Women and Work

Mapping Social Reproduction Theory

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Capitalism is a system of exploitation and oppression. This series uses the insights of Social Reproduction Theory to deepen our understanding of the intimacy of that relationship, and the contradictions within it, past and present. The books include empirical investigations of the ways in which social oppressions of race, sexuality, ability, gender and more inhabit, shape and are shaped by the processes of creating labour power for capital. The books engage a critical exploration of Social Reproduction, enjoining debates about the theoretical and political tools required to challenge capitalism today.

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Susan Ferguson

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Introduction

When Hillary Clinton won the Democratic presidential nomination in July 2016, it was widely seen as a triumph for feminism. Clinton had climbed up the patriarchal ladder in the 1970s and 1980s, smashing glass ceilings along the way to become a wealthy lawyer, New York state senator, and eventually US Secretary of State in the Obama administration. She seemed the very picture of a working woman who had made it in a man's world. As former Texas senator Wendy Davis told the Democratic Party's women's caucus at the time, "We have never, ever had someone who has walked in our shoes, we have never had someone who understands what it means to be a woman in America, and we have never had the kind of champion that we are going to have in Hillary Clinton."[1]

Alas, Clinton didn't fare as well in her next job interview. She lost the contest for president of the United States to a man. Not just to any man, but to one notoriously sexist Donald Trump. It looked like Americans would accept almost anything to keep a woman out of the White House. Just as feminism propelled Clinton forward, her supporters lamented, anti-feminism stopped her in her tracks.

Yet, a few months later, the wind was fully in feminism's sails, albeit blowing in a different direction. In January 2017, hundreds of thousands marched through city streets around the world, waving placards with angry, witty quips at Trump's outrageously loutish behaviour and warning that feminism's hard-fought gains will not be easily dismantled. Then on March 8, International Women's Day (IWD), they took to the streets again responding to a call to resist not only "Trump and his misogynist policies, but also … the conditions that produced Trump, namely the decades long economic inequality, racial and sexual violence, and imperial wars abroad."[2]

This was a different—but not entirely new—direction for feminist politics. Socialist feminists who organized international Women's Strikes to coordinate with IWD demonstrations did what feminists in Latin America, Italy, and Poland had been doing in recent years, and what feminists have done during upsurges of struggle throughout history: they called on women to strike—to walk off their waged and unwaged jobs,

and to join with anti-racist, queer, trans, Indigenous activists, and others in demanding that people's environmental, social, economic, and reproductive needs be met. In the United States, organizers call the movement Feminism for the 99%.[3] In Argentina, it is called "popular feminism," and described as a struggle based on "a situated, class-based feminism that seeks to grow in relation to emancipatory political projects."[4] Such resistance looks very different from vying for a seat in a boardroom or the oval office for a good reason: these feminists aim not to break into a man's world, but to change that world by collectively refusing the work that upholds it.

This book is about the different ways in which feminists have understood work, and women's work in particular, in relation to questions of freedom and oppression. Work becomes an issue for women, I propose in Chapter 1, precisely because the emergence of capitalism makes it one. That is, capitalism develops only by trapping and distilling the generalized capacity of humans to labour. But it does so not simply—or even primarily—by feeding off the productive potential of waged labourers. It does so equally by reorganizing and devaluing all of people's life-making activities, most of which have been the tasks assigned to women. The book thus spans the four centuries of capitalism's existence. And it considers feminist positions associated with numerous political traditions—from 1790s radical democracy through nineteenth-century utopian socialist communitarianism and African American women's club movement feminism to the international Wages for Housework campaign and today's Feminism for the 99% project. It traces feminist theories of labour throughout this history, conceptualizing them along three broad trajectories in order to come to terms with why and how feminists have disagreed about women's work. Those trajectories are: *equality*, *critical equality*, and *social reproduction* feminisms.

But more than just a mapping of the past to present, the ensuing chapters also construct an argument about the way forward for those of us interested in building a broad-based, pluralist socialist movement. I propose that the perspective which has historically dominated socialist feminism, *critical equality feminism*, has limited the scope and potential of socialist feminism to develop the sort of inclusive working class politics needed to move beyond the ravages of capitalism. I also explain how and why *social reproduction feminism*, on the other hand, develops a theory of work that broadens our understanding of class and class struggle. This closer look at social reproduction feminism occurs in the last three

chapters of the book. There, I consider various formulations of that theoretical approach, and seek to explain how certain recent developments in that trajectory succeed in showing us what it will take to create a society in which work is an expression of freedom, not oppression.

PART I: THREE TRAJECTORIES

Equality feminism takes root in the late eighteenth-century writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and other radical democratic feminists, whose work I discuss in Chapter 2. As it develops into a more coherent framework, equality feminism incorporates a sustained critique of the gender division of labour: women's relegation to (difficult, isolated, and undervalued) work enforces their vulnerability to the arbitrary rule of husbands and fathers while breeding dependence on men. Freedom is thus to be found in their independence from men—which is attained, in large part, through access to waged work (and the education required for decent employment). This approach, I suggest, sits squarely in the *rational-humanist* tradition of critique, the same tradition of moral philosophy on which pre-modern European feminists drew.

Social reproduction feminism also begins with troubling the gender division of labour. In Chapter 3 I show how early nineteenth-century utopian socialists Anna Wheeler and William Thompson move beyond moral philosophical traditions. They do so by beginning to develop a *political-economic* analysis of women's work in the home. According to Wheeler and Thompson, women are oppressed not simply because they are excluded from waged labour and forced to be housewives. Rather, their oppression is a question of how and why such labour is devalued in the first instance, which these utopian socialists assess by theorizing its contribution to overall social wealth. Their contribution lays the foundation for a new perspective: social reproduction feminism directs our attention to the interaction between unpaid and paid labour, positioning these as different-but-equally-essential parts of the same overall (capitalist) system. As such, it sees the division and ongoing relation between the two forms of labour, not the nature of gendered labour, as the central feminist problem. It follows then that women's emancipation hinges on the radical reorganization and reimagining of the whole world of work. It also follows that capitalism will not be overturned unless women's oppression is addressed as part of the class struggle.

Chapter 3 also introduces the *critical equality feminist* trajectory through the mid-nineteenth-century writings of French socialist feminist Flora Tristan. This perspective shares social reproduction feminism's critique of capitalism's separation of productive from reproductive work, but it does so without elaborating a political-economic analysis of unpaid women's work. Instead, it analyzes, more one-sidedly, the gender division of labour, adopting the rational-humanist framework of equality feminism that attributes women's oppression to their dependence on men, also suggesting that waged work will secure women's independence from men. Critical equality feminism departs from equality feminism, however, in its claim that waged work for women is but a first step in a wider freedom project: because women are excluded from socially productive work in capitalist societies, they cannot be free until capitalism too is overturned. Women's workforce participation therefore has a further rationale: along with being released from men's subjugation, women workers fortify the class struggle against capitalism.

Critical equality feminism thus combines two forms of analysis: a rational-humanist critique of women's unpaid labour and a political-economic critique of waged labour. August Bebel and Friedrich Engels elaborate and sanction this hybrid approach as the socialist movement's more-or-less official response to "the woman question" for decades to come. This approach, I argue in Chapter 4, explains why socialist feminism tends toward theoretical dualism (the tendency to conceive patriarchal and capitalist powers as two distinct sets of social relations). Such theoretical dualism, as critics have long pointed out, engenders an equally dualist, and flawed, political perspective in which the specifically *feminist* struggle is distinct from—and added on to—the class struggle: women fight (men or the state) for their independence from men; workers fight bosses for control over their labour power. It also can promote a class reductionist political perspective: because capitalism must be ended before women can be free, the feminist struggle can always be deferred in the name of building working class unity.

Chapter 4 looks as well at two socialist feminists, revolutionaries Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai, who argue valiantly against such dualist and class reductionist politics.[5] Each has considerable insight into the importance of the feminist struggle for socialism. But insofar as they embrace a critical equality feminist perspective on women's labour, they fail to theorize their way out of the confusions introduced by the hybrid approach. That perspective correctly points to the historical

co-emergence of capitalist waged labour and unpaid domestic labour, but it does not theorize any *systemic* or necessary relation between them. It lacks a theory of their interdependency. As a result, critical equality feminism lacks the basis from which to argue that feminist and worker struggles are two different parts of the same class struggle.

Part I closes with a discussion of the traditions of anti-racist feminism which have embraced and moved beyond the three trajectories I've outlined. As early as the 1820s, those writing about black women's experiences called attention to the more complex realities not just of women's lives but of women's work, and of domestic labour in particular. I take a close look at Claudia Jones, an African American feminist Communist Party USA member in the 1940s and 1950s. Her insights about the integrated nature of racial, gender, and class oppression across realms of waged and unwaged labour gesture toward a social reproduction feminism perspective. Unfortunately, white socialist feminists who go on to develop that perspective fail to take note.

PART II: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION FEMINISM

Social reproduction feminism, I hope this book convinces readers, offers a way out of the theoretical conundrums that have characterized the socialist feminism tradition. It does so, however, only after sorting through a few muddles of its own. Its central innovation is the theorization of the feminist struggle *as* an anti-capitalist struggle, a class struggle. While critical equality feminism asserts that women's oppression ends only when capitalism is overturned, social reproduction feminism grapples with the logic behind that claim.

Chapter 6 considers several notable contributors to this trajectory, Mary Inman, Margaret Benston, Sheila Rowbotham, and the international Wages for Housework campaign theorists, Silvia Federici, Maria Dalla Costa, and Selma James. I chose these contributors because they nicely represent the two-sided development of the trajectory: the interpretation of social reproductive labour as capitalistically productive (that is, value-producing) labour, on the one hand, or as capitalistically unproductive (use value-producing only), on the other. While this may appear to be an outdated debate (those familiar with socialist feminism's history will sigh, no doubt, about revisiting the Domestic Labour Debate), I argue that it is still highly relevant: how feminists understand

unpaid domestic labour has determined the sort of political strategy they embrace, both in the 1970s and today.

At the same time, I recognize that splitting the theoretical hairs of Marxian value theory is both an arcane and abstract undertaking, and so I have reserved the heavy lifting for the first half of Chapter 8. Those disinclined to dig in are invited to skip to the second half of that chapter! Chapter 6 looks at the strengths and weaknesses of social reproduction feminism from the 1940s through to the 1970s, contrasting it to both Betty Friedan's liberal equality feminism and the radical feminism of the New York Redstockings group among others. I argue that despite its insights, social reproduction feminism in this era places too much determinative weight on unpaid housework—a move that leaves it open to the same sort of tendencies we see in critical equality feminism, theoretical dualism, and class reductionism.

As a result, and like the other trajectories, social reproduction feminism is challenged to theorize labour in ways that can explain oppressions other than gender. I revisit anti-racist feminism in Chapter 7 through a discussion of the work of the Combahee River Collective and Angela Davis. Here, I propose that the most promising response to the black feminist call for an analysis and politics that captures the integral relation of class and social oppressions can be found in today's renewed social reproduction feminism. That renewal follows Lise Vogel in dislodging unpaid housework from the centre of its analysis and insisting instead on the necessary-but-contradictory relation of social reproductive to productive work. In unlocking the possibility of critically integrating the arguments black feminists have long been making about women's social reproductive work, Vogel enabled social reproduction feminism to move beyond its own theoretical obfuscations.

This leads me to Chapter 8, where I address the question of value theory as it has been debated by the two schools of thought within social reproduction feminism. The point of that discussion is to explain how and why those schools—one associated with the autonomist Marxist understanding of value production, the other adhering closely to Marx's explanation of value in *Capital*—advocate distinct political strategies. While the former emphasizes the need to move outside capitalism and develop revolutionary commons through which people learn new ways of reproducing themselves and their worlds, the other looks to building mass movements capable of breaking the system from within. These are not mutually exclusive strategies of course, nor should they be. But, as I

try to show, the latter is absolutely essential, but not something that is the necessary or logical conclusion of autonomist Marxist feminism.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Clearly, a book that surveys centuries of feminist thinking has certain limitations. Most notably, it leaves much out. In choosing texts to highlight, I relied on my sense of those who contributed either genuinely theoretical innovations or who best exemplified theoretical trends. Because my choices are guided by what historians consider a "feminist canon," this is a story of Euro-American (mostly British-American) feminism. Telling the stories of Indigenous, Indian, South American, African, Australian, Mid-Eastern, and Asian feminist theories of labour would be better done by others more expert on those traditions. Yet, as a book about how women's work has been conceptualized in capitalist societies, I hope it provides a productive theoretical scaffolding that can be applied, adapted, and revised in relation to such stories.

I also focus on "race" and racism to the exclusion of other social oppressions, which I mention only in passing. This is largely because black feminist critiques figure prominently in the literature—perhaps because racial politics have been so prominent in the United States, where many of the activists and theorists I draw upon have been based. It is also because doing justice to any singular body of work is difficult enough; I am unlikely to do justice to the rich discussions now percolating around settler colonialism and sexualities in particular within a relatively short book.

To help the reader appreciate where the ideas I discuss emerge from, I provide some broad historical and textual context. The first chapter is the most "historical" as I set the context for why work matters to feminists at all. I do so by tracing the ways in which capitalism's emergence altered the meaning of work within people's lives. In the following chapters, I include briefer, usually introductory, passages that describe socio-political trends in the development of capitalism relevant to those writing about women's work at the time. I hope readers wanting more extended discussions of the feminists and issues I touch upon briefly will find the endnotes helpful.

Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction is a book about theory. But it is about theory that is needed if we are to create a world which prioritizes meeting human needs for security, health,

sustenance, and creativity before all else. If the demonstrations and women's strikes of recent years are to develop into a truly mass, pluralist, anti-capitalist movement, socialists and socialist feminists need to sort through the competing ideas that guide their political decision making. We need to work through to a more theoretically coherent perspective, one that can make a clear and compelling case for placing the fight against oppression at the heart of the class struggle. I hope this book contributes to that project.

1
The Labour Lens

Why do feminists think about work at all? What makes work—or labour—a compelling lens through which to view the world? I can think of a few good answers to that question. The most obvious perhaps is that the vast majority of women today work, and they work a lot, often under difficult and degrading circumstances. To begin, women do the majority—75 percent—of the world's unpaid care and domestic work. They spend up to three hours more per day cooking and cleaning than men do, and anywhere from two to ten hours more per day looking after children and the elderly.[1] Whatever the hardship or rewards of such work, it remains the case that those who govern our countries and economies do not recompense or adequately recognize it as a contribution to overall social wealth. As for paid labour, women's global participation rates are lower than men's, but after 300-plus years of capitalism, women are still more likely to land in the informal and low-waged sectors. They are still more likely to earn their living doing jobs that are arduous, dangerous, and insecure.[2]

That these patterns prevail makes it not just reasonable, but in fact urgent, to ask what women's work has to do with gender and gender oppression.[3] Feminists began seriously engaging with that question at the dawn of industrial capitalism. That we return to it today is not so much a sign of their failure to find an answer as it is of society's failure to solve the problem of work, and of women's work in particular. This book is about the responses to that question. It stretches back to the earliest Western feminist tracts and leapfrogs the centuries to consider feminist ideas about labour today. It is not, however, a mere review of what wise women (and some men) have had to say. Rather, it reflects upon the ways in which those ideas developed in order, primarily, to understand why the socialist feminist tradition has struggled to articulate a coherent, inclusive anti-oppression politics, and how the renewal of social reproduction feminism can most effectively contribute to anti-capitalist projects today. I introduce the book's argument and structure below.

But this chapter begins with a consideration of what work is, and why it matters so much for those who want to change the world.

CAPITALISM, WORK, AND WOMEN

There's a reason that Euro-Western feminists started thinking and writing about work when they did. It has to do with capitalism. The emergence of capitalist social relations in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and their imposition and consolidation throughout the United Kingdom, the continent, and the colonies over the next 150 years was founded on a dramatic and violent reorganization of people's working lives. The nature of the work people did, the times of day they performed it, who they worked with and for, and *why* they worked changed radically. Once a means of *supporting* life, work became a means even of *dominating* life as well.

Feudal peasants and serfs did indeed spend their lives working—often under harsh conditions. But work was something they did to survive. They did not also, as those who live in capitalist societies must, *survive to work*. Unlike waged workers, peasants and serfs had direct access to the wider ecosystem on which their subsistence depended. They produced the food they ate and chopped the wood they used for warmth and shelter. And they exercised significant control over the rhythms and pace of daily and seasonal tasks, and over the uses of communal lands and water. Their work satisfied specific, pre-determined needs (needs that exceeded bare subsistence to include spirituality, ritual, and play).[4]

Marx refers to this relation of the peasantry to the land as "the natural unity of labour with its material [*sachlich*] presuppositions."[5] This pre-capitalist mode of existence is premised upon a birth-given (and therefore seemingly natural) position within the wider social order. While that position is dependent upon and subordinate to the direct, personal authority of a lord, belonging to a lord in feudal Europe went hand-in-hand with belonging to the land. Whatever hardship lords inflicted, the peasantry was already, by custom and law, attached to the land from which its members could (however meagerly) feed, clothe, and shelter themselves.[6] Given their direct access to the means of subsistence, the peasantry can sustain itself outside of the peasant-lord relation. The peasant has "an objective existence independent of labour," writes Marx, similar to a "proprietor," who can shape "the conditions of his reality." But unlike the *nonproductive* proprietor (a lord or capitalist

for instance), the peasantry is a community of "co-proprietors … who at the same time work."[7]

This is not to say the peasantry exercised total control over its working conditions. Lords and estate managers decided what got produced on feudal estates, when and how. Moreover, those decisions, and to a certain extent those of peasant households as well, were set according to patriarchal conventions that enforced a traditional (if not absolute) gender division of labour, granting women only precarious and partial control over their bodies and labour. But access to the means of subsistence granted peasants and serfs considerable ability to set the rhythms and pace of their labours. They ceased work for festivals and holidays and, if pushed to intensify production or pay higher taxes, they regularly extended midday breaks or left crops in the fields to rot.[8] Lords responded by exacting penalties and more closely supervising peasant labour. But they could not kick the peasantry off the land, effectively threatening recalcitrant producers with starvation. Though politically subordinate, peasants and serfs were under no *economic* compulsion to obey the lords.

All this changes—over time, and with tremendous struggle—with the rise of capitalism. Capitalist social relations emerge first in the English countryside in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and become the dominant mode of production in rural and urban areas across the continent over the next 150 years. The uneven, violent, and ongoing transition from feudalism to capitalism need not be recounted here in detail.[9] At its heart is the expropriation of the peasantry—the razing of household plots and enclosures of common lands that, in time, sever the direct relationship of the peasant to her own means of subsistence. For Marx, this process generates the "primitive accumulation of capital": it transforms "individualized and scattered means of production into socially concentrated means of production" essential to kickstart (and sustain) capitalism.[10]

No longer are decisions about what gets produced in the hands of lords and peasants. With the rise of capitalism, the *market* (that is, the competitive dynamic among capitalists and independent producers) determines production. Labour, then, becomes something more than a practical human activity to be set in motion to meet specific needs and desires. It becomes a means of producing commodities: things that the market determines hold economic value—things that will produce a profit. Whereas in feudal society, the needs and desires of the aristocracy were

excessive, they were not endless. Capitalist production, however, has no such inherent limit. Unlike the peasant who exercised some control over how quickly and when she hoed fields for the lord, baked bread for her household, and broke from her labours to eat, drink, and sleep, the waged worker is forced to adopt new forms of work discipline.[11] This ensures that one-time "co-proprietors … who also work" learn precisely what it means to be (property-less) workers … who also live.

The work of living, of sustaining oneself when not working for the capitalist, does not disappear of course. It just goes underground. It becomes separated from and subsumed to the work of *making a living*—earning a wage in order to buy what is necessary to create and maintain life. The marginalization of unwaged subsistence work does not occur because waged work is harder or more important. It occurs because the work of subsisting, of reproducing life, is no longer possible unless one, *first*, has access to a wage (or other forms of money income). Some people avoid waged work by selling or trading things they make. But most, unable to feed and shelter themselves by directly and productively appropriating the means of life from the forests, fields, and waters, end up working for a wage—a wage with which they buy food, shelter, and clothing. In this way, work for a capitalist comes to dominate *all* "life-activity"—not just the value-producing activity of the factory floor or other workplace.

As in feudalism, then, most people in capitalist societies certainly work to survive. *But they also survive to work.* More precisely, they survive to become waged labourers. But here's the crux: to become waged labourers is itself a feat of labour—of women's labour specifically. While women's work varied across region and time in feudal peasant societies, women performed the bulk of the tasks required to meet subsistence needs.[12] They cooked, cleaned, and looked after young children. They also tilled the soil and harvested the produce of fields and garden plots, butchered animals, brewed beer, spun yarn, and ground grains. They developed and administered medicines to heal the sick. And they attended other women in labour, gave birth, and nursed new life. In short, women—in a more direct and transparent way than men—reproduced human beings.

With the transition to capitalism, women's reproductive labour is radically reorganized. First, as peasants lose their access to land, women lose direct access to and control over the "material presuppositions" of their subsistence-based activities. Men of course lose this too, but women's reproductive work *remains* outside the immediate value circuits of capitalism (even as the product of that work, human beings, move in

and out of those circuits as present and future waged workers, and even as women are themselves drawn into waged work on a massive scale). What's more, women's subsistence work is, in this early stage of capitalist development, increasingly distinguished from waged work spatially and temporally. It is generally performed in communities and private households (away from work performed for capitalists) and at times that accommodate the waged workers' workday, week, and year.

Responsible for reproducing workers, women in capitalist societies are at the heart of an intractable dilemma. Capitalist profit-making—and, thus, the existence of capitalism itself—depends upon the availability of the very human labour power whose means of subsistence it has already appropriated. It becomes imperative to regulate women's labour, especially if, as was often the case, there are not enough workers willing and able to submit to the new capitalist disciplines of work. Capitalist states and ruling classes partially resolve this dilemma by turning women's bodies "into an instrument for the reproduction of labor and the expansion of the work-force."[13] Thus, as Maria Mies and Silvia Federici contend, the primitive accumulation of capital involves more than the expropriation of European workers' land (and the enslavement of African bodies). It also, crucially, requires the expropriation of women's reproductive labour.

Yet *that* was not going to happen without a struggle. Without doubt, feudal society was deeply patriarchal. Women were, for the most part, legally subject to the authority wielded by fathers, husbands, curates, and lords. Still, within peasant households and communities, inequality was tempered, on the one hand, by the control women exercised over their (re)productive labours and, on the other, by the fact that *both* men and women were subject to a higher patriarchal authority, the lord. Capitalism's consolidation then required the gradual, uneven, and ongoing, frequently violent, process of undermining the control and relative equality women enjoyed in peasant households. A burgeoning capitalist state (supported by the Catholic Church and male-dominated craft guilds) variously terrorized, compelled, and induced women to accept new forms of sexist degradation and domesticity. Poor women faced persecution as witches and saw their work as midwives and healers sidelined, diminishing women's control over abortion, live births, and contraception. The state also intensified women's social vulnerability, introducing changes to inheritance laws, criminalizing prostitution, legalizing rape and battery, and ousting women from certain forms of paid labour.