

# Notes on Gender in Marx's *Capital*

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## Abstract

As interest in Marxism and Feminism is reviving and Marx's views on 'gender' are receiving a new attention, some areas of agreement among feminists are emerging that also shape my approach to the subject.<sup>1</sup> First, while denunciations of gender inequalities and patriarchal control in the family and society can be found in Marx's work from an early stage, it is agreed that Marx "did not have much to say on gender and the family"<sup>2</sup> and, even in *Capital* his views on the subject must be reconstructed from scattered observations. Nevertheless, Marx's work has given a significant contribution to the development of feminist theory, although not primarily based on his direct pronouncements on the subject. Not only has his historical materialist method helped demonstrate the constructed character of gender hierarchies and identities.<sup>3</sup> Marx's analysis of capitalist accumulation and value creation have given feminists of my generation powerful tools to rethink the specific forms of exploitation to which women have been subjected in capitalist society and the relation between 'sex, race, and class.'<sup>4</sup> However the use that feminists have made of Marx has at best taken them in a different direction from the one he traced.

**Key words: Gender, Marx, Labour-Power, Feminism, Wages for Housework Movement, Domestic Work, Reproduction**

Writing about gender in *Capital*, then, is coming to terms with two different Marxes and, I add, two different viewpoints on gender and the class struggle. Accordingly, what follows is divided into two parts. In part 1, I examine Marx's view of gender as articulated in Vol.1 in his analysis of women's employment in industrial labour. I also comment on his silences, especially about domestic work, as they are eloquent about the concerns that structured his thought at the time of his writing.

My main argument here is that Marx left the question of gender un-theorized partly because 'women's emancipation' had a peripheral importance in his political work, moreover he naturalized domestic work and, like the European socialist movement as a whole, he idealized industrial labour as the normative form of social production and a potential leveler of social inequalities. Thus, he believed that, in time, distinctions based on gender and age would dissipate, and he failed to see the strategic importance, both for capitalist development and for the struggle against it, of the sphere of activities and relations by which our lives and labour-power are reproduced, beginning with sexuality, procreation and, first and foremost, women's unpaid domestic labour.

These 'oversights' concerning the importance of women's reproductive work have meant that, despite his condemnation of patriarchal relations, he has left us an analysis of capital and class that is conducted from a masculine viewpoint – that of the 'working man,' the industrial waged worker in whose name the International was formed, assumed to be the carrier of a universal aspiration to human liberation. It has further meant that many Marxists have felt justified in treating gender (and race) as cultural matters, dissociating them from class, and that the feminist movement had to start with a critique of Marx.

Thus, while this article focuses on the treatment of gender in Marx's major text, in Part 2, I briefly revisit the reconstruction of Marx's categories developed by feminists in the 1970s, especially in the Wages For Housework Movement of which I was part. I argue that Wages For Housework feminists found in Marx the foundation for a feminist theory centered on women's struggle against unpaid domestic labor because we read his analysis of capitalism politically, coming from a direct personal experience, looking for answers to our refusal of domestic relations. We could then take Marx's theory to places that in Marx had remained concealed. At the same time, reading Marx politically revealed the limitations of Marx's theoretical framework,

demonstrating that a feminist anti-capitalist perspective cannot ignore his work, at least as long as capitalism, remains the dominant mode of production,<sup>5</sup> but must go beyond it.

## 1. Marx and Gender on the Industrial Shop Floor

The limits of Marx's work stand out most clearly in *Capital*/Vol. 1, as it is in this work that Marx for the first time examined the question of 'gender' not in relation to the subordination of women within the bourgeois family, but with regard to the conditions of women's factory work in the industrial revolution. This was the 'woman's question' of the time<sup>6</sup> on both sides of the Channel, as economists, politicians, philanthropists clamoured against the destruction of family life it produced, the new independence it gave women, and its contribution to workers' protest, manifested in the rise of Trade Unions and Chartism.

Thus, by the time Marx began his writing, reforms were underway, and he could count on a copious literature on the subject, mainly consisting of reports by the factory inspectors that, by the 1840s, the English government was employing to ensure that the limits imposed on the hours worked by women and children would be observed.<sup>7</sup>

Whole pages from these reports are cited in Volume 1, especially in the chapters on the 'Working Day' and 'Machinery and Large Scale Industry,' serving to illustrate the structural tendencies of capitalist production – (the tendency to extend the working day to the limit of the workers' physical resistance, to devalue labour-power, to extract the maximum of labour from the minimum number of workers) – and to denounce the horrors women and children were subjected to at each stage of industrial development.

From them we learn of needlewomen dying of over-work and lack of air and food,<sup>8</sup> of young girls working without meals, fourteen hours a day or crawling half-naked in mines to bring coal to the surface, of children dragged from their beds in the middle of the night "compelled to work for bare subsistence",<sup>9</sup> 'slaughtered' by a vampire-like machine, consuming their lives until "there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited."<sup>10</sup>

Few political writers have described as uncompromisingly the brutality of capitalist work – outside of slavery – as Marx has done and he must be praised for it. Particularly impressive is his denunciation of the barbaric exploitation of child labour, which is unmatched in Marxist literature. But despite its eloquence, his account is

generally more descriptive than analytic and is remarkable for the absence of a discussion of the gender issues it raises.

We are not told, for instance, how the employment of women and children in the factories affected workers' struggles, what debates it prompted in workers' organizations, or how it affected women's relations with men. We have instead various moralistic comments to the effect that factory labour degraded women's 'moral character,' by encouraging 'promiscuous' behaviour, and made them neglect their maternal duties. Almost never are women portrayed as actors capable of fighting on their own behalf.<sup>11</sup> Mostly they appear as victims, although their contemporaries noted their independence, their boisterous behaviour, and their capacity to defend their interests against the factory owners' attempts to reform their ways.<sup>12</sup>

Missing in Marx's account of gender on the shop floor is also an analysis of the crisis that the near extinction of domestic work in proletarian communities caused for the expansion of capitalist relations, and the dilemma that capital faced – then as now - with regard to the optimal place and use of women's labour. These silences are especially significant as the chapters I mentioned are the only ones in which issues concerning gender relations have any presence.

Gender issues have a marginal place in *Capital*. In a three-volume text of thousands of pages, only in about a hundred we find any references to family, sexuality, women's work, and these often passing observations. References to gender are missing even where they would be most expected, as in the chapters on the social division of labour or the one on wages.

Only at the end of the chapter on Machinery and Large Scale Industry we find clues to the gender politics that we know Marx advocated in his political work, as secretary of the First International, in which capacity he opposed attempts to exclude women from factory employment.<sup>13</sup> These are consistent with his life-long belief that – for all its violence and brutality – capitalism was a necessary evil and even a progressive force, since by developing the productive forces capitalism creates the material conditions of production that alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual is the ruling principle.<sup>14</sup>

Applied to gender this meant that, by 'liberating' labour from the constraints of specialization and from the need for physical strength, and by drawing women and children into social production, capitalist development and industrialization in particular paved the way to more egalitarian gender relations. For on one side they

freed women and children from personal dependence and parental exploitation of their labour – the trademarks of domestic industry - and on the other enabled them to participate on equal basis with men in social production.

As he put it, while discussing the introduction of elementary education for children-factory workers:

[Thus] However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family 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.<sup>15</sup>

What this new family would look like, how it would reconcile 'production and reproduction' is not something Marx investigates. He only cautiously added that:

... the fact that the collective working group is composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must under appropriate conditions turn into a source of humane development, although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalist form, the system works in the opposite direction...<sup>16</sup>

Though not explicitly articulated, key to Marx's assumption that the displacement of domestic by large scale industry would produce a more humane society was undoubtedly also the idea (to which he returned in several sections of *Capital*) that industrial work is more than a multiplier of the power of production and a guarantor (presumably) of social abundance. It is – potentially - the creator of a different type of cooperative association and a different type of human being, freed from personal dependence and not 'fixed' in any particular set of skills, thus capable of engaging in a broad range of activities and the regular type of behaviour required by a 'rational' organization of the labour process.

Continuous with his conception of communism as the end of the division of labor, and his vision in *The German Ideology* of a society where one would fish and hunt in the morning and write poems in the evening,<sup>17</sup> the idea of an industrial, cooperative, egalitarian society, where (paraphrasing a provocative pronouncement in the *Communist Manifesto*)<sup>18</sup> gender differences would have lost all 'social validity'

in the working class, may seem enticing, and not surprisingly it has inspired generations of socialist activists, feminist included.

Yet, as feminists in the 1970s have discovered, there are major limits to this perspective. Four are worth being noted, all with implications beyond gender, relating to Marx's conception of industrialization and capitalist development as emancipating forces and conditions for human liberation.

By praising modern industry for both liberating women from the fetters of domestic work and patriarchal rule and for making possible their participation in social production, Marx assumed that:

- (i) women had never before been involved in social production, that is, reproductive work should not be considered socially necessary labour,
- (ii) what in the past has limited their work participation has been lack of physical strength;
- (iii) essential to gender equality is a technological leap and,
- (iv) most important, anticipating the argument that Marxists would repeat for generations, factory work is the paradigmatic form of social production, consequently the factory, not the community, is the site of anti-capitalist struggle.

Questions must be raised on all these counts.

We can quickly dispose of the argument from 'physical strength,' as explanation for gender-based discrimination. Suffice to say that Marx's own description of women's and children conditions of industrial employment is a counter argument to it, and the factory reports he cited make it clear that women were recruited in industrial work not because automation lessened the burden of their labor,<sup>19</sup> but because they could be paid less, were considered more docile and more prone to give all their energies to the job. We should also dispel the idea of women's confinement to home-work prior to the advent of industrialization. For the domestic industry from which women were liberated employed only a small part of the female proletariat, and was itself a fairly recent innovation resulting from the collapse of the artisan guilds.<sup>20</sup> In reality prior to and during the industrial revolution women worked in many different jobs, from agricultural work, to trading, domestic service and domestic work. Thus – as Bock and Duden have documented – there is no historical basis for the idea – to which Marx and other socialists have subscribed – that "the development of capitalism, with its increasingly industrial ("productive) work of

women, freed and frees them from the age-old feudal reigns of housework and tutelage by men.”<sup>21</sup>

Marx also underplayed in his conception of large scale industry as a leveler of social and biological distinctions, the weight of inherited and reconstructed sexual hierarchies ensuring that women would experience factory work in specific ways, different from men's.

He noted that gender assumptions continued to be prominent in industrial work, used e.g. to justify keeping women's wages lower than men's, and that 'promiscuous' work conditions could mean vulnerability to sexual abuse, often resulting in the pregnancy at a very early age.<sup>22</sup> But (as we have seen above) he assumed that these abuses would be overcome when workers would take political power and redirect industry's objectives towards their wellbeing. However, after two centuries of industrialization we can see that, while the end of capitalism is nowhere in sight, wherever it has been achieved or approximated, equality in the workplace has been a product of women's struggles not a gift of the machine.

More crucial is that Marx's identification of industrial labour as the normative form of work and privileged site of social production leaves no space to any consideration of domestic reproductive activities, which as Fortunati has pointed out, Marx only mentioned to note that capital destroys them by appropriating all of women's time.<sup>23</sup>

There is an interesting contrast here with the approach to the factory-home relation in the work of Alfred Marshall, the father of neo-classic economics. Marx's view of industrial labour as a more rational type of work recalls Marshall's "general ability to work," which he described as a new capacity, possessed [at the time] by few workers in the world:

'not peculiar to any occupation' but wanted by all, enabling workers to keep at any kind of work for a long time, "bear in mind many things at time... accommodate quickly to changes in detail of the work done, to be steady and trustworthy."<sup>24</sup>

Marshall, however, in line with contemporary reformers, believed that the prime contributor to the production of this 'general ability' was home-life and especially the influence of the mother,<sup>25</sup> so that, he strongly opposed women's external employment. Marx, by contrast, gives little attention to domestic work. No discussion of it appears in his analysis of the social division of labour, where he only

states the division of work in the family has a physiological basis.<sup>26</sup> Even more remarkable is his silence on women's domestic work in his analysis of the reproduction of labour-power, in the chapter entitled "Simple Reproduction."<sup>27</sup>

Here he turned to a theme that is crucial for understanding the process of value-creation in capitalism. That is: labour-power, our capacity to work, is not a given. Daily consumed in the work-process, it must be continuously (re)produced, and this (re)production is as essential to the valorisation of capital as "the cleaning of machinery," for "[i]t is the production of the capitalists' most precious means of production: the worker itself."<sup>28</sup>

In other words, as he also suggested in the notes later published as *Theories of Surplus Value*,<sup>29</sup> in *Capital* as well, Marx indicates that the reproduction of the worker is an essential part and condition of capital accumulation. However, he conceives it only under the aspect of 'consumption' and places its realization solely within the circuit of commodity production. The workers – Marx imagines – use the wage to buy the necessities of life – and by consuming them reproduce themselves. It is literally production of waged workers by means of commodities produced by waged workers.<sup>30</sup> Thus, "the value of labor-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner," and it is determined by the labour-time necessary for the production of the commodities the workers consume.<sup>31</sup>

At no point in *Capital*, does Marx recognize that the reproduction of labour-power entails women's unpaid domestic work – to prepare food, wash clothes, raise children, make love. On the contrary, he insists on portraying the waged worker as self-reproducing. Even when considering the needs the worker must satisfy, he portrays him as a self-sufficient commodity-buyer, listing among his necessities for life food, housing, clothing but awkwardly omitting sex, whether obtained in a familial set-up or purchased, suggesting an immaculate male workers' life, with only women being morally tainted by industrial labour.<sup>32</sup> The prostitute is thus negated as a worker, and relegated to an example of women's degradation, being pictured as belonging to "the lowest sediment of the surplus population, "that *lumpen* proletariat<sup>33</sup> that in *The 18 of Brumaire* he had described as "the refusal of all classes."<sup>34</sup>

There are a few passages where Marx comes close to breaking this silence and implicitly admitting that what appears as 'consumption' to the waged worker may be reproductive work from the viewpoint of his female counterparts. In a footnote to a discussion on the determination of the value of labour-power, in "Machine and Large Scale Industry," he writes: "from this we see how capital for the



purpose of its self-valorisation, has usurped the family labour necessary for consumption,<sup>35</sup> adding that:

[s]ince certain family functions, such as nursing and suckling children, cannot be entirely suppressed, the mothers who have been confiscated by capital must try substitutes of some sort. Domestic work, such as sewing and mending, must be replaced by the purchase of ready-made articles. Hence the diminished expenditure of labor in the house is accompanied by an increased expenditure of money outside. The cost of production of the working class therefore increases and balances its greater income. In addition to this, economy and judgment in the consumption and preparation of the means of subsistence becomes impossible.<sup>36</sup>

However, of this domestic work “that cannot be entirely suppressed” and has to be replaced by purchased goods nothing more is said, and we are also left to wonder if the cost of production only increases for the worker or increases for the capitalist as well, presumably through the struggles workers would make to gain higher wages.

Even when referring to the generational reproduction of the workforce, Marx makes no mention of women’s contribution to it, and rules out the possibility of any autonomous decision-making on their part with regard to procreation, referring to it as the “natural increase of the population,” commenting that “the capitalist may safely leave this to the workers’ drives for self-preservation and propagation,”<sup>37</sup> – a contradiction with the previously cited comment that female factory workers’ neglect of their maternal duties practically amounted to infanticide. He also implied that capitalism does not depend on women’s procreative capacity for its self-expansion, given its constant creation of a ‘surplus population’ through its technological revolutions. [In reality, so concerned have capital and the state been with ‘population’ movements that the advent of capitalism has marked an extension of prohibitions against all forms of birth control, in many cases in place even today, and intensification of penalties for women tempering with procreation.]

Attempting to account for Marx’s blindness to such ubiquitous work as reproductive work, that must have unfolded daily under his eyes in his own household, in earlier essays I have stressed its near absence in proletarian homes at the time of Marx’s writing, given that the entire family was employed in the factories from sun-up to sun-down.<sup>38</sup> Marx himself invites this conclusion when, quoting a

doctor sent by the English government to assess the state of health of the industrial districts, he noted that the shutting down of the cotton mills, caused by the American Civil War, had at least one beneficiary effect. For the women now:

had sufficient leisure to give their infants the breast instead of poisoning them with Godfrey's Cordial (an opiate). They also had the time to learn to cook. Unfortunately the acquisition of this art occurred at a time when they had nothing to cook. ....This crisis was also utilized to teach sewing to the daughters of the workers in sewing schools." "An American revolution – (he concluded) – and a universal crisis were needed in order that working girls, who spin for the whole world, might learn to sew!<sup>39</sup>

But the abysmal reduction of the time and resources necessary for the workers' reproduction which Marx documents was not a universal condition. Factory workers were only 20% to 30% of the female working population. Even among them, many women abandoned factory work once they had a child. In addition (as we have seen) the conflict between factory work and women's 'reproductive duties' was a key issue in Marx's times, as the factory reports he quoted and the reforms they produced demonstrate.

Why, then, this systematic exclusion? And why could Marx not realize that the parliamentary drive to reduce women's and children's factory work harboured a new class strategy that would change the path of the class struggle?

No doubt, part of the answer is that, like classical political economists, Marx viewed housework not as a historically determined type of work with a specific social history, but as a natural force and female vocation, one of the products of that great 'larder' that for us (he argued) is the earth. When, for instance, he commented that overwork and fatigue produced an "unnatural estrangement" between female factory workers and their children,<sup>40</sup> he appealed to an image of maternity in tune with a naturalized conception of gender roles. That in the first phase of capitalist development women's reproductive work was only (in his terminology) 'formally subsumed' to capitalist production,<sup>41</sup> i.e., it was not yet reshaped to fit the specific needs of the labour market, possibly contributed to it. Yes, such an historically minded and powerful theoretician as Marx was should have realized that though domestic work *appeared* as an age old activity, purely satisfying 'natural needs,' its form was actually a very historically specific form of work, product of a separation between production and reproduction, paid and unpaid labour, that had never

existed in pre-capitalist societies or generally societies not governed by the law of exchange value. Having warned us against the mystification produced by the wage relation, he should have seen that, from its inception, capitalism has subordinated reproductive activities, in the form of women's unpaid labour, to the production of labour-power and, therefore, the unpaid labour the capitalists extract from workers is far more conspicuous than that extracted during the waged work day, as it includes women's unpaid housework, even if reduced to a minimum.

Was Marx silent on domestic work because, as previously suggested, he "did not see social forces capable of transforming domestic labour in a revolutionary direction?" This is a legitimate question if we "read Marx politically",<sup>42</sup> and take into account that his theorizing was always concerned with its organizational implications and potential.<sup>43</sup> It opens the possibility that he was guarded on the question of housework because he feared that attention to this work might play into the hand of workers' organizations and bourgeois reformers glorifying domestic labour to exclude women from factory work. But by the 1850s-and '60s housework and family had been for decades at the centre of a lively discussion between socialists, anarchists, and a rising feminist movement, and reforms of the home and housework were also being experimented.<sup>44</sup>

We must conclude then that his disinterest in domestic work had deeper roots, stemming both from its naturalization and its devaluation, that made it appear, in comparison with industrial labour, as an archaic form soon to be superseded by the progress of industrialization. Be as it may, the consequence of Marx's under-theorization of domestic work is that *his account of capitalist exploitation and his conception of communism ignore the largest activity on this planet, and a major ground of divisions within the working class.*

There is a parallel here with the place of 'race' in Marx's work. Though he recognized that "labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin"<sup>45</sup>, he did not give much space in his analysis to slave labour and the use of racism to enforce and naturalize a more intense form of exploitation. His work, therefore, could not challenge the illusion – dominant in the socialist movement – that the interest of the white male waged worker represented the interest of the entire working class – a mystification that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led anti-colonial fighters to conclude that Marxism was irrelevant to their struggle.

Closer to home Marx did not anticipate that the brutal forms of exploitation that he so powerfully described would be soon a thing of the past, at least in much of Europe. For threatened by class warfare and the possible extinction of the workforce,

the capitalist class, with the collusion of some workers organizations, would embark in a new strategic course, increasing investment in the reproduction of labour power and male workers' wages, sending women back home to do more housework, in this process changing the course of the class struggle.

Though aware of the immense waste of life the capitalist system produced and convinced that the factory reform movement did not proceed from humanitarian inclinations, Marx did not realize that what was at stake in the passing of 'protective legislation' was more than a reform of factory work. Reducing the hours of female labour was the path to a new class strategy that reassigned proletarian women to the home, to produce not physical commodities but workers.

Through this move, capital was able to dispel the threat of working class insurgency and create a new type of worker: stronger, more disciplined, more resilient, more apt to make the goals of the system his own – indeed the type of worker that would look at the requirements of capitalist production “as self-evident natural laws.”<sup>46</sup> This was the kind of worker that enabled end-of-the-century British and US capitalism to make a technological and social shift from light to heavy industry, from textile to steel, from exploitation based upon the extension of the working day to one based upon the intensification of exploitation. This is to say that the creation of the working-class family and the full-time proletarian housewife were an essential part and condition of the transition from absolute to relative surplus. In this process, housework itself underwent a process of 'real subsumption,' for the first time becoming the object of a specific state initiative binding it more tightly to the need of the labour market and the capitalist discipline of work.

Coinciding with the heyday of British imperial expansion (which brought immense riches to the country boosting workers' pay-checks), this innovation cannot be solely credited with the pacification of the work-force. But it was an epochal event, inaugurating the strategy that later culminated with Fordism and the New Deal, whereby the capitalist class would invest in the reproduction of the workers to acquire a more disciplined and productive workforce. This is the 'deal' that lasted until the 1970s when the rise of women's struggles internationally and the feminist movement put an end to it.

## **II. Feminism, Marxism, and the Question of 'Reproduction.'**

While Marx, as proponent of 'women's emancipation' through participation in social production mostly understood as industrial labor, inspired generations of socialists, a

different Marx was discovered in the 1970s by feminists who, in revolt against housework, domesticity, economic dependence on men turned to his work searching for a theory capable of explaining the roots of women's oppression from a class viewpoint. The result has been a theoretical revolution that changed both Marxism and Feminism.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa's analysis of domestic work as the key element in the production of labour-power,<sup>47</sup> Selma James' location of the housewife on a continuum with the 'wageless of the world,'<sup>48</sup> who nevertheless have been central to the process of capital accumulation, the redefinition by other activists of the movement of the wage relation as an instrument for the naturalization of entire areas of exploitation, and the creation of new hierarchies within the proletariat : all these theoretical developments and the discussions they generated have at times been described as the "household debate," presumably centering on the question whether housework is or is not productive." But this is a gross distortion. What was redefined by the realization of the centrality of women's unpaid labour in the home to the production of the work-force was not domestic work alone but the nature of capitalism itself and the struggle against it.

It is not surprising that Marx's discussion of 'simple reproduction' was a theoretical illumination in this process, as the confirmation of our suspicion that never would the capitalist class have allowed so much domestic work to survive if it had not seen the possibility to exploit it. Reading that the activities that reproduce labour power are essential to capitalist accumulation brought out the class dimension of our refusal. It showed that this much despised, always taken for granted work, always dismissed by socialists as backward, has been in reality the pillar of the capitalist organization of work. This resolved the vexed question of the relation between gender and class, and gave us the tools to conceptualize not only the function of the family, but the depth of the class antagonism at the roots of capitalist society. From a practical viewpoint, it confirmed that, as women, we did not have to join men in the factories to be part of the working class and make an anti-capitalist struggle. We could struggle autonomously, starting from our own work in the home, as the "nerve centre" of the production of the workforce<sup>49</sup>. And our struggle had to be waged first against the men of our own families, since through the male wage, marriage and the ideology of love, capitalism has empowered men to command our unpaid labour and discipline our time and space.

Ironically, then, our encounter and appropriation of Marx's theory of the reproduction of labour-power, in a way consecrating Marx's importance for feminism, also provided us with the conclusive evidence that we had to turn Marx upside down and begin our analysis and struggle precisely from that part of the 'social factory' that he had excluded from his work.

Discovering the centrality of reproductive work for capital accumulation also raised the question of what a history of capitalist development would be like if seen not from the viewpoint of the formation of the waged proletariat but from the viewpoint of the kitchens and bedrooms in which labour-power is daily and generationally produced.

The need of a gendered perspective on the history of capitalism – beyond 'women's history' or the history of waged labour- is what led me, among others, to rethink Marx's account of primitive accumulation and discover the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century witch-hunts, as foundational moments in the devaluation of women's labour and the rise of a specifically capitalist sexual division of work.<sup>50</sup>

The simultaneous realization that, contrary to Marx's anticipation, primitive accumulation has become a permanent process also put into question Marx's conception of the necessary relation between capitalism and communism. It invalidated Marx's stadial view of history, with capitalism depicted as the purgatory we need to inhabit on the way to a world of freedom and the liberating role of industrialization.

The rise of eco-feminism which connected Marx's devaluation of women and reproduction with his view that humanity's historic mission is the domination of nature strengthened our stand. Especially important have been the works of Maria Mies and Ariel Salleh which have demonstrated that Marx's effacement of reproductive activities is not an accidental element, contingent to the tasks he assigned to *Capital*, but a systemic one. As Salleh put it, everything in Marx establishes that what is created by man and technology has a higher value: history begins with the first act of production, human beings realize themselves through work, a measure of their self-realization is their capacity to dominate nature and adapt it to human needs, and all positive transformative activities are thought in the masculine: labour is described as the father, nature as the mother,<sup>51</sup> the earth too is seen as feminine - *Madame la Terre*, Marx calls it, against *Monsieur le Capital*.

Eco-feminists have shown that there is a profound connection between the dismissal of housework, the devaluation of nature, and the idealization of what is produced by human industry and technology.

It is not the place here to reflect on the roots of this anthropocentric view. Enough to say that the immense miscalculation Marx and generations of Marxist socialists have made with regard to the liberating effects of industrialization are today all too obvious. No-one today would dare to dream – as August Bebel did in *Woman Under Socialism* (1903) – of the day when food would be all chemically produced and everyone will carry with him a little box of chemicals wherewith to provide his food supply of albumen, fat and hydrates of carbon, regardless of the hour of the day or the season of the year.<sup>52</sup>

As industrialization is eating the earth and scientists at the service of capitalist development are tinkering with the production of life outside of the bodies of women, the idea of extending industrialization to all our reproductive activities is a nightmare worse than the one we are experiencing with the industrialization of agriculture.

Not surprisingly, in radical circles we have been witnessing a 'paradigm shift', as hope in the Machine as a driving force of 'historical progress' is being displaced by a refocusing of political work on the issues, values, relations attached to the reproduction of our lives and the life of the ecosystems in which we live.

We are told that Marx too in the last years of his life reconsidered his historical perspective and, on reading about the egalitarian, matrilinear communities of the American North East, he began to reconsider his idealization of capitalist, industrial development and to appreciate the power of women.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, the Promethean view of technological development that Marx and the entire Marxist tradition have promoted, far from losing its attraction, is making a come-back, with digital technology playing for some the same emancipatory role that Marx assigned to automation, so that the world of reproduction and care work – that feminists have valorised as the terrain of transformation and struggle – is risking being again overshadowed by it. This is why, though Marx devoted limited space to gender theories in his work, and presumably changed some of its views in later years, it remains important to discuss them and stress, as I have tried to do in this essay, that his silences on this matter are not oversights, but the sign of a limit his theoretical and political work could not overcome but ours must.

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- <sup>1</sup> Signs of the new interest in Marx's theory of gender are the recent publications of Heather A. Brown's *Marx on Gender and the Family* (2012) and Shahrazad Mojabed., *Marxism and Feminism* (2015), this last published in concomitance with the conference organized on the subject by Rosa Luxembourgh Foundation in Berlin in the same year.
- <sup>2</sup> Heather Brown, op. cit., p.143.
- <sup>3</sup> For a Marxist theory of women's nature, see Nancy Holmstrom, op. cit.
- <sup>4</sup> The quotes here are in reference to Selma James' essay on this subject. Op. Cit.
- <sup>5</sup> I echo here a point made by Martha Gimenez in op. cit., pp. 11-12.
- <sup>6</sup> On the debate about the consequences of women's industrial labour as the "Woman's Question" in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, see Judy Lown, op. cit., pp.1-4,131,214, 2010-218. For the same debates in France, see Joan Wallach Scott, op. cit., especially chapter 7, pp.139-166.
- <sup>7</sup> On the reform of female and child labour in England, beside *Capital*/Vol.1, see Judy Lown, op. cit., and Laura Levine Frader, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> *Capital*/Vol.1, p.365.
- <sup>9</sup> Vol.1: p.353
- <sup>10</sup> Vol.1: p.416
- <sup>11</sup> The only reference to a female factory workers' struggle is on p.551, where he mentions power-loom weavers going on strike in Wiltshire over the question of time-keeping.
- <sup>12</sup> Hewitt, op. cit., and Lown, who speaks of female workers' opposition to proposed Factory Acts in the 1830s (p.214), and of silk workers' struggle "to maintain control over those aspects of life which had always been central to working women's experience ...childcare, personal hygiene and dress". (op. cit., p.162). On factory girls "representing a new found independence and freedom for womankind" see Lown, op. cit., 43ff., and Seccombe op. cit., p.121.
- <sup>13</sup> See Brown p.115.
- <sup>14</sup> Vol.1: p.739.
- <sup>15</sup> Vol.1, pp. 620-1.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.621.
- <sup>17</sup> *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p.53.
- <sup>18</sup> *Communist Manifesto*, op. cit., p.88. He added that, consequently, [t]he various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as the machine obliterates all distinctions of labor ...(ibid.)
- <sup>19</sup> See. Vol.1, p.527.
- <sup>20</sup> See on this topic Bock and Duden, op. cit.; and Henninger, op. cit., pp.296-7.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.157.
- <sup>22</sup> *Capital*, Vol.1, p.852.
- <sup>23</sup> Fortunati adds that Marx saw women's reproductive work "through reading government's reports which had realized the problem posed by the [factory work's] usurpation of housework much earlier." *The Arcane of Reproduction*, Op. cit. p.169.
- <sup>24</sup> A. Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (1890), pp.206-7.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 207.



<sup>26</sup> Vol.1, p. 471: "Within a family...there springs up naturally a division of labour caused by differences of sex and age, and therefore based upon a pure physiological foundation."

<sup>27</sup> See K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Part 7, Chapter 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.718.

<sup>29</sup> K. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 1., p..172. "Productive labour would therefore be such labour as produces commodities or directly produces, trains, develops, maintains labour-power itself." As we will see later this was taken by feminists to indicate that domestic work is 'productive work' in the Marxian sense.

<sup>30</sup> The reference here is to Piero Sraffa, *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*. Cambridge University Press, 1960.

<sup>31</sup> See Vol.1, p. 274.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>33</sup> *Capital*, Vol. 1, p.797.

<sup>34</sup> *The 18<sup>th</sup> of Brumaire*, op. cit. p.75.

<sup>35</sup> *Capital*/Vol. 1, p.518, n.38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.518note.

<sup>37</sup> Vol.1: p.718.

<sup>38</sup> Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, op. cit. p.94.

<sup>39</sup> *Capital*, Vol. 1: pp. 517-8 footnote.

<sup>40</sup> *Capital*, Vol.1, p.521.

<sup>41</sup> Marx uses the concept of 'formal,' versus 'real,' sub-sumption to describe the process whereby in the first phase of capitalist accumulation capital appropriates labor "as it finds it," "without any modification in the real nature of the labor process",. Vol.1: 1021.By contrast, we have 'real subsumption' when capital shapes the labor/production process directly for its own ends.

<sup>42</sup> My reference here is to Harry Cleaver, *Reading Marx Politically*. Op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> This is a point on which A. Negri insists in *Marx Beyond Marx*, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> See on this topic Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*. Op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> Vol.1: 414.

<sup>46</sup> Vol. 1.: 899.

<sup>47</sup> See "Women and the Subversion of the Community" in *The Power of Women...*op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> See *Sex, Race, and Class*, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> See Fortunati, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> See *Caliban and the Witch*. Op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> Salleh, op.cit., pp.72-76.

<sup>52</sup> Bebel, op. cit., p.287-8.

<sup>53</sup> See on this topic Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* as discussed by heather brown, op. cit. , chapters six and 7.

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