas female workers have, in addition to paid work, unpaid domestic work. Changes in capital accumulation set the conditions for family formation among the propertyless and, at the same time, continuously undermine it, so that a stable union becomes increasingly unattainable or unstable for the more vulnerable sectors of the working class. But "family" in its various current forms is only, to use Marx's terminology, an "imaginary concrete"; the "real concrete" or "totality comprising many determinations and relations" is the capitalist organization of social reproduction and the resulting changing networks of social relations within which social reproduction becomes possible at a given time for different strata within the propertyless population.

Marx's logic of inquiry thus results in the identification of a structural foundation (one that is not reducible to individual-level explanations) for the capitalist mode of reproduction among the propertyless which, though it is one that on the surface appears to

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be simply the timeless, pseudo-universal "family," has structural conditions of possibility specific to the capitalist mode of production. The capitalist structural constraints affecting how propertyless men and women can make a living and the likelihood they will be able to form stable unions are the material basis for the structured inequality between men and women. Gender inequality thus conceptualized, as a structural characteristic of capitalist social formations, is irreducible to microfoundations; *i.e.*, it cannot be solely or primarily explained on the basis of either men's or women's intentions, biology, psychosexual development, etc. because it is the structural effect of a complex network of macrolevel processes through which production and reproduction are inextricably connected. This network sets limits to the opportunity structures of propertyless men and women, allocating women primarily to the sphere of domestic/reproductive labor and only secondarily to paid (waged or salaried) labor, thus establishing the objective basis for differences in their relative economic, social and political power. However, analysis of concrete or specific instances of gender inequality within households, enterprises, bureaucracies, etc. is not only amenable to study at the level of microfoundations, but requires this. We cannot fully explain oppressive practices in a given institution without taking into account the agency of the major social actors; these actors' intentions, attitudes, beliefs, and practices have to be explained in terms of the structural conditions that made them possible.

The subordination of reproduction to production not only structures gender inequality as a macro-level aspect of capitalist social formations; in doing so it also affects people's existence and practices and, therefore, their consciousness. These relations establish the conditions for the effectivity of precapitalist and capitalist ideologies and practices about gender, sexuality, etc., as well as for the emergence of new ones. To make the point differently, the presence of precapitalist elements in the culture and ideology of any given social formation is not an indicator of the pervasiveness of gender inequality as a transhistorical phenomenon, nor a simple instance of precapitalist "survivals." Rather, it is evidence of the existence of capitalist material conditions that allow for the effectivity of behavior guided by such cultural and ideological elements. When those material conditions change, people's behavior as well as their allegiance to traditional views on gender, sexuality, family size, etc., also change. As

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social change is always uneven, and some sectors of the population are more affected than others, ideological struggles and divisions within social movements are the unavoidable result, as exemplified by past and current divisions among women and among feminist theorists, and the ambivalence many women feel towards feminism today.

For the sake of brevity, I have explored these determining effects among the propertyless. Among the owners of capital, the intergenerational transmission of capital is ensured through ideological, legal and political conditions which, while reflecting the requirements for the intergenerational reproduction of the capitalist class, apply to all social classes, as if "the family" were a classless phenomenon and its conditions of possibility were the same for everyone. The constraints and opportunities shaping the relations between male and female owners of capital and the forms of oppression faced by wealthy women are different, in some respects, from those affecting propertyless women, but I have chosen to focus on the latter because most women (and most men as well) are propertyless. It was their experiences and grievances that gave rise to the Women's Movement in the 1960s and will give rise to class politics enriched by feminist politics in the future.

Conclusion: Marx and Feminism Today

In this essay, I have explored the relevance of Marx's methodology for deepening our understanding of the structural basis for the inequality between women and men under capitalism. This is a preliminary analysis, limited to mapping out those structural conditions at the level of the mode of production, establishing the grounds for empirical analyses of their effects in historically specific contexts. I have argued that Marx's methodology leads to a conceptualization of the oppression of women as the visible or observable effect (*e.g.*, in the labor market, socio-economic stratification, domestic division of labor, etc.) of underlying structured relations between men and women which are, in turn, an effect of the ways in which capitalist accumulation determines the organization of reproduction among the propertyless, making it contingent on the ability of people to sell their labor.

Does this conceptualization matter? Isn't it a form of "economism" or "class reductionism"? I do not think so. To argue that women and

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men are not equal because the subordination of reproduction to capital accumulation makes that inequality unavoidable is to ground the oppression of women in capitalist societies in the core processes and features of the capitalist mode of production itself. The implications for feminist theory and politics are important.

Theoretically, a focus on underlying relations between men and women leads to the replacement of a men-vs.-women mode of thinking with a more complex and dialectical framework according to which sexist ideologies, "discourses," the beliefs, attitudes and practices of individuals, male and female, have structural conditions of emergence and effectivity that are not reducible to individuals' intentions and characteristics. Relations, as objects of inquiry, can be grasped only through their effects. We do not see class relations but we see and experience their effects when, for example, downsizing leaves thousands unemployed or when, despite growth in labor productivity and profits, workers' real wages decline. Likewise, we do not see the relations between propertyless men and women based on their unequal access to the conditions of reproduction and the means of exchange, but we do see their effects in women's relative lack of power at work and in the home. It may be argued that it is superfluous to conceptualize these underlying relations, and that it is enough to document wage/salary differentials, differences in socialization, ideologies, social constructions of gender that belittle women, male prejudices, discriminatory practices, etc. These are important phenomena which, however, must themselves be explained if we are to avoid falling into tautology (*i.e.*, explaining male domination on the basis of the phenomena used to infer its existence) while struggling for changes likely to be ineffective in the long run, no matter how significant they might be in the short run. The alternative to explanations of the oppression of women grounded in their historically specific material conditions of existence (the capitalist processes that place propertyless men and women in unequal relations to the conditions necessary for production and reproduction) are ahistorical theories based on societal requirements or on individuals' attributes (biology, psychology, psycho-sexual development, etc.) which, in terms of Marx's logic of inquiry, are at best descriptive, partial and therefore misleading accounts of the observable phenomena we call the oppression of women.

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In light of the preceding remarks, the Marxist–feminist analysis I offer in this paper is not "reductionist" but historical in the Marxist sense; it postulates that just as the production of things is organized in qualitatively different ways or modes of production, the reproduction of life and concomitant social relations are also structured in qualitatively different ways. Although at the level of observable phenomena there appears to be such a degree of continuity to warrant the conclusion that gender differences and gender inequality are a transhistorical phenomenon rooted in transhistorical societal or individual causes, Marx's methodology leads to the identification of underlying historically different structural conditions of possibility under capitalism, conditions that remain unchanged despite changes at the level of observable phenomena such as, for example, greater male involvement in housework and childcare, increases in women's income, women's access to male-dominated jobs, professions, careers, political office, etc. This approach transcends the issue of whether class or gender is "primary," or whether they "interact," by postulating that at any given time people, as ensembles of social relations, act in ways that reflect the interconnections of the historically specific structures that shape their lives, among which production and reproduction are paramount. Capitalist production entails class divisions and contradictions between the interests of capitalist women and propertyless women; among the latter, socioeconomic status differences create antagonisms between, for example, "middle-class" and working-class women. Reproduction, on the other hand, entails important commonalities of experience, most of which cut across classes, establishing a material base for women's solidarity and shared interests (sexuality, childcare, reproductive rights, domestic responsibilities, problems and joys, etc.). There are, however, important class and socioeconomic status differences in women's experiences of biological reproduction, reflected in their attitudes towards abortion, desired family size, etc, as well as differences in the organization of social reproduction: the use of paid domestic workers not only by capitalist women but by women affluent enough to afford them highlights how oppression is not something that only men can inflict upon women. The real advances upper-middle-class professional and business women (those earning six-figure salaries) have made in the last 30 years presupposes the existence of a servant stratum, drawn from the less skilled layers of the working class,

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including a large proportion of women from racial and ethnic minorities, often undocumented immigrants.

While the nature and number of divisions among women varies at the level of social formations, class divisions are common to all capitalist social formations and all social groups (*e.g.*, immigrant populations, races, ethnicities, etc.) are themselves divided by class. In light of recent feminist theory's "retreat from class" and from Marx, it must be kept in mind that regardless of what theorists may think of class as a category of analysis, class as a mechanism of surplus extraction and as a social relation that constrains people's opportunities for survival and self-realization continues to affect women's (and men's) lives: "Without understanding the significance of class positioning . . . women's movements through social space, through education, families, labor markets and in particular, in the production of their subjectivity, could not be understood" (Skeggs, 1997, 6).

Politically, the existence of class divisions establishes limits to qualitative changes in the situation of women under capitalism. Feminist struggles for women's rights, though important for the attainment of substantial improvements in the opportunities and quality of life of many individual women, do not and cannot substantially alter the status of all women. Women's success in their struggle for economic, political and civil rights does not alter the material conditions that created the problems that motivated those struggles; it only implies full membership in capitalist society. This is indeed important, for most women, like most men, must work to support themselves and their families. The abolition of gender barriers to education, employment, career advancement, political participation, etc. is a necessary and key aspect of the struggle against the oppression of women. But, as Marx argued, political emancipation and the attainment of political and civil rights are inherently limited achievements because, though the state may abolish distinctions that act as barriers to full political participation by all citizens, it does not abolish the social relations that are the basis for those distinctions and are presupposed by the very existence and characteristics of the state:

> The political annulment of private property has not only not abolished private property, it actually presupposes it. The state does away with difference in birth, class, education, and profession in its own manner when it declares birth, class, education, and profession to be unpolitical differences, when it

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summons every member of the people to an equal participation in popular sovereignty. . . . Nevertheless the state still allows private property, education . . . to have an effect in their own manner . . . and makes their particular nature felt. Far from abolishing these factual differences, its existence rests on them as a presupposition. (Marx, 1994, 7.)

Today we can add gender, race, ethnicity, immigrant status and other distinctions to those aspects of people's lives used to exclude them from full economic and political participation. Contemporary legislation designed to abolish male (and other forms of) privilege will not put an end to these forms of inequality. The most propertyless women can expect, under capitalist conditions, is a stratification profile that mirrors that of men. Women would then cease to be disproportionately poor. While this would be an enormous improvement in the status of women, it is unlikely to happen. Given the flexibilization of labor contracts, the unhampered mobility of capital, and changes in the forces of production which increase productivity with decreasing labor inputs, women's and other oppressed groups' struggle for equality within the structural limits of capitalist society are likely to be protracted, with no happy ending in sight, as long as the capitalist mode of production prevails.

There are limits to political gains also. Women's attainment of proportional representation in political office and leadership positions would not substantially change the conditions affecting the lives of most women (though it could benefit the most skilled, educated and economically privileged), just as the over-representation of men in political positions and leadership roles does not alter the vast political, class, and socioeconomic inequalities among men. In fact, economic inequalities among men have deepened in the last 20 years; in the United States, for example, the observed narrowing of the income gap between male and female earnings owes its existence not just to higher real wages for women but to declines in real male wages (Mishel, Bernstein and Schmitt, 2001, 127–129).

This admittedly sketchy account of some of the implications of Marx's work for feminism indicates that as long as capitalism rules, propertyless women will remain oppressed because most men's and women's ability to satisfy their needs, reproducing themselves daily and generationally, will remain subordinate to the changing needs of capital accumulation. To the extent feminist theory and politics

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reject as "reductionist" any grounding of the oppression of women in capitalist material conditions of existence, they could become increasingly irrelevant for the lives of most women, except academics and the relatively affluent. As the world capitalist economy grows in strength and the unprecedented mobility of capital can overnight devastate national and regional economies, the vulnerability of workers increases exponentially. In this context, there is bound to be a resurgence of labor organizing within and across national boundaries. Feminism cannot afford to be absent from the process, but this would require the recognition of the relevance of Marx's work for the emancipation of women and acknowledgment of the significance of class divisions among women, thus raising the issue whether feminist theory can ignore class and remain politically relevant for the vast majority of women. This acknowledgment of the importance of Marx for the cause of women would therefore entail not only the development of new scholarship researching and documenting the relationship between the capitalist structures that oppress women and issues of gender formation, consciousness, sexuality, reproduction, etc. but also the rediscovery and acknowledgement of the heritage of Marxist, socialist and materialist feminist theory from the 1970s and early 1980s.[10] More importantly, it would hopefully result in the strengthening and greater visibility of a feminism that transcends the fragmentation of voices and identities to concern itself with the plight of working women. Underlying the unquestionable and important historical, cultural and politically constructed differences among women there is the fundamental fact that the overwhelming majority of women, here in the United States and elsewhere, are propertyless and have to work for a living, facing similar forms of exploitation and oppression and similar constraints upon their life choices.

This preliminary analysis has shown how it is possible to use the methodological and theoretical tools available in Marx's work to theorize the capitalist foundations of women's oppression, and the possibilities today open to feminist politics. History is repeating itself; as in the early 19th century, male workers' wages and employment opportunities are declining as the proletarianization of women and children intensifies. In this context, it is through the contribu-

10 Two relatively recent collections do bring to the attention of students and younger feminists important Marxist–feminist contributions overlooked by third wave feminism: Vogel, 1995; Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997.

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tions of Marxist feminism that both Marxism and feminism can be revitalized to meet the challenge of the times.

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