



A CONVERSATION BETWEEN DUAL AND TRIPLE SYSTEM THEORIES AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY

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Abstract: This article attempts to understand if we can speak of a transition from Feminist Marxism to Feminist Materialism and Social Reproduction Theory, using a critical apparatus consisting of theorists such as Silvia Federici, Heidi Hartmann, as well as SRT feminists like Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharaya, Nancy Fraser, and Susan Ferguson. Starting from the proponents of the “Wages for Housework” campaign, I will make a short incursion into dual and triple system theory, to the unitary theory of Social Reproduction.

Keywords: Social Reproduction Theory, Feminist Materialism, Marxist Feminism, dual system theory, triple system theory

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The controversies between feminism and Marxism have been and perhaps still are, depending on how you look at them, layered. There have been several attempts to understand women’s role as workers in the society through social reproduction and to understand their contribution to the capitalist economy or what this contribution should be, exactly. Based on Heidi Hartmann’s essay, “The Unhappy Marriage,” and Cinzia Arruzza’s “Functionalist Determinist Reductionist,” I will look at dual and triple system theories and the unitary theory of social reproduction and mark the evolution from one to the other, as well as what each of them stands for and if the transition from what social reproduction theory meant to Marx to what social reproduction theory means to feminist theorists like Arruzza or Susan Ferguson could have been done regardless of dual and triple system theory. In other words, are dual and triple system theories a transition point to social reproduction theory or two separate socio-economical lines of thought? Starting from Marxist feminism and the campaign “Wages for housework”, which began in Italy in the 70s and produced waves of responses after that, I will shortly go through some of the responses this movement has received and produced amongst feminist theorists at the time.

An Incursion into Dual and Triple System Theories

Housework is understood by the proponents of the “Wages for Housework” campaign as “the most pervasive manipulation, and the subtlest violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class.”¹ It may have seemed like the campaign was simply advocating for the women’s right to be paid for the work they did in the house, for them to join the labor force, but, as shown in what follows, it had more than one facet. In her essay “Wages against Housework”, Federici emphasizes the difference between the ways in which male work is perceived – as real work, and the way women’s work is perceived as unimportant, even unnoticed work, going even further and saying that housework, imposed as it was on women, “has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of your female character.”² The text, however, underlies many other aspects of women’s role under capitalism, as well as their relation to capitalism. Without the care they offer in private, the public aspect could not function. Without the pillar of support they embody, their husbands could not go and do paid work. But

Federici argues that imposing wages for housework might give women the opportunity to then refuse the housework, because, as Angela Davis puts it, housework is non-stimulating, creative or productive, so nobody should waste their time doing it.³ So, what could wages for housework actually do for women? As Federici herself puts it, it could bring forward a revolutionary perspective:

“If we start from this analysis we can see the revolutionary implications of the demand for wages for housework. It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us. To ask for wages for housework will by itself undermine the expectations that society has of us, since these expectations—the essence of our socialization—are all functional to our wageless condition in the home.”⁴

It does not mean, however, to just include women into the workforce in one way or another. In fact, Federici goes on to state how pointless it is to make a comparison between women’s fight for waged housework and a raise in the wages of male factory workers. The fundamental difference is that when they struggle for more wages, men continue to enforce the flaws and constrictions of capitalism, deepening us further in to the system, whereas for women it means escaping it. This fight puts women face to face with capitalism, the very system that oppresses them. Such an understanding of this phenomenon is indeed revolutionary: “When we struggle for wages for housework we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social role.”⁵

Thus, to denaturalize housework, we need to transform it into paid work, because the unpaid nature of this work has made it “the most powerful weapon”, as Federici puts it⁶, used to further perpetuate the idea that housework is not work. Like most Marxist feminists, she locates the construction of femininity within capitalism, but what is truly interesting in her approach, and what she actually claims in her famous work “Wages Against Housework,” is that women already denaturalize housework solely by *demanding* they be paid for it, focusing rather on the importance of the performative act of demanding, than on its final outcome. But does wages for housework actually solve the problem of the “double day”, as Hartmann calls it, or does it just grant women a wage for their work, but maintain the attitude that housework is effortless and something women enjoy to do for their husbands and children? Federici argues that the reason why men find it so easy to accept what women do for them is because they regard it as an easily performed voluntary act of care and love.

While Federici considers the source of oppression to be the very nature of the work, Angela Davis, in *The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective*, claims that desexualization might not actually solve the problem of oppression, which leads to her tying privatization to oppression: “housework need no longer be considered

necessarily and unalterably private in character.” Her solution to put an end to oppression as well as possible economic tensions is for housework to become industrialized and socialized. She ties her argument of private property being the culprit to Engels’ argument in the *Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*. In the same way, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James pose an interesting question in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, where they argue that this private character of women’s housework is actually an illusion:

“Woman on the other hand has been isolated in the home, forced to carry out work that is considered unskilled, the work of giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and servicing the worker for production. Her role in the cycle of social production remained invisible because only the product of her labor, the laborer, was visible there.”⁷

This makes me go back to what Federici’s argument that when women think they serve one man, they actually serve all men. Still, to this point the problem is systemically embedded into capitalism. Heidi Hartmann then takes it from here and argues, throughout her essay, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, that we ought to look both ways, that women’s source of oppression comes from both capitalism and patriarchy. Furthermore, she tries to argue that a materialist analysis will better be able to identify what our society needs, which is a reorganization in which capital and patriarchy are two separate autonomous modes of production and this suggests that patriarchy is “not simply a psychic, but also a social and economic structure.” Like Hartmann, Christine Delphy also thinks of patriarchy as a system independent of capitalism and argues for solidarity as a weapon to aid the end of oppression: “Mobilization for this struggle should be based on patriarchal oppression, and thus includes all individuals oppressed by patriarchy and hence interested in its destruction, that is, all women.”⁸ Hartmann offers some political background to support her dual system theory. The premise which sets it all off lies in her disapproval of how early Marxists, like historian Eli Zaretsky, understand private property as the cause of women’s oppression, similar to how they thought capital stands behind the exploitation of workers. If capitalism were to end, it does not mean women’s oppression will end as well:

“Moreover, even if capitalism created the private sphere, as Zaretsky argues, why did it happen that women work there, and men in the labor force? Surely this cannot be explained without reference to patriarchy, the systemic dominance of men over women. From our point of view, the problem in the family, the labor market, economy, and society is not simply a division of labor between men and women, but a division that places men in a superior, and women in a subordinate, position.”⁹

Hartmann refers to Zaretsky and Engels’ conception of family



and community as a romanticized view. He points out that, in this logic, all categories of Marxism are sex-blind and incapable of explaining why only certain people will fill certain positions. This leads to what is maybe the core argument for developing a dual system theory, which is that Marxism analyzes women's position in the society through looking at men and women in relation to the economic system, instead of looking precisely at the relation between women and men. To summarize, feminist materialism proposes an understanding of patriarchy and capitalism as completely separate modes of production. While Hartmann seems to believe that reconceptualizing production is what will help us realize the kind of society we want, Delphy wants a "total destruction of the patriarchal system of production and reproduction."

Feminist materialists like Hartmann and Delphy have tried to build a better analysis based on the one Marxism offers, but do dual system theories support themselves? Addressing this question, Cinzia Arruzza speaks about the limitations of the dual and triple system theories. One could argue that the dual system theory was missing something, but feminists like Sasha Roseneil or Sylvia Walby have included "racism" as an autonomous system. If we go back to Marxists and Angela Davis' various mentions of women of color and how they relate to the status of "housewife", we can notice that although it was noted that women of color experience oppression differently, it still seems to be attributed to privatization and the capital, rather than racism.

From Feminist Materialism to Social Reproduction Theory

I will now turn to Cinzia Arruzza, whose social reproduction theory stance stems from what she calls *limitations* of the double and triple system theories. She claims that, because we find ourselves at an *impasse* we need to reconsider a unitary system theory, or as Susan Ferguson puts it, *a truly integrative analysis*. Social reproduction theory, the way Ferguson perceives it, is a theory that "could avoid the pitfalls of economic reductionism and functionalism if its material foundations were conceived as social and historical, not abstract, narrowly defined economic relations."¹⁰ Another definition of social reproduction is given by Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett: "the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally."¹¹ It seems from here that the materialist line of thought of separating capital from patriarchy, from race, is quite abstract thinking for social reproduction feminists. Although dual and triple system theories are all based on Marxist theories, Arruzza feels like they have not managed to reshape Marxism in the sense that they intended to. Since the struggle of Marxist feminism is precisely pinpointing the dynamics of the relationship between women's oppression and capitalism, dual and triple system theories, as Arruzza claims, "reproduce a fragmented perception of the social world."¹² To explain the manners in which materialist feminists have tried to overcome

the Marxist base-superstructure (and did not succeed, according to Arruzza), she explores the limitations of interplay between social relations and the notion of *consubstantiality* introduced by French feminists such as Danièle Kergoat and Jules Falquet, where they superimpose gender, class and race. *Consubstantiality* borrows this interconnectedness it preaches for from intersectionality and Arruzza goes further to explain why this line of thought is problematic. One of the reasons, as we have previously learned from Hartmann, Sylvia Walby or Christine Delphy is that these systems, be they dual or triple, are related to production and they are systems on their own, which include exploitation, domination and oppression, while determining each other at the same time. To explain why these materialist theories lead ultimately to infinite determinism and reductionism and to reinforce how a unitary theory could help break the chain, Arruzza metaphorically compares intersectionality to the theory of consubstantiality, explaining that if intersectionality is a mechanical interaction, consubstantiality is a chemical reaction which combines elements to create a new one:

"This approach takes into account and analyzes class exploitation, and attributes a crucial role to it. But the insistence on the coformation and consubstantiality of these social relations, animated by the refusal to attribute a determining role to class exploitation, upon closer look, ends up reproducing a ceaseless play of relations."¹³

However, *consubstantiality* as such fails to explain precisely the reason why the interaction occurs. This overlapping of determining elements causes determinism to lose "its explanatory function,"¹⁴ which leads to an infinite superimposition of systems of oppression, which is the very thing that intersectionality, according to feminist materialism, does wrong. Thus, Arruzza delves deeper into explaining how a revival of the social reproduction theory envisioned initially by Marx could potentially be the next step in what regards the reshaping of society. But the social reproduction, as Marx has discussed it, has been heavily criticized as being reductionist and biologically determinist, so how does Social Reproduction Feminism work now?

As Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser convey it in *Feminism for the 99%*, the aim of SRT is to "establish the primacy of people-making over profit-making."¹⁵ However, while, as Arruzza claims, there are Marxist feminist theorists who may have slightly leaned over into biological determinism, it is not the case that social reproduction theory is biologically determinist, in the sense that "it pays attention to the fact of biological reproduction and to the differential role that the sexes play in it, not because it sees in them a source of social meaning, but because of the way capitalism sets limits and constraints on them; in other words, because of the specific way intergenerational reproduction is socially organized within capitalism."¹⁶ Other authors such as Susan Ferguson tie Social Reproduction Feminism to its "its commitment to explaining the ways in which patriarchal dynamics inhere in

an integral and non-reducible logic of social reproduction.”¹⁷ One of the more complex definitions of SRT is offered by Tithi Bhattacharaya, a few years earlier, in 2017, in her introduction to *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*:

“The fundamental insight of SRT is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. The notion of labor is conceived here in the original sense in which Karl Marx meant it as “the first premise of all human history” -- one that, ironically, he himself failed to develop fully. Capitalism, however, acknowledges productive labor for the market as the sole form of legitimate “work,” while the tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labor power, is naturalized into nonexistence.”¹⁸

To better follow SRT’s trajectory, Arruzza offers a short incursion into the history of social reproduction theory. She begins by explaining the three meanings found in Marx’s notion of reproduction: labor power, capital and societal reproduction. Social reproduction was actually developed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, referring to the reproduction of the conditions of production. It was then appropriated by feminist theorists to mean the everyday physical and emotional reproduction, meaning emotional, affective labor¹⁹. But where are we now? As we learned from *Feminism for the 99%*, we find ourselves in a social reproduction crisis. Capitalism’s treatment of social reproduction poses contradictions, in the sense that the system cannot function without it, but the system also grants it no value economically whatsoever: “This is exactly our situation today. The current, neoliberal form of capitalism is systematically depleting our collective and individual capacities to regenerate human beings and to sustain social bonds.”²⁰

One of the main questions or problematics SRT poses revolves around the dynamic between race/gender and the capitalist machine. SRT still attempts at posing some questions, as well as answering some questions and there are many different nuances and facades Social Reproduction theorists approach. Arruzza, for instance, as Bhattacharaya explains in her introduction to *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, “refuses the reduction

of this complex dynamic to a simple question of ‘whether class comes before gender or gender before class,’ but points the way toward thinking about how ‘gender and class intertwine in capitalist production.’”²¹

Conclusions

In trying to determine if any of these theories I explored give an answer that could potentially aid the end of oppression for women or reestablish a semblance of balance in society, I found out that for feminist materialists, Marxist feminism serves as a thesis, post-structuralist feminism is the antithesis and materialist feminism is the synthesis.²² At the same time, Cinzia Arruzza disagrees with this overview, initially suggested by Stevi Jackson in “Marxism and Feminism,” as well as with the feminist materialist way of superimposing or adding an instance of oppression as a system of its own. But reintroducing a unitary theory of social reproduction the way Arruzza does it, implies “understanding of the process of reproduction of capitalism cannot be given simply on the basis of understanding its automatic aspects.” Arruzza pleads for also including human agency and class agency “within the process of total reproduction, so that losing sight of one of these aspects leads to a poor understanding of the fundamental functioning of capitalist expanded accumulation.”²³ However, what we learn from Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser’s manifesto is that we find ourselves in the midst of a social reproduction crisis, where neoliberalism stands for “the two earner family,” attempting to include women into the labor force. In this sense, labor regime is not liberating for women due to the still existent form of dependence within the family unit, which makes it difficult to position oneself in this debate. Still, without dual and triple system theories, which newer Marxist feminists contest, a unitary theory could not have been formulated the way it has been. Therefore, perhaps, we could shift the dialectical scheme proposed by Jackson into Marxism (thesis) – Dual/Triple System Theories (antithesis) and SRT (synthesis). Indeed, Social Reproduction Feminists, as Ferguson puts it in the essay I quoted above, give accounts that are developed neither on “purely theoretical” grounds, nor on “purely abstract” grounds.²⁴ They simply aim at providing a better, more comprehensive explanation of how these oppressive relations are embedded in the capitalist society.

Notes:

1. Silvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework”, In *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (New York: PM Press, 2012), 15-23. Quotation from 16.
2. Ibid.
3. Angela Davis, “The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working Class Perspective.” In *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books).
4. Silvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework”, In *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Frminist Struggle* (New York: PM Press, 2012), 15-23. Quotation from 18-19.



5. Ibid, 19.
6. Ibid, 18.
7. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The power of women and the subversion of the community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press 1975), 28.
8. Christine Delphy, "The Main Enemy," *Feminist Issues* 1(1) (1980): 23-40. Quotation from 39.
9. Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital & Class* 3, 2 (1975): 1-33. Quotation from 5.
10. Cinzia Arruzza, "Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and its Critics." *Science & Society* 80, 1 (2016): 9-30. Quotation from 10.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, 13.
13. Ibid, 14-15.
14. Ibid, 15.
15. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* (London and New York: Verso 2019), 72.
16. Cinzia Arruzza, "Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and its Critics." *Science & Society* 80, 1 (2016): 9-30. Quotation from 23.
17. Susan Ferguson, "Social Reproduction: What's the big idea?," last modified November 5, 2019, <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/>
18. Tithi Bhattacharaya in *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class. Recentering Opression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 1-27. Quotation from 2.
19. See Brendan O'Connor, Interview with Cinzia Arruzza, last modified November 5, 2019, <https://splinternews.com/how-women-are-leading-the-class-struggle-1834721678>
20. Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent*, 73
21. Bhattacharaya, in *Social Reproduction Theory*, 5
22. Arruzza, "Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist," 15
23. Ibid, 28
24. Susan Ferguson, "Social Reproduction: What's the big idea?," last modified November 5, 2019, <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/>

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