

Gender & Caring labor: What's Marxism got to do with it?

-by Johanna Brenner

Many feminists agree that the gendered division of labor—and especially the feminization of caring labor (as both unpaid and paid work)—is very important to the reproduction of gender relations of power and privilege in capitalist societies.ⁱ 20th century feminist movements challenged and changed gender relations in households and workplaces; yet, the gender division of caring labor persists, if not in its most extreme form.ⁱⁱ As unpaid family workers and lower-wage paid workers, working class women do a double shift. Even though men share more domestic labor than they used to, mothers in general sleep less and have less leisure time than do fathers. In addition, women continue to carry primary responsibility for other kinds of care, such as care for disabled and ill kin, care for elders.

A vast army of low-paid women workers (often women of color/migrant workers) are the nannies, home-care workers, and housecleaners who make it possible for other women to do professional/managerial jobs. Over the last twenty years or so, the total amount of unpaid carework done in the home has diminished, because carework has been marketized—through paid domestic labor but also the expansion of “non-profit” and for profit businesses. But working-class and even middle-class families can only afford to buy these services, because low-paid women are the work force in daycare centers, nursing homes, institutional and home care for the elderly and disabled people. That women, rather than men, take primary responsibility for care in an economy where workers are penalized or rewarded in many ways (pay, promotion, pensions) according to their hours of work and employment, is one reason (besides just straight gender discrimination) that women workers still earn less than men on average. Tellingly, the wage gap increases substantially once women and men begin raising children.

Although Marx had little to say directly about women's oppression or the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, Marxist feminists have drawn on his thought to create a distinctive approach to these questions. Because it is clear that the gender division in caring labor continues and has profound effects, Marxist feminists have focused our attention on continuity and change in how caring labor is organized.ⁱⁱⁱ

Marxist feminist theory begins, where Marx does, with collective labor. Human beings must organize labor socially in order to produce what we need to survive; how socially necessary labor is organized, in turn, shapes (not determines!) the organization of all of social life.

When Marx refers to individuals who are productively active in a definite way, he is thinking primarily about the production of material goods. Marxist feminists expand the notion of socially necessary labor to include collective labor that meets individual needs for sustenance and daily renewal as well as birthing and rearing the next generation. The term social reproduction has been developed to refer to this labor.^{iv}

By social reproduction is meant the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life on a daily basis and inter-generationally. Social reproduction involves various kinds of socially necessary work - mental, physical and emotional - aimed at meeting historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined needs and, through meeting these needs, maintaining and reproducing the population. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, how adults receive social and emotional support, and how sexuality is socially constructed.

That we speak of production on the one hand and social reproduction on the other is, in part, an artifact of the (masculinist) development of Marxist thought and the nature of the capitalist mode of production. In capitalism, the work done in households, although crucial to the reproduction of human beings, is separated off from the production and circulation of commodities. In comparison, with the exception of slavery, in pre-capitalist class societies, households organized through marriage and kinship were the basic unit for organizing the production of material goods as well as human care.

As Marx pointed out, commodities (including commodified services) are both use values and exchange values. (*Capital* Vol. I, MECW vol. 35:45-46) That is, they meet a need (otherwise there would be no point in making them); but they are not produced in order to meet needs—rather, they are produced to generate surplus value—or profit. From the point of view of the production of use values, wage and unwaged labor form a unified process which has, as its end result, the reproduction of human beings. The separation of what is from one point of view (the point of view of production of use values) an integrated process into two different types of labor (commodified and uncommodified) is a result of capitalist class relations of production, not a universal fact of human social life. This separation parallels the emergence of a division between the public and private spheres, between family and work, between the state and the economy, which are also a hallmark of capitalist societies. It is these double separations—economy/household and economy/state—that have shaped the history of gender relations and women’s struggles to change them within capitalist societies.

Until now, all known systems of social reproduction have been based on a gendered division of labor (albeit sometimes quite rigid, at other times more flexible). Although this pattern appears to be mandated biologically--by the physical requirements of procreation and the needs of infants--the distribution of the work of social reproduction between families, communities, markets, and states and between women and men has varied historically. This variation can be analyzed, at least in part, as the outcome of struggles around class and gender, struggles that are often about sexuality and emotional relations as well as political power and economic resources. Class and gender struggles in turn are shaped by societal systems of oppression organized around other dimensions of power—race/ethnicity, nationality, sexual practices/identities, and so forth.

If we start from the particular features of capitalist social relations, so cogently analyzed by Marx, we can gain useful insights into these struggles and how they have produced the distinctive gender regimes (the complex of social, cultural, economic, and political practices/structures that make gender difference) of capitalist societies.

One of the great ironies of capitalist social relations is that, on the one hand, in order to exist capital needs labor (there is no exploitation, no profit, without workers); but, on the other hand, labor power differs in a fundamental way from other factors of production. The capitalist who invests in machinery can be reasonably sure to get the fruits of his investment. Indeed as a rule capitalists must invest to raise productivity in order to cut costs and compete. In contrast, the capitalist has no hold over the children of his current employees and so is reluctant to pay a wage that can support them. Marx defined “surplus value” (profit) as that part of the total value produced in the working day that was above the amount necessary for the worker’s survival (at an historically determined level)—the “value of labor power.” Yet, he also recognized a tendency for employers to force wages below this minimum.

“In the chapters on the production of surplus-value it was constantly presupposed that wages are at least equal to the value of labour-power. Forceable reduction of wages below this value plays, however, in practice too important a part, for us not to pause upon it for a moment.” (*Capital* Vol. I, MECW, 595-596)

Here Marx identified a central contradiction of capitalism—that although capital depends on the reproduction of labor power, the demand for profit threatens to undermine the reproduction of the workforce. Marx captured this conundrum in his famous ironic comment in *Capital* vol. I: “The maintenance and reproduction of the working-class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the labourer’s instincts of self-preservation and of propagation.” (MECW, 572).

From this perspective, the capacity of the working-class to reproduce itself depends on the working-class itself—on the level and extent of class struggle. Through struggle over the length of the working day, over wages, over the conditions of work, over the extent of the welfare state and other public services, working-class people have wrenched from capitalist employers the means to care for themselves and their children. Yet private contracts and public policies that have resulted from these struggles, have often assumed and reinforced rather than challenged a gender division of labor. (Among other examples, the gendering of jobs within firms, the shape of welfare programs, the rules of social security)

People, as Marx said, make their own history—but not under conditions of their own choosing. Here, Marxist-feminists argue that in order to understand the outcome of working class struggles we have to take into consideration the material conditions within which these struggles take place and the process through which, in different historical contexts, working-class men and women have defined their goals, organized their forces,

developed their strategies. These processes of defining goals, organizing forces and developing strategies have been shaped and constrained by institutionalized relations of power and privilege formed around race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

In particular, working-class women's responsibilities for caregiving, and the conditions under which they do this work, have often disadvantaged them in relation to men within both informal and formal arenas of political contestation and decision-making. Movements and movement organizations, therefore, reflect the gendered power relations through which women's voices have often been marginalized. In addition, gendered responsibilities for caregiving have shaped the way that women in different social locations (defined by intersections of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality) understand their needs and interests and, therefore, what *they* fight for within the movements and organizations that attempt to defend working-class standards of living, the health of families and communities, etc.^v

The effect of gendered responsibilities for care on women's activism is positive as well as negative. Often, women, especially working-class/poor women, indigenous women, women of color in working class communities, migrant women, find a ground for respect, authority, and power in their care responsibilities.^{vi} And, where women cooperate across households in order to accomplish their work in social reproduction, they create the social basis for collective action. Women's location in the labor of social reproduction, then, is a resource for resistance as well as a source of disempowerment.

Overall, capitalist employers resistance toward investing in the reproduction of labor power (especially new generations of labor power), competition among workers, the individualizing pressures of the wage form itself, all push in the direction of privatizing rather than socializing caregiving work. But so long as caregiving remains a private responsibility of households whose members must engage in substantial hours of both waged and unwaged labor, the gender division of labor in the household will retain a compelling logic. Even in capitalist societies with much larger welfare states than in the US, the amount of caring labor individual households must perform remains very large.

The gender division of labor looks very different in households where the low-paid labor of women (predominantly women of color (as daycare workers, family daycare operators, nannies, house cleaners, after school caregivers, homecare workers,) allows upper income professional/managerial women workers to manage rather than perform caring labor. Still, for the vast majority of heterosexual coupled households, including those in the "middle class," caring labor remains gendered. This is particularly striking in the instance of care for very young children and elders, where it is women, not men, who move out of the paid workforce (or shift to part-time paid work) to do caring work. (These decisions also reflect the wages and working conditions of many feminized occupations.)

Further, of course, the privatization of responsibility for care is especially disastrous for working-class and poor mothers who are not partnered. The difficulties of solo parenting, for working class women (white and women of color) are a strong

incentive to stay in, or enter into, less than satisfactory relationships with men. On the other hand, as wages spiral down and jobs disappear, as the puny welfare state gets even smaller, as the carceral state claims more people of color in its grip, as life just gets more insecure and more difficult, marriage and stable partnering is increasingly an out of reach survival strategy for working class women in general and especially for working-class women of color. Yet, without socially supported and funded alternatives to these privatized strategies for organizing care, living outside of couple-based households is a source of extreme disadvantage. From this perspective, it can be argued that the drive toward “marriage equality” in the LGBTQ movement reflects not only the desire for and ability to assimilate, but also the difficulties of creating other ways to survive. Or, to put it another way these, the difficulties of surviving outside of family/households make the desire for assimilation more powerful.

Of course, individual and family survival strategies based on forming coupled households organized around a gender division of labor are not simply the outcome of rational responses by men and women to material difficulties. They also reflect women’s and men’s interests and desires which are shaped socially and culturally as well as economically.

Recognizing the power of cultural and social effects, feminists have argued that it is through discourses of gender difference that gender identities come to be adopted, resisted, transgressed, and reproduced. The feminization of care remains one of the most powerful and widespread of discourses. Although discourses of gender difference have powerful effects, a Marxist feminist standpoint leads us to add that ideas do not sustain themselves without some grounding in everyday experience. This was of course one of Marx’s great insights when describing the “fetishism of commodities,” in capitalism in which relationships between people come to be seen as relationships between things. This way of understanding the world, Marx argued, is a reflection of the wage relation in commodity production. It is not a “false consciousness” in the sense of ideas imposed by cultural and social forces; rather, it is a worldview that expresses, or is consonant with, actual experience under the relations imposed by the commodity form. In the same way, to understand how the gender division of labor sustains itself in any given moment in capitalist society, we have to look for the social relations that undergird it. Here, I would argue, the impossibility of socializing care in capitalism confers a logic on, makes sensible and even productive, discourses of gender difference.

A second feature of capitalist production relations that shapes the organization of social reproduction and the gender division of labor is capitalist control over the work process. As Marx points out, insofar as workers control important aspects of the production process they have a basis for resistance; therefore, capitalist employers seek to minimize workers’ control through deskilling and through supervision.

Managerial strategies for controlling labor create, incorporate, and reproduce relations of power and privilege organized by race, gender, nationality and sexuality.^{vii} Processes of gendering, racializing, and sexualizing bodies and identities, embedded in capitalist management, reproduce gender heteronormativity—another pillar of the gender

division of labor in social reproduction. In addition, strategies that workers use to resist managerial power at the workplace and in the broader society also reflect relations of power and privilege organized by race, gender, sexuality, etc.. Workers' may be able to constrain management, but often in ways that benefit some workers at the expense of others. Beyond the workplace, local labor markets, and therefore the wages of workers in different social locations (defined by the intersection of race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, etc) are shaped by political processes and not only economic ones.

The consequence of workers' loss of control over the ways in which labor is coordinated—and the capitalist drive to extract as much surplus labor as possible—is that the full range of human needs cannot be incorporated into decisions about how production is organized. In no capitalist society is production organized to take into account, to actively support, and to provide for, the socially necessary labor of care. This work is extensive, highly skilled and labor intensive, even though it is often thought of as unskilled and inherent to feminine nature. Even the most 'family friendly' welfare state regimes, such as Sweden, do not intrude substantially on private firms' employment policies. Of course, this relation of power throws responsibility for caregiving back onto family/households.

A third feature of capitalist production relations that shapes the organization of social reproduction and the gender division of labor is that exploitation takes place through the free exchange of the wage contract and therefore requires the separation of political and economic power.^{viii} One of the most important shifts in the organization of social reproduction in capitalist societies over the past century has been the emergence of the welfare state—the expansion of public (government) responsibility for education, healthcare, and childrearing, as well as increased (and often oppressive) state regulation of families, especially those in the vulnerable parts of the working class (e.g. immigrants, oppressed racial/ethnic groups, the poor, single mothers). Although it is tempting to understand these developments as state managers acting in the long-term interests of the capitalist class—stepping in to guarantee the reproduction of the labor force when the capitalist employers will not—we might instead follow Marx's lead in focusing our attention on the self-organization of the working-class

The extent and form of government expansion into social reproduction is the outcome of reform struggles in which middle-class and working-class men and women, not only capitalist employers and state managers, played important roles. As products of struggle, state policies reflect the level and purposes of women's political self-organization but also the different resources and power available to women and men in different classes and racial/ethnic groups. Moreover, the terrain on which these groups have engaged is hardly neutral. Developments in the capitalist economy provided political openings and political resources—for example, by drawing women into wage labor; but capitalist class interests also placed constraints on what could be won. These constraints have been exercised mainly in two ways. First, especially in the liberal market economies, capitalist employers have consistently—and for the most part successfully—resisted government intrusions on their business practices and significant taxation of their profits. More fundamentally, state managers and legislators are

ultimately dependent on economic growth and prosperity, which in turn is controlled by capitalist investors.^{ix}

From this vantage point, the reasons that feminist movement has been so wildly successful and so painfully a failure, come into focus. Insofar as feminism sought to win the right to contest and compete with men free of legalized and culturally approved discrimination, feminism has won gains that have transformed—or are in the process of transforming—industrialized capitalist societies. Insofar as feminism sought to socialize responsibility for social reproduction (free—publicly supported and organized-- daycare and before/after school care, well-paid parenting leave, shorter work week and work day, generous income support and pensions for caregivers, etc.), feminism has utterly foundered. Socializing care would require a redistribution of wealth from capital to labor. Over the last thirty years, of course, redistribution has moved in the opposite direction. Until a militant, disruptive, society-wide movement that is intersectional in its politics appears, the gender division of labor will continue to hold its sway.

i This piece is adapted from my article, “Gender Inequality,” forthcoming in *The Marx Revival*, ed. Marcello Musto (Palgrave MacMillan). It is meant to provoke discussion and not to be at all definitive. In many instances, in order to make a theoretical point within space limits, complexities of the issue are ignored.

ii For a discussion of continuity and change in the gender division of labor in relation to racial/ethnic and class differences, see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor,” *Signs*, v.18, n.1 (1992)

iii Debates about the origin and reproduction of the household gender division of labor in capitalism have figured largely in Marxist and socialist feminist theorization of women’s oppression. For a range of approaches, see Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London & New York: Zed Books, 1986), Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (London: Falling Wall Press Ltd, 1975), Michele Barrett, *Women's oppression today : problems in Marxist feminist analysis* (London: NLB, 1980), Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

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Johanna Brenner, *Women and the Politics of Class* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, ‘Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist Marxism,’ in *Studies in Political Economy* 10, Winter 1983; Sue Ferguson, ‘Building On The Strengths of the Socialist Feminist Tradition,’ *New Politics*, 7, 2 (Winter 1999); Lise Vogel, ‘Domestic Labor Revisited,’ *Science & Society* 64, 2 (Summer 2000), 151-170; Martha Gimenez, ‘Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited,’ *Science & Society*, 69, 1 (January 2005), 11–32.

v For an interesting discussion of how working-class women’s interests are shaped by their caring responsibilities, see Maxine Molyneux, “Mobilization without Emancipation? Women’s Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua,” *Feminist Studies*, v.11, n. 2 (Summer, 1985).

vi For examples of women’s activism through their caregiving roles, see Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grass-roots Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

vii Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979); Carolina Bank Munoz, *Transnational Tortillas: Race, Gender, and Shop-Floor Politics in Mexico and the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2008)

viii A fourth important feature of capitalist social relations with consequences for the organization of social reproduction is the drive toward commodification (turning every human capacity and function and all production into commodities). This is not addressed here, but is discussed in the forthcoming article on “Gender Inequality” in *The Marx Revival*.

ix For a classic statement of this argument, see Fred Block, 'Beyond Relative Autonomy: State Managers as Historical Subjects,' *Socialist Register* (London: Merlin Press, 1980)