

## “¡Se Va a Caer, Se Va a Caer!” (It’s Going to Fall, It’s Going to Fall!): The Power of Marxist Feminism for a Political Critique of Patriarchal Capitalism

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### Abstract

In this paper, we are interested in recovering some current reflections on the possible articulations between marxism and feminism: on one hand, from the theoretical concern for the particular forms of exploitation of women and the LGBTQ community within the frame of a neoliberal global hegemony that acquires a new intensity in Latin America, on the other, from the political commitment to the feminisms and activisms of sex-gender dissidence, social movements that in recent times have achieved a surprising political and social mobilization, articulating diverse demands and heterogeneous resistance practices, constituting a powerful laboratory of political experimentation. While these political and intellectual strategies could be read as particular, scattered, fragmentary or discontinuous criticisms, their power lies in their ability to update and articulate historical content and marginalized political languages, disqualified, discarded by the neoliberal-neoconservative hegemony. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and put into discussion these practices of resistance -its legacies and challenges-, not only from the political creativity that they bring to the scene, but also from their constitutive heterogeneity. Our proposal seeks to recover the diversity and complexity of political languages, politicizing ways of subjectivation, emancipatory imaginaries and resistance practices of feminist activism and sex-gender dissidence that have multiplied in Argentina in recent times.

**Keywords:** power, Marxist, feminism, political critique, patriarchal, capitalism

### Introduction

Against any reductionist exegesis, in this text we support that the large and complex work of Karl Marx laid firm foundations for the political comprehension of the fundamentals and functioning logics of capitalism as a specific way of production of subjects.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be denied that there have been many and diverse the interpretations and political activism that derived from that German philosopher’s intellectual enterprise. Between many other things, we are interested in bringing back here some of the current reflections regarding the possible articulations between Marxism and feminism, on one hand, from the theoretical concern about the particular forms of exploitations of women and feminized bodies in the framework of a neoliberal global hegemony that acquire a new intensity in Latin-American; on the other hand, from the political commitment to feminism and activism of sexual and gender dissidence, social movements that in the last moments have achieved an

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Origin of Family, Private Property and State*, Engels (1924) stated that capitalism isn’t just a way of production of goods, but also a way of production of subjects. Within this framework, we can ask ourselves about the production of gender, wondering about the rules that reproduce the normative heterosexual family. Feminist that inspired from Marxism and psychoanalysis allied to demonstrate how parenting acted to reproduce individuals that are useful to the capital. That is how, historically, the regulation of gender and sexuality are since always systematically linked to the capitalist way of production, being fundamental for the functioning of said economic, political and cultural system. In an attempt to get past false dichotomies in the heart of the left –issued from a dogmatic reading of Marxism- Judith Butler (2000) questions all those apparent stable distinctions between material and cultural life, warning that its political function is to identify new social movements –such as feminism and sexual dissidences- with the merely cultural, and the cultural with the derivative and secondary.

unexpected massiveness in the political and social mobilization, articulating diverse demands and heterogeneous resistance practices, becoming a potent laboratory of political experimentation.<sup>1</sup>

### **The feminism-Marxism debate comes back to the forefront**

In the last few years, it has been registered a strong reactivation of the debate regarding the role of women in the reproduction of the capitalist system of exploitation and domination from interesting critiques to neoclassical economy that Marxist feminist have been realizing since the seventies.

In a context of worsening of sexist violence all around the world, as well as the public visibilization of the women struggles against all forms of patriarchal oppression, Silvia Federici (2018; 2015; 2013) offers in her profuse work an explanation regarding the necessary role of the oppression of women in capitalism, stating that the latter has had a central function in the process of capitalist accumulation, insomuch as women have been the producers and reproducers of the most essential capitalist good: labor power. In her research about violence against women, sexual division of labor and non-paid work carried out by women, Federici demonstrates that it is possible to transcend the dichotomy between capitalism and patriarchy, giving the latter a specific historical content, within the framework of the problematization of the Marxist concept of labor.

In the same sense, the Italian Marxist Cinzia Arruzza (2015) lays out the question regarding how must be comprehended the relation between capitalist oppression and sexual and gender oppression, setting off from the assumption that this way of domination cannot be explained in individual, psychological or relational terms, but it is part of a structural social web, commonly denominated "patriarchy". Inscribed in a Marxist perspective, she resorts to, between other concepts, the notions of power of labor production and reproduction, and that is how she spreads out a rich argumentation in favor of a specific way to comprehend the articulations between capitalism and patriarchy.

From the work of these authors, our main goal is to develop a critical perspective for the analysis of the contemporaneous ways of dominations and the struggles that seek to oppose them. In this text, we take the theoretical and political tools of the feminist movement to clarify some central concepts of the Marxist theory, as well as the "production-reproduction" dualism, form the amplified conception of "labor" that expose the Marxist feminisms.<sup>2</sup>

### **The problematic nodes of a materialist feminism**

In Gayle Rubin's words (1986:5), "a sex/gender system is a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which those transformed human needs are satisfied". In that part of the social life that she calls "sex/gender system", Rubin finds the matrix of women and sexual minorities' oppression.

According to this author, classical Marxism as well as the social life theory aren't interested nor in gender nor in sexuality: "in Marx's social world map, human beings are laborers, peasants or capitalists; the fact that they are also men or women isn't seen as something very meaningful" (Rubin, 1986:5). Nonetheless, because there isn't a theory that explains the oppression of women with the explicative force that the Marxist theory explains class exploitation, there were a lot of

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<sup>1</sup> In Argentina, the feminist movement organized three active strikes against Macri's neoliberal government, and with strong complaints to the union leaders: since 2016, every March 8<sup>th</sup> the movement showed its massiveness in the streets, within the framework of the "International Working Woman's Day". In 2016, the women movement called for an "active strike" under the "While the CGT drinks tea, we take the streets" slogan (making a wordplay with Spanish word "tomar", which means both "drink" and "take"), and the next year the novelty was that the Argentine women movement achieved articulations with women collectives from different parts of the world, the struggle acquiring international nuance: the actions that were framed in the "International Women's Strike" took place in 50 countries, making an important leap in 2018, with the backing of women's collectives from more than 170 countries. The massiveness of current feminist mobilizations is a symptom of this viral effect that we previously referred to. Even more, we can affirm without doubt that in Argentina, "feminism" is an identity category in which are inscribing a multiplicity of political struggles and demands, in an inconceivable way from a decade ago: unionism, "Madres de Plaza de Mayo", national and popular movement lead by Cristina Fernández, territorial base movements and popular economy organizations, and different political parties and non-governmental organizations (Azarian, De Mauro Rucovsky y Martínez, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> We use this generic term to include historical trends of "materialist feminism" in the strict sense –founded by Christine Delphy- and the "feminist workerism" –that emerges from Mariarosa Della Costa and Alisa DelRe's initial considerations-, as well as the current versions of anti-capitalist or anti-neoliberal feminism, that finds in Silvia Federici, Cinzia Arruzza and Nancy Fraser, between others, its main referents.

attempts the oppression of women in the light of Marxist analysis. Between these attempts, there is a study field in the intersection between Marxism and feminism that, in our opinion, is central to comprehend the massiveness and the huge mobilization capacity that feminist struggles currently exhibit, against the deepening of all kinds of inequalities. We refer to the research line initiated by Dalla Cost in 1972 and deepened currently by Federici (2013; 2015; 2018), that basically states capitalism is a system of social production that does not recognize the reproduction labor of women as a social-economical activity and as a source of capital accumulation and, in exchange, it mystifies it as a natural resource or a personal service, at the same time that profits from the non-paid condition of the involved labor.

It is clear that for Marx, the reproduction of power of labor depends on the determination of the quantity of goods –foods, clothes, housing, oil- necessary to maintain the life and the power of a laborer. But there is something that Marx takes for granted, as something natural or naturalized: those goods aren't in an immediately consumable form when they're acquired by salary, "it is necessary to realize an additional work on those things before they can become into persons: the food must be cooked, the clothes washed, the beds made and the wood cut, etc. therefore, domestic labor is a key element in the laborer reproduction process from which the surplus value is extracted. As in general there are women who do the domestic labor, it has been observed that it is through the reproduction of power of labor that women are articulated in the nexus of surplus value that is the sine qua non of capitalism" (Rubin, 1986:8).

In this historical framework, the question that arises is why have been women that took charge of domestic labor and not men? Gayle Rubin comes back to the exam that Marx made in the first tome of *The Capital* of reproduction of labor and states that: "what is needed to reproduce the laborer is determined, in part, by the biological needs of the human organism, in part, by the physical conditions of the place he lives and, in part, by the cultural tradition" (1986:9). It is precisely that "historical and moral element", by Rubin's words, "that gave capitalism a cultural inheritance in the form of masculinity and femininity", a long tradition in which a wife, a mother, or any woman that does the reproductive labor is one of the needs of the laborer. Thus, the concept of social reproduction indicates the way that's organized, in the heart of a society, the psychological, mental and emotional labor necessary for the reproduction of the population: from the preparation of food to children's education; from the caring of the sick and older people to the home, passing through sexuality. To the theorists that have found a necessary relation between capitalism and patriarchy, capitalism isn't just a combination of purely economic laws and mechanisms, but a complex and articulated social order, with internal relations of exploitation, domination and alienation. In this way, the dynamics of capitalist accumulation keeps producing, reproducing, transforming, renovating and maintaining hierarchical and oppressive sexo-generic relations (Arruzza, 2016).

### Final reflection

To conclude, we want to point out what is –from our point of view- the most important contribution that Marxist feminism make to the current debates around neoliberalism: make visible the role of the social reproduction in the production of economic value, warning that reproductive labor that women do is unequally distributed and not valued.

Even if we give a step back, we can state that from the interjection between feminism and Marxism comes off that the main conflict in the capitalist society is not between capital and labor, but between the reproduction of capitalism and the reproduction of life. About this aspect, it is possible to stand out a theoretical-political position that it is starting to gain strength as much in activism as in the local academy: the feminist economy. This must be understood as a bet for another economy, to decenter the markets, for another way to organize the reproduction of daily life: an economy led by people's vital desires and not by the reproduction of capital, because the sustainability of life is what is at stake in neoliberalist capitalism.

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