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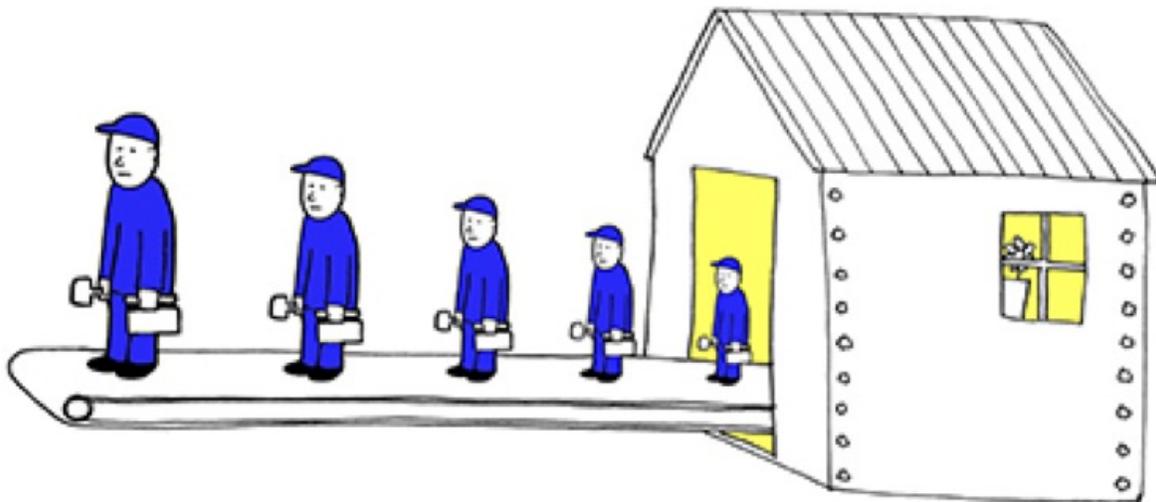
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Summary: Discusses how Marx challenges the dualism of productive and reproductive labor and argues that Marx is amenable to a feminist interpretation. Originally appeared in *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society & Culture* 17:1 (Winter 2018) <http://logosjournal.com/2018/gender-and-capital-150-years-later/> - Editors

Gender and Capital 150 Years Later

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We are witnessing an era of conservative backlash on gender rights. Nearly across the board, women make less than men, make up a majority of those in poverty (70% of those in extreme poverty), and face the real prospect of becoming a victim of sexual violence (1-3 internationally).[1]

In the US, for example, women's reproductive rights have been on the chopping block in a variety of ways including efforts to regulate access to abortion by states, attempts to cut funding to Planned Parenthood at both state and federal levels, and attempts to repeal and replace Obamacare that would include ending mandatory coverage of maternity and other basic aspects of women's healthcare. All of these policies would have a profound effect on the lives of all US women, but would disproportionately affect poor women's lives. Perhaps at the 150th Anniversary of the publication of *Capital*, Vol. I it is time to reassess what Marx had to say about the intersections of class and gender.

In this paper, I take up Marx's discussion of the production and reproduction dualism as well as his views on women workers and possibilities for new forms of the family. While Marx sometimes lapses into Victorian morality, I argue that his basic theoretical understanding could possibly be amenable to a feminist interpretation. Despite some ambivalence, Marx tended toward a dialectical model that rejected dualisms of any kind and focused on each side of

the dualism as an important moment of the whole process. While his success in overcoming these dualisms in regard to women was sometimes limited, his overall theoretic position seems amenable to feminist revisions.

Production and Reproduction

I would suggest that Marx's discussion of capitalist reproduction and consumption could offer a starting point, albeit in a very undeveloped form, for understanding the specifically capitalist nature of patriarchy. In his chapter on "Simple Reproduction" as well as some material from earlier drafts of *Capital*, Marx begins to strip away the distorted nature of capitalist reproduction as understood by classical political economists. This includes an astute critique of their understanding of the relationship between production and consumption.

In this sense, Marx describes the view of classical political economists who see production and consumption in a one-sided and distorted way. Classical political economy sees the relationship between production and consumption as mostly mutually exclusive. Products are consumed either for productive or unproductive purposes:

"Hence both the capitalist and his ideologist, the political economist, consider only that part of the worker's individual consumption to be productive which is required for the perpetuation of the working class, and which therefore must

take place in order that the capitalist may have labour-power to consume. What the worker consumes over and above that minimum for his own pleasure is seen as unproductive consumption.”[2]

For capital, consumption appears important only to the extent that working class consumption is kept to a subsistence level in order to produce the maximum amount of surplus value.

Further, Marx illustrates the alienated nature of this process in which production and consumption are fragmented for the worker:

“The worker’s productive consumption and his individual consumption are therefore totally distinct. In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the production process. The result of the first kind of consumption is that the capitalist continues to live, of the second, that the worker himself continues to live.”[3]

Here, Marx begins to get at the origins of the public/private distinction as it exists in capitalism. The production of goods for the purposes of producing surplus value is seen as completely separate from the consumption necessary for maintaining the health of the worker.

This, however, is only a one-sided assessment of the process. Consumption is integral to production although capitalist social relations tend to conceal this:

“It is the production and reproduction of the capitalist’s most indispensable means of production: the worker. The individual consumption of the worker, whether it occurs inside or outside the workshop, inside or outside the labour process, remains an aspect of the production and reproduction of capital, just as the cleaning of machinery does, whether it is done during the labour process, or when intervals in that process permit... The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation. All the capitalist cares for is to reduce the worker’s individual consumption to the necessary minimum.”[4]

But Marx notes that there is another side to this as well. This “drive for self-preservation and propagation” may not be as natural as it appears. In fact, capital fundamentally alters this seemingly “natural” drive. As Marx notes in “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” “capital itself regulates this production of labour-power, the production of the mass of men it intends to exploit in accordance with its own needs.”[5] Thus, capital has its own unique process for

reproduction of workers. It does so in such a way to reduce to a minimum the requirements of the worker:

“As capital, therefore, it is animated by the drive to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by man, that obstinate yet elastic natural barrier. This resistance is moreover lessened by the apparently undemanding nature of work at a machine, and the more pliant and docile character of the women and children employed by preference.”[6]

Despite the fact that Marx does not point out that women and children were viewed as naturally pliant because of oppressive institutions and not because of some unchanging nature of individuals, he at the very least begins to describe how seemingly natural conditions are undermined by capitalism.

Overcoming these barriers will have profound effects on the family structure. Marx notes this, as well as the fact that women in the workforce were seemingly less able to fulfill their traditional family responsibilities:

“As was shown by an official medical inquiry in the year 1861, the high death-rates are, apart from local causes, principally due to the employment of the mothers away from their homes, and to the neglect and maltreatment arising from their absence, which consists in such things as insufficient nourishment, unsuitable food and dosing with opiates; besides this, there arises an unnatural estrangement

between mother and child, and as a consequence intentional starving and poisoning of the children.”[7]

While it is certainly important to criticize Marx for failing to understand the social arrangements that make women responsible for childrearing and other functions of social reproduction, we need not follow Marx completely down this path. What is important to emphasize is that there appears to be some acknowledgement, albeit very undeveloped, that part of the role of motherhood may be socially reconstructed. While he writes of the negative effects caused by mothers not staying at home to work, he reserves particular ire for the “unnatural estrangement between mother and child”[8] which leads the mother to end the life of the child. Thus, Marx leaves at least some opening for women’s employment as long as there are other arrangements made for children’s care. It is the prospect of mothers simply having no positive relationship with their children that Marx finds to be fully unnatural. While Marx’s position here remains quite ambiguous regarding the place of women in the workforce, later, Marx makes a strong case for the necessity of change in the family structure—one that is being achieved by women’s participation in industry.

In contrast to the political economists that Marx critiques for their one-sided focus on production, Marx sees production and reproduction as a dialectically related whole: “The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total,

connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer.”[9] When viewed “as a total, connected process,” reproduction involves more than just the creation of human beings as such. Instead, under capitalism, reproduction involves a social aspect as well that continually “reproduces the capital-relation itself”—the worker and the capitalist. Thus, production and reproduction are not mutually opposed; instead all elements necessary to capitalist production including childrearing are dialectical moments of the whole.

Here Marx notes the way in which reproduction both physically and socially is a necessary feature of the capitalist accumulation process. Capital is the subject that increasingly comes to regulate all activity and comes to dominate new groups, including women and children. It does this in accordance with its own needs rather than the needs of those in society.

While Marx sees production as a primary determinant of the structure of the family and society as a whole, here he is only speaking of the capitalist mode of production in which society has largely ceded its control of social relations to the dictates of the market. This is only an appearance, however: “If production has a capitalist form, so too will reproduction. Just as in the capitalist mode of production the labour

process appears only as a means towards the process of valorization, so in the case of reproduction it appears only as a means of reproducing the value advanced as capital, i.e. as self-valorizing value.”[10] Here, Marx seems to be using appearance in a dialectical way in which the appearance is only a part of the whole. In this case, appearance is only one possible manifestation of production. Even under capitalism where labor seems to be only “a means towards the process of valorization,” there is much more going on than that. Just as capitalism is reproducing itself and extending its relations to all areas including the family, it also is developing the means to transcend this form.[11] While he does not take up this regarding the family at this point, as we will see later, Marx to some extent applies this logic to the form that the family takes as well, arguing that it is unlikely that the modern Western family would be the final form that the family takes.

Marx’s concept of reproduction is more complex than most accounts allow for. It is true that Marx, at least to some extent, ignores childcare and some of the social practices surrounding it. Marx was primarily interested in understanding and transforming the specifically capitalist social system in which he lived. Through careful and systematic analysis, Marx argued that production was a primary determinant of all aspects of social life especially under capitalism where fetishized relations involving

commodities tended to dominate over the relations with real individuals.

For this reason, Marx saw it as necessary to focus primarily on production in the public sphere as well as those aspects of the private sphere that directly related to production proper. This does not mean that Marx completely ignored the private sphere and relegated it completely to the ahistorical, “natural.” Instead, he argued that the private sphere could only be understood in reference to production. The same was true of reproduction as well; production could only be truly understood once the specific mode of reproduction was understood. Thus, the relations of production may have had analytic priority over other relations; however, these relations must be understood as dialectically related to the whole in order to understand the capitalist, or any other mode of production.

Marx focused on the specific ways in which capitalism reproduced itself through socialization of labor. For Marx, an understanding of any social phenomena could only occur within the context of a specific mode of production and a corresponding social system. Thus, the social elements involved in reproduction, for Marx, contain more than just species reproduction and must be integrated into a whole system that includes both the production of goods and people as well as their reproduction. Since they are a dialectically integrated whole, where, for example,

reproduction is a dialectical moment of production, this avoids many of the problems associated with dual systems theories that treat production and reproduction as analytically separate phenomena.

Women Workers

Far from ignoring women's labor, a large portion of the chapters "The Working Day" and "Machinery and Modern Industry" discussed the work of women and children. The introduction of machinery had a profound effect on the structure of capitalism, since it allowed for women's and children's inclusion in the workforce. It could give strength to those who could not otherwise do certain strenuous tasks. This created a situation where women and children could now be at least as productive—if not more so—than men who did physically taxing work. Consequently, this increased the number of workers involved in industry and significantly affected the lives of women and children. Both were taken out of the home to do these seemingly adult male tasks. This, as Marx noted, would have a profound effect on the structure of the family since it would be more difficult for women to carry out their traditional domestic roles while working in the factory. [12]

Claudia Leeb argues that Marx tended to "reinforce the male/female (strong/weak) opposition in relation to the working-class woman," since they could only enter the workforce through the introduction of machinery.[13] This

is all the more apparent since he did not openly question women's weakness in relation to men. While it is probable that Marx was referring to women's supposedly biologically based physical inferiority, taking a more socially based approach in interpreting the statement may be helpful. The crucial point is not whether Marx viewed women as biologically weaker, but that women's position in industry and in private life had changed as a result of the introduction of machinery. Important barriers to women's entry into the workforce had been overcome. Thus, women are not forced to stay in the domestic sphere. Machinery could enhance the abilities of all workers regardless of gender or age.

In addition to their work in modern, mechanized factories, women and young people also represented a large portion of workers in the domestic industries.[14] These industries, which had often not mechanized and produced on a smaller scale, had to compete with modern large-scale industry. The necessity of making up for the lack of technological productivity meant that the workers were exploited even more to stay competitive:

“The exploitation of cheap and immature labour power is carried out in a more shameless manner in modern manufacture than in the factory proper. This is because the technical foundation of the factory system, namely, the substitution of machines for muscular power, and the light character of the labour, is almost entirely absent in

manufacture, and at the same time women and excessively young children are subjected quite unscrupulously to the influence of poisonous or injurious substances ... the less the social productivity of labour and the technical basis for the combination of labour processes are developed in that branch, the more does the murderous side of this economy emerge.”[15]

Thus, in a variety of ways capitalism is able to use existing social inequalities, such as gender, to enhance the extraction of surplus value. This was especially true when capitalism mixed with other less developed social forms.

Women and children were often paid significantly less than men.[16] While Marx did not provide a detailed explanation for this, he pointed to capitalist efforts to bring the cost of the workers’ subsistence to a minimum especially in relation to women where the cost needed to “maintain the women of the surplus population is beneath all calculation. Hence nowhere do we find a more shameless squandering of human labour-power for the most despicable purposes than in England, the land of machinery.”[17] This was another case where the capitalist interest in profit results in human beings, especially those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, being treated as commodities, all the better the lower price that they realize in the market.

Marx was not content with noting the harsh conditions that women faced in the workforce. He also pointed to the

potential for positive effects on the working class as a whole in the labor force and as we shall see later, in family relationships as well. Initially, the introduction of women into the workforce created an impetus to regulate the excesses of capitalism's exploitation of women's labor. With his quotation from the report on the Factory Act of 1844, which regulated adult women's work, Marx noted how "[it] states ironically: 'No instances have come to my knowledge of adult women having expressed any regret at their rights being thus far interfered with.'"[18] This was one of the first attempts to "interfere" with the rights of workers to "freely" negotiate wages with their employers. Thus, the façade of freedom and equality was first torn away from women's and children's labor, since they could not legally protect themselves. While designed for women and children because of their historically subordinate social status, this would later set a precedent for regulations for adult male workers who worked in tandem with women and children. Thus, from 1844 to 1847, the 12-hour day was universal for those under the Factory Act as capitalism acted as a leveler.[19]

Transformation of the Family

Later in *Capital*, Vol. I, Marx returned to his discussion of the transformation of the family. As capitalistic organization of industry spread into the areas previously occupied by domestic industry, it helped to create further ground for the

dissolution of the family since it became necessary to regulate “the so-called ‘domestic labour’, [since] this is immediately viewed as a direct attack on the patria potestas, or in modern terms, parental authority.”[20] Marx noted that the barriers that were once in place to separate the public and private spheres were being broken down through the incorporation of women and children’s labor into industry, outside of the control of the head of household. The state had to at least take over regulation of some of the economic aspects in order to protect the system from collapse—often doing so quite reluctantly.[21]

Marx argued, however, that this form of exploitation and destruction of the family also had some potentially positive effects:

“It was not however the misuse of parental power that created the direct or indirect exploitation of immature labour-powers by capital, but rather the opposite, i.e. the capitalist mode of exploitation, by sweeping away the economic foundation which corresponded to parental power, made the use of parental power into its misuse. However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic

foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes. It is of course just as absurd to regard the Christian-Germanic form of the family as absolute and final as it would have been in the case of the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek or the Oriental forms, which, moreover, form a series in historical development. It is also obvious that the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under the appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker.”[22]

It appears that Marx was summarizing much of his previous argument regarding capitalism’s effects on the family. The old ties based upon an economic system in which most production occurred within the domestic sphere had begun to dissolve as it became more industrially based. Although production does not determine but only conditions the form of the family, these changes in the production of the means of life have had significant effects on the ability of the patriarchal family to function. It created grounds for both the harsh exploitation of new workers under capitalism as well as a non-exploitative form of the family in the new society.

While this is admittedly a brief and abstract discussion of the potential for changes in the family structure, it is important to note that Marx posited this change occurring as a result of the cooperation of all workers, including women and children. Marx was not questioning the introduction of women into the workforce, let alone calling for a family wage. Instead he pointed to the ways in which in the “spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works” against the humane development of workers.[23] Equally significant is his dialectical discussion of how these developments could under the right circumstances be transformed into their opposite, that is, to a new form of the family.

Conclusion

Although Marx’s writings on gender and the family are located sporadically throughout his work and he does not provide a completely worked out theory of gender relations, this does not necessarily mean that Marx was not interested in understanding gender relations or that he was sexist. There certainly are some problematic areas in his writings on gender and the family such as his ambivalent position regarding the changing moral status of women as they entered the workforce, here potentially illustrating a moderate Victorian viewpoint. While Marx’s theory remains underdeveloped in terms of providing an account that includes gender as important to understanding capitalism,

his categories nonetheless lead in the direction of a systematic critique of patriarchy as it manifests itself in capitalism since he is able to separate out the historically specific elements of patriarchy from a more general form of women's oppression as it has existed throughout much of human history. In this sense, his categories provide resources for feminist theory or at least areas for new dialogue at a time when Marx's critique of capital is coming to the fore once again.

Notes

[1] Morse, Felicity. "International Women's Day 2014: The shocking statistics that show why it is still so important," Independent. March 7, 2014.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/international-womens-day-2014-the-shocking-statistics-that-show-why-it-is-still-so-important-9177211.html>

[2] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 718.

[3] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 717.

[4] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 718.

[5] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 1061. Emphasis in the original.

[6] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 527.

[7] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 521.

[8] Emphasis added.

[9] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 724.

[10] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 711, emphasis added.

[11] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 621.

[12] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 517.

[13] Leeb, Claudia (2007) "Marx and the Gendered Structure of Capitalism," Philosophy & Social Criticism." Vol. 33, no. 7. p. 848.

[14] These were usually small cottage-based plants with few employees and little modern technology.

[15] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 591-592.

[16] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 590.

[17] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 517.

[18] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 394.

[19] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 520.

[20] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 620.

[21] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 620.

[22] Marx, Karl (1976) Capital Vol. I. New York: Penguin Books. P. 620-621, emphasis added.

[23] For a discussion of how Marx is ambivalent on the effect of factory work on women's morality, see Brown, Heather. (2012) Marx on Gender and the Family: A Critical Study. Bill Books. p. 84-88.

