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Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and its Critics

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ABSTRACT: The notion of social reproduction articulated by Marxist feminists within a unitary theory of gender oppression and capitalism has been accused in the past of being either functionalist or economic and biological determinist. These accusations were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the Marxist notions of production and reproduction and on a reified understanding of what a capitalist society is. Moreover, often those who have criticized the Marxist feminist understanding of social reproduction have not been able to offer a solid alternative and have ended up in even greater theoretical impasses, particularly exemplified by dual and triple systems theories. On the contrary, the notion of social reproduction has the potential to avoid these impasses, while at the same time suggesting a non-reductionist account of the capitalist mode of production: one in which capital is not seen as the subject of a strictly "economic" process.

THE NOTION OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION, introduced into the debate by Marxist and socialist feminists more than three decades ago, was meant to offer a sophisticated, non-reductionist account of the relation between gender oppression and capitalism without falling into the impasse of dual and triple systems theories. Marxist feminists have stressed the fact that a mode of production and a certain structure of class relations set the framework

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within which the processes of social reproduction, *i.e.*, the processes of reproduction and maintainance of human life, take place. As Sue Ferguson puts it:

> In the early 1980s, a small number of socialist feminists argued that a unitary, materialist social theory was indeed possible. Dissatisfied with simply "adding gender or race on," theorists of social reproduction aimed for a truly integrative analysis. They suggested such a theory 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. According to the proponents of social reproductionism, early socialist feminism relied on an unduly narrow, ahistorical conceptualization of the economy; it treated the economy as a self-sufficing arena of commodity production existing independently of the daily and generational production of people's lives. (1999, 4.)

Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett suggest a terminological distinction between societal and social reproduction, where the latter term indicates

> the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and intergenerationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work — mental, physical, and emotional — aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined means for maintaining and reproducing population. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed. (BL, 1991, 314.)

While societal reproduction indicates the reproduction of an entire system of social relations, social reproduction refers to the more specific domain of the renewal and maintenance of life and of the institutions and work necessary therein. This must be understood as entailing three key components: "the biological reproduction of the species," "the reproduction of the labor force," and the "reproduction of provisioning and caring needs" (BG, 2003, 32). In Brenner and Laslett's definition, societal reproduction includes social reproduction: this means that specific class relations also set the framework within which social reproduction takes place. The notion of social

reproduction in this schema is meant to underline the centrality of the work of maintaining existing life and reproducing the next generation as a part of necessary labor within the whole process of societal reproduction. Or to use Bakker and Gill's words: "Social reproduction [is] both a productive potential and a condition of existence for the expanded reproduction of capital and social formation" (2003, 22). Under capitalism this work is performed mostly from within the family unit, but this is not always necessarily the case. Moreover, within capitalism, the portion of this work that is performed either within the family, or by the state in the form of welfare, or within the market, varies according to historically specific circumstances (BL, 1989, 383–4).

Already some decades ago, Lise Vogel (Vogel, 1983; new edition, 2014) identified the notion of social reproduction as the basis for a unitary theory about gender oppression and its relationship to capitalism, capable of avoiding the fall into dualisms, which do nothing but postpone the problem of having an explanatory understanding of gender inequalities instead of solving it. Such an approach is particularly needed today. Indeed, the notions of financial and economic crisis alone are not sufficient to give an account of the current crisis of the capitalist mode of societal production and reproduction, especially if the latter is taken to be a dynamic and contradictory ensemble of processes of valorization, domination, and alienation. These processes have historically given birth to different social configurations concerning gender and race relations. Because each crisis is at the same time a moment of *impasse* of the valorization process and an occasion for its reorganization, the current crisis should also be addressed and analyzed from the viewpoint of the process of reconfiguration of the concrete mechanisms of gender and race oppression, as these mechanisms play an important role within the valorization process itself. The notion of social reproduction within the framework of a unitary theory enables us to understand the current crisis not simply in economistic terms, but rather as a general crisis of the reproduction of capitalist society considered in all of its dimensions. Moreover, it enables us to understand why neoliberal globalization and the current crisis are leading to an increasing privatization and commodification of social reproduction, with capital penetrating into spheres that in the past were not directly subsumed by the market.

This article wants to be a theoretical contribution to the small but significant revival of the notion of social reproduction during

the last decade (Ferguson, 1999; 2008; BG, 2003; Katz, 2004; BL, 2006). In order to reassess the notion of social reproduction within the framework of a unitary theory of gender oppression and capitalism, I will first address the limits of notions of interplay between different systems of social relation (class, gender, and race), which reproduce, for example in materialist feminism, the limitations of dual or triple system theories. Then, I will address some of the critiques advanced against the notion of social reproduction as it had been articulated by Marxist feminists within the perspective of a unitary theory. My aim is to show that accusations of biological and economic determinism, and of functionalism, are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the notions of production and reproduction within a Marxist framework.

Interplay and "Consubstantiality"

Marxist feminism has never had an easy life. It has been under pressure both from radical feminist and postructuralist feminist critiques of Marxism, and from the Marxist theorists' delay in paying due attention to the issue of the relationship between gender and capitalism, and in providing convincing answers thereto. Although flourishing for a short season in the late 1960s and 1970s, it nevertheless entered a major crisis in the 1980s under the pressure of a feminist literature that developed largely in antagonism to a "straw Marx" characterized by determinism, vulgar materialism, sex blind categories, and economic reductionism (Gimenez, 2005, 11). The adoption in socialist feminist literature of dual and then triple systems theories,[1] which in their various forms and derivations still heavily influence a significant portion of materialist feminist literature today, did not help confront and revise in an adequate way traditional Marxist theory.[2] As

1 Dual systems theory was first advanced by Heidi Hartmann, in her famous article "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union" (1981). The basic claim of this article was that patriarchy and capitalism are two relatively autonomous systems, which interact with each other, sharpening each other. This theory was then corrected into a triple systems theory, for example by Sasha Roseneil (1994) and Sylvia Walby (1990), in order to include racism as a system on its own.

2 The labels socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, and materialist feminism are used in various ways, sometimes interchangeably, for the boundaries among them are often blurred. If one wants to draw a distinction, one might say that socialist feminism is a label that, in the English-speaking world, has been applied to a wider range of feminist theories than Marxist feminism: it also includes those who developed a theory of patriarchy and attempted to combine it with a Marxist analysis of capitalism. Materialist feminism, inspired by the work

Iris Marion Young (Young, 1997) noted, dual systems theory allowed Marxist theory of economic and social relations to remain basically unchanged; for, by assuming that Marxist categories are sex-blind, it only required the addition of a theory of gender relations to Marxist theory. On the other hand, the difficulty of Marxist feminism (and of Marxism) in clearly identifying the underlying logic of the relationship between women's oppression and capitalist dynamics on a theoretical level favors the affirmation of dual or triple systems theories that reproduce a fragmented perception of the social world.

Put simply, the resort to notions such as that of patriarchal and racial modes of production, or of a sex-affective mode of production (Ferguson, 1989), in order to explain the persistence of different forms of gender discrimination under capitalism on a systemic level, is equivalent to resorting to a theoretical *deus ex machina* or to presupposing precisely what needs to be explained, thus begging the question. The problem is that the insufficiency and underdevelopment of unitary materialist theories of women's oppression is one of the causes of the relative success of dual and triple systems theories compared to Marxist feminist explanations.

In order to show the epistemological and theoretical limits of dual and triple systems theories, I will address one of their most sophisticated versions, the one elaborated by some French authors who have produced significant theoretical work along the lines of materialist feminism. With the aim of overcoming the reductionism of the "base–superstructure" model on one hand, and the limits of intersectionality theory on the other, recent materialist feminism has paid particular attention to the reciprocal interplay between social relations. Danièle Kergoat (Kergoat, 2009) and Jules Falquet (Falquet, 2009), for example, have suggested the necessity of developing a theory of "coformation," or "consubstantiality" and "coextensionality" of gender, class, and race.[3] According to these authors, it is certainly true

of authors such as Christine Delphy, Michèle Barrett, Annette Kuhn and Anne Marie Wolpe, was meant to supplement the inadequacies of Marxism through a combination of historical materialism, radical feminism, and postmodern and psychoanalytic theories of meaning and subjectivity. Althusser's thought (duly revisited) served often as the connecting bridge among these different strands. See Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997; see also Gimenez, 2000.

3 Consubstantiality is the notion employed by Kergoat and borrowed from the theological notion of the unity of substance of the three persons of the Trinity. In fact, what was at stake in the Trinitarian debate was exactly the possibility of thinking diversity and plurality in identity and unity.

that intersectionality contributed to revealing the false universalism and the hidden white imperialism implied in the idea of a sisterhood fundamentally shaped on the archetype of the white middle-class woman. However, it operates as a kind of geometrical combination of identities that are given in advance and are potentially infinitely multiplied (Dorlin, 2005).

The view of consubstantiality developed by Kergoat borrows from intersectionality the idea of the reciprocal interconnections of the relations of domination and identities, but tries to show how these relationships continuously reshape, mark, and produce each other. It tries, therefore, to grasp this interconnection as a strongly dynamic and historical one. By doing this, as Kergoat claims, it is possible to oppose the sharp distinction between class relations that belong to the economic domain and patriarchal relations that belong to the ideological sphere (Kergoat, 2009, 118ff).

However, the attempt to oppose a sharp distinction between patriarchal, race, and class relations through the notion of consubstantiality appears to be problematic. It is based, in fact, on a few controversial presuppositions shared by many materialist feminists. The first presupposition is that gender, class, and race relations are all relations of production: just like the persons of the divine Trinity in Kergoat's Trinitarian metaphor, they don't have a difference of substance. The second presupposition is that each of these relationships is a system on its own, including instances of exploitation, domination and oppression; moreover, that these systems together constitute a unified system or a totality by mutually determining each other. One can find a similar approach in Christine Delphy's idea that patriarchal relations must be understood as a mode of production on their own, the patriarchal or domestic mode of production, which is autonomous from the capitalistic one, but nevertheless interacts with it simultaneously (Delphy, 2009).

The notion of consubstantiality has the merit of giving a dynamic account of the way in which all of these relationships come to form a system together. To use a metaphor, if, at its beginnings, the theory of intersectionality thought sometimes of this interaction as a geometrical or a mechanical one, then the theory of consubstantiality thinks of this interaction along the lines of an elemental chemical reaction combining elements together in such a way as to form a new substance. 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. What it fails to explain is the determining logic of such an interaction among these chemical elements — viz., why this kind of interaction takes place to begin with. Insofar as everything determines everything else, the notion of determination loses its explanatory function, and avoiding an infinite regress in the causal chains becomes impossible. Moreover, it is not clear how the view of consubstantiality can escape the infinite multiplication of systems of oppression that it condemns in intersectionality.

Upon closer examination, these developments of dual or triple systems theories show the fundamental theoretical impasses of such theories, even in their more sophisticated and historically grounded versions. It is thus worth trying to reassess a unitary theory, capable of escaping reductionism and determinism. With this aim in mind, in what follows I will re-examine some of the criticisms advanced in the past against such a unitary approach.

Production Versus Reproduction

The presentation of the notion of the reproduction of social relations by Stevi Jackson in her article "Marxism and Feminism" can serve as an illustration both of some of the limits of the way the theory has been elaborated, and of the misreadings and caricaturizations to which it can be subject. Jackson's article is meant to provide an overview of the engagement between Marxism and feminism from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, and as such, it has been translated and published as the only entry on Marxism and feminism in the *Dictionnaire Marx Contemporain* edited by Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (BK, 2001). This overview is written from a materialist feminist perspective and it has an implicit triadic pattern in which Marxist feminist theory is the thesis, post-structuralist feminism the antithesis, and materialist feminism the synthesis. Indeed, the logic of the article is that Marxist feminism imploded because of its theoretical failures, and in particular, because of its economic and biological determinism. Part of materialist feminism, revising the Althusserian perspective, developed into an analysis of ideology as the origin and

the main site of women's oppression and ended up in the postmodern abandonment of materialism *tout court*. Materialist feminism is now enjoying a renewal and is welcomed by Jackson as the more appropriate approach to the relationships among genders, because it allows for a materialist approach while avoiding reductionism and recognizing a plurality and complexity of social relations and systems of oppression.

Within this overall context, Jackson presents the notion of the reproduction of social relations in the following terms:

> This was one logical outcome of the DLD [domestic labor debate], which produced a covert consensus whereby housework continued to be regarded as reproducing labour power; to suggest that it produced anything became almost taboo. This distinction between production and reproduction is spurious, nonsensical — something cannot be reproduced without first being produced — and runs counter to Marx's position that every process of production is simultaneously a process of reproduction. . . . It also raises the problem of conflating social reproduction, the reproduction of the labour force and biological reproduction. . . . When women's work is said to "reproduce" the proletariat or capitalist social relations, the implication is that they do this work because they have babies. Hence all the complex ways in which capitalist social relations are reproduced, as well as women's subordination itself, are reduced to women's reproductive capacities. . . . It might seem rather curious for feminists to succumb to such blatant biological determinism, to reduce women's oppression to their reproductive capacities without questioning women's responsibilities for childcare, but this is a common means of theorising the relationship between capitalism and women's oppression among Marxist feminists. (1999, 19–20.)

To say that this passage does a disservice to a complex discussion by playing with the semantic ambiguity of the word production would be to put it rather lightly. As Jackson explained some pages earlier, the core of the domestic labor debate was about whether domestic labor produces value and surplus value, or whether it produces only use values.[4] Despite knowing that the issue of value production was at the center of the debate, Jackson blatantly asserts that the distinction between production and reproduction does not make any sense, because something cannot be reproduced without first being produced. Clearly this statement holds only if we take the word

4 I leave aside the "benefits" debate; see Holmstrom, 1981.

"production" in its general sense, but it certainly does not hold if what we mean is production of value. Moreover, Marxist feminists and socialist feminists did not deny that the work of reproduction is a kind of work. On the contrary, social reproduction theorists tended to broaden the concept of labor in order to include reproductive work within it. But they insisted that the social form of this work, and the set of specific social relations within which it takes place (such as, for example, kinship relations), can be theoretically distinguished from that of formal, paid work.

Even independent of an interpretation of Marx, this difference is very important to mark for decisive and rather evident analytical reasons. But Jackson's apparent reading of Marx is no less puzzling: indeed, if it refers to Marx's thought, Jackson's indictment of the theory as "spurious" is entirely ungrounded. The distinction between production and reproduction is clearly introduced by Marx, who not only applied the term reproduction to phenomena ranging from the reproduction of labor power, to that of classes, of class relations, of the conditions of production, and of capital itself (simple and expanded reproduction), but more specifically distinguished between individual (or unproductive) consumption and productive consumption. The former, individual consumption, is crucial to the reproduction of the worker, but it takes place *outside* the production process.[5]

The mention of Marx's idea "that every process of production is simultaneously a process of reproduction" likely refers to the passage in which Marx introduces the notion of simple reproduction in the first volume of *Capital*:[6]

> Whatever the social form of the production process, it has to be continuous, it must periodically repeat the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction. (1990, 711.)

5 "The worker's consumption is of two kinds. While producing he consumes the means of production with his labor, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. This is his productive consumption. . . . On the other hand, the worker uses the money paid to him for his labor-power to buy the means of subsistence; this is his individual consumption. 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" (Marx, 1990, 717).

6 Jackson herself does not provide any precise reference.

Later, Marx also insists that by producing for the capitalist the worker is constantly reproducing capitalist class relations, so that in this sense the production process can also be seen as a process of reproduction:

> Since the process of production is also the process of the consumption of labour-power by the capitalist, the worker's product is not only constantly converted into commodities, but also into capital, *i.e.*, into value that sucks up the worker's value creating power, means of subsistence that actually purchase human beings, and means of production that employ the people who are doing the producing. Therefore the worker himself constantly produces objective wealth, in the form of capital, an alien power that dominates and exploits him; and the capitalist just as constantly produces labour-power, in the form of a subjective source of wealth which is abstract, exists merely in the physical body of the worker, and is separated from its own means of objectification and realization; in short, the capitalist produces the worker as a wage-labourer. This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the worker, is the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production. (1990, 716.)

The meaning of these statements is not that there is a perfect identity between production and reproduction, nor that it is impossible to distinguish them, and is certainly not that every process of reproduction is at the same time a process of production of value. If production indicates the production of value, then while every process of production is at the same time, *in a sense*, a process of reproduction, the opposite is not true. Consumption, including individual, unproductive consumption, for example, is a fundamental part of the process of reproduction of an entire society. The first of Marx's passages quoted above underlines the fact that every mode of production must constantly reproduce the conditions of production if society wants to survive: under capitalism this takes the form of expanded reproduction, because of the logic of accumulation. This does not mean that every aspect of the reproduction of the conditions of production produces value. State bureaucracy, politics, police control, family, school, science, technology, ideology and so on, all take part in the reproduction of the conditions of production and of a determinate concrete social formation, but according to Marx they are not production of value all the way through.

On the other hand, when Marx refers to the fact that by working for a capitalist, the worker reproduces both herself as a worker and the class relation, this means substantively two things: first, since she

doesn't own the means of production, wage labor is the only way the worker can have access to the means necessary to her own reproduction and that of her family. Second, wage labor has the characteristic feature of keeping the worker in her condition of dispossession *sine die*, because of the capitalist's constant and repeated appropriation of the surplus value she produces, not to speak of the process of social alienation of the worker's capacities, which are constantly appropriated and incorporated into fixed capital (Marx, 1990, 755–56). By working, the worker is constantly reproducing capital and capitalist class relations (*ibid.*, 723–724). Moreover, she is not just reproducing herself as a generic human being with needs and desires; she is also reproducing herself *qua* worker, *i.e.*, as a member of a specific class characterized by dispossession and exploitation and as a human being with some specific, historically determined and socially produced features. This observation, once again, does not entail that there is a perfect identity of production and reproduction, such that any distinction between them is "spurious and nonsensical." Class relations, as well as human beings, are certainly reproduced within the production process, but *not only* within the production process: there are many aspects of social life that contribute to their reproduction and can be considered as "productive" only if one employs the term in a loose and non-specific way (people also "produce" nightmares, paranoid ideas, and gastric acid, often in reciprocal correlation).

Social Reproduction and Biological Determinism

According to Jackson, the introduction of the concept of reproduction leads to a conflation of social reproduction, the reproduction of the labor force, and biological reproduction, with biological determinism as the final outcome. She is not the first to raise this point against Marxist feminism. Biological determinism, moreover, is a common accusation within feminist debates, and ironically enough, some authors appear to play both the role of the accused and that of the prosecutor. For example, the claim concerning biological determinism in Jackson's passage quoted above is a comment on a quotation from a 1979 article by Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, who are indicted by Jackson as a clear example of the unavoidable biological determinism of Marxist feminists (BM, 1979). But in 1980 Barrett published a book which became a classic of socialist feminist

literature, *Women's Oppression Today*, in which she criticized the notion of social reproduction on very similar grounds: the tendency to conflate women's role in the biological reproduction of the species with the historically specific question of their role in the reproduction of male labor power and in maintaining the relations of dominance and subordination of capitalist production (Barrett, 1988, 27). Moreover, she concluded that the concept of social reproduction, as elaborated so far, is so closely tied to an account of class relations at the root of capitalist production that it cannot be rendered compatible with a serious consideration of male dominance (Barrett, 1988, 29).

Consistent with her fear of functionalism and biological determinism, and with an insistence on the importance of ideology and historical contingency over logical necessity, Barrett observed that trying "to grasp the character of women's oppression in contemporary capitalism in terms of the supposed needs of capitalism itself" is inadequate (1988, 248–9). It is not only functionalist, but also reductionist, and it does not allow for an account of the different specific aspects of women's subordination. Moreover, it runs the risk of biological determinism, because it explains women's oppression within capitalism on the basis of their role in the household as child-bearers and domestic laborers, without seeing how this role is the outcome of social dynamics and of political choices, and not an unavoidable outcome of biology.

Whereas Barrett's skepticism about the adequacy of the notion of social reproduction for understanding the specific features of women's oppression does not do justice to the explanatory potential of the concept, some of her critiques are justified. In particular, she is right in underlining the necessity of not turning sexual biological difference into an explanatory *deus ex machina*, for it is exactly the social meaning attributed to that difference that needs to be explained.[7] However, Barrett's own solution to this problem is unconvincing. In her book

7 See, for example, the way Benston explains the roots of women's secondary status within capitalism: women are that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and the family, where most of work is precapitalist, outside of trade and the marketplace. Men, on the contrary, are responsible for commodity production. The devaluation of work which is not immediately or mediately related to commodity production, is the source of women's inferior status. This explanation, as is evident, may describe some features of women's oppression, but it has no explanatory power, because the sexual division of labor is just taken as a given and not explained. See Benston, 1997 (first published in *Monthly Review*, 21:4, 1969).

she seeks to find in ideology the answer to the question of the social meaning attributed to sexual difference. She defines ideology as the generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, and transformed. These processes are always historically embedded in material practice, they play a role in the relations of production, and they may become essential for the maintenance of the system (Barrett, 1988, ch. 3). In the case of capitalism, more specifically, the ideology of gender plays a significant role in the relations of production, while it does not have any essential role in the reproduction of raw materials, installations, and machinery: the wage-labor relation and the contradiction between labor and capital are "sex-blind" and operate quite independently of gender (Barrett, 1988, 99). The problem with this position is that, while it may avoid biological determinism and economic reductionism, it does not, in fact, explain very much: Saying that the root of the attribution of a specific social meaning to sexual difference is the process by which this meaning is produced is a tautology, not an explanation. Moreover, the idea that capitalism has been gendered by a pre-existing ideology does not take into account that one can plausibly argue the opposite: namely, that the process of capitalist primitive accumulation has contributed to the creation of gender ideology and of gender inequalities in a fundamental way.[8]

Before throwing the concept of social reproduction into the dustbin of history, it is worth examining whether it necessarily entails the kind of reductionism and biological determinism criticized by, among others, Jackson and Barrett. If we refer back to Brenner and Laslett's definition of social reproduction given above, what appears evident is that, for the two authors, biological reproduction is a central fact of human life, but a fact that is always socially organized and cannot be considered apart from social and societal reproduction. Class relations set boundaries within which social reproduction takes place, and therefore within which biological reproduction is also organized. This further implies that there are processes of ideological production which attribute specific meanings to sex, sexuality, generational

8 This is, for example, Silvia Federici's thesis in her work on primitive accumulation. As she puts it: "Primitive accumulation, then, was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was *also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as 'race' and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat" (Federici, 2004, 63–64).

reproduction, and sexual difference. As such, biological difference does not indicate anything more than the fact that women bear children: this in itself has no social or cultural meaning. Social and cultural meaning arises because the biological fact of reproduction and sexual difference takes place within certain modes of societal and social reproduction that have specific features.

One can see an example of a historical and empirical application of this view in Brenner and Ramas' critique of Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* (BR, 1984). In their article, they offer an alternative explanation to that offered by Barrett for the expulsion of women from wage labor in Britain in the 1840s–1860s, and for the subsequent rise of a sex-segregated labor market. According to Barrett, pre-existing gender ideology played a decisive role in pushing male craft unions to oppose female work and to force women into the domestic sphere. In this way a household system was implanted, which then shaped the labor market, pushing it in the direction of a gendered division of labor. Brenner and Ramas' starting point, on the contrary, is that pre-existing gender ideology alone could not have had such an effect. Ideology may, for example, have encouraged employers to pay women less, but it is not sufficient to explain why women were willing to accept lower wages. The explanation of women's withdrawal from industrial production is that the exigencies of biological reproduction entered into a material contradiction with industrial factory work and the way it was organized in the specific historical circumstances of mid–19th-century Britain. The point is not that the biological facts of reproduction were incompatible with women's involvement in production *tout court*, but rather that they were not readily compatible with full participation in *capitalist* production because of the way production was socially and materially organized for the sake of capital's need to maximize the appropriation of surplus value. This material contradiction explains the reason why a specific household system took place.

Brenner and Ramas do not deny the role of ideology in this, but they stress that capitalist production — and therefore a certain structure of class relations — imparted a coercive charge to biological reproduction, which explains why gender ideology could proliferate. One may or may not agree with this argument, but its logic does not entail any biological determinism. On the contrary, the limits set to biological reproduction by specific class relations and a specific organization of the productive process are the root of the subordination

of women: biological facts in themselves, taken apart from this, do not explain anything. A similar line of thought is supported by Martha Gimenez, who observes that if we isolate biological, physical, and social reproduction from the historically specific social relations within which they occur, we risk ending up with what Marx would call a simple abstraction, *i.e.*, an abstraction which universalizes what is historically specific and therefore yields only partial or misleading knowledge (Gimenez, 2005, 16–17).

In summary then, while some Marxist feminist authors may have slipped into biological determinism, social reproduction theory as such is not a biologically determinist theory. 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.

The potentialities of this approach are more evident if we take into consideration that the contradiction between biological reproduction and capitalist production does not belong to the past. For example, in her study about the last decades' process of feminization and defeminization of work in export-oriented industrialization (EOI), Tery Caraway shows that there is a direct correlation between changes in fertility rates and changes in the rate of women's employment (Caraway, 2007). Although she recognizes an important causal role to what she calls "gendered discourses of work" and to mediating institutions, she identifies the strongest causal factor in the process of gender segmentation of the labor market in the labor-intensive/capital-intensive divide. She convincingly argues that the higher turnover in women's employment is not due to female workers' greater instability. Indeed, in sectors that adopt labor practices that encourage long tenure and allow women to balance family duties with work responsibilities, such as capital-intensive sectors, gender differences in workers' stability nearly disappear (Caraway, 2007, 60). But, while it is true that gender differences almost disappear among female and male workers employed in capital-intensive firms that reward tenure, these firms prefer not to deal with the costs and organizational troubles associated with maternity leave, and this is the main reason why they tend to employ fewer women. This is why women are more massively employed in labor-intensive sectors, which have labor practices that

encourage high turnover and can therefore deal more easily and with fewer costs with the problem of maternity. Gendered outcomes in the labor market are a function not simply of women's role in the family, but of intentional efforts by employers to induce high turnovers among all workers and especially among women (Caraway, 2007, 44–45).

Social Reproduction and Functionalism

Afraid of functionalism and sharply critical of the tendency towards functionalist explanations in Marxist literature, in her book Barrett welcomed the impossibility of demonstrating the logical necessity of a sexual division of labor:

> Although we may usefully argue that gender division has been built into the capitalist division of labour and is an important element of capitalist relations of production, it is more difficult to argue that gender division *necessarily* occupies a particular place in the class structure of capitalism. It has not, at least as yet, been demonstrated that the sexual division of labour forms not simply a *historically constituted* but a *logically pre-given* element of the class structure that would *automatically* be reproduced by the reproduction of this class structure. (Barrett, 1988, 138.)

Against the attempt to demonstrate the function for capitalism of every phenomenon related to gender, Barrett stressed the historicity of the interlacement of gender division and capitalism, and pointed out the problematic character and the contradictions of the relation between gender and class. Her distaste for the functionalist model of explanation, implied by the notion of logical necessity, is evident through the emphasis in her formulation of this question. "Automatically" is indeed the key word of this passage. However, we might wonder whether she is right and the only alternative we have is between functionalism, on the one hand; and an account of the laws of capitalist production as fundamentally sex-blind, and as gendered only in consequence of a historical contingency, and of the intervention of gender ideologies coming from the past, on the other. The latter account, which is the one Barrett supports, attributes to ideology the main role in historically gendering capital, reproducing in this way the dualism she wanted to avoid. But is it true that pointing out the constitutive role gender division plays within the process of societal reproduction leads us to

a functionalist position in which tendencies and counter-tendencies, contradictions and tensions are all replaced by infallible iron laws? Or is this not rather the consequence of Barrett's structuralist approach, which tends to treat "economy" as a thing rather than as a set of living social relations? We certainly do not need to accept an automatism in the reproduction of the sexual division of labor, any more than we would accept automatism for the reproduction of the class structure as a whole. Provided the reproduction of the relations of production is the terrain of an ongoing struggle, a view Barrett explicitly takes elsewhere in the book, this also holds for the sexual division of labor, even in the case where the sexual division of labor is considered to be a logical consequence of the reproduction of capitalist social relations. We might even claim that, if it is true that gender division is logically necessary for capitalism or, alternatively, that it is a logical consequence of it, the reproduction of the capitalist class structure also depends on the outcome of the struggle over gender division. In other words, conflicts and contradictions permeate all aspects of the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Finally, Barrett's fear of functionalism does not take into account the fundamental flexibility of capitalism, namely the fact that the forms in which social reproduction takes place are historically variable and not static, and that, once again, the collective agency of those who resist, for example, privatization or commodification does play a crucial role in the social negotiation of the way social reproduction is organized.

While Barrett's own alternative to functionalism is unconvincing, her critique of the Marxist feminist tendency towards functionalism is not entirely ungrounded. Moreover, she is not the only one who offers this critique. In two articles on social reproduction, Sue Ferguson points out that social reproduction feminists did not manage to overcome the functionalism inherited from structuralist Marxism (Ferguson, 1999; 2008). She argues that they did overcome economic reductionism by broadening the concept of economy and understanding it as the system through which people organize to satisfy human needs. Moreover, they avoided engaging with Marxism as with an abstract science that offered only "economic laws of motion." On the contrary, they took up "the historical materialist project of deconstructing the social relations that make those laws possible" (Ferguson, 1999, 7). However, they continued to resort to some basic theoretical concepts that recall the structural functionalist approach

typical of dual systems theory. This appears evident, for example, in concepts such as the correlation of "demographic laws" and "economic laws" (Ferguson, 1999, 10), or in the tendency to treat the economy as a "thing," or as a structure, and not as a living set of social relations, which are historically changeable and which are the product of people's practice (Ferguson, 2008, 46). According to Ferguson, the limit of this approach is that it conceptualizes capitalism as a set of structures within which people act in functionally prescribed ways.

One may see this limit, for example, in some formulations employed by Martha Gimenez in two articles wherein she systematizes her Marxist structuralist approach to the relationship between capitalism and the oppression of women. In "The Oppression of Women: A Structuralist Marxist View," she suggests that an adequate explanation of sexual inequalities should be found by investigating them as a historically specific phenomenon with specific roots located in the invisible levels of social reality, *i.e.*, in structures. Therefore the material basis of sexual inequality is to be sought in the articulation of the relations of production with the relations of physical and social reproduction, both understood as structures. Elsewhere she claims that under capitalism, the mode of production determines the mode of reproduction, and, consequently, unequal relations between men and women (Gimenez, 1997, 18–23). According to Gimenez, postulating "mutual interaction" is to overlook the theoretical significance of the overwhelming evidence of the capitalist subordination of reproduction to production. Gender inequality, determined by the subordination of reproduction to production, is a structural characteristic of capitalist social formations: oppression of women is the visible or observable effect of underlying structured relations between men and women, which are, in turn, an effect of the ways in which capitalist accumulation determines the organization of reproduction. While all of Gimenez' specific observations about the effects of capitalist accumulation on family, welfare, and sexuality are particularly insightful and illuminating, these observations are organized within a theoretical framework that presents the mode of production and the mode of reproduction as two structures, one of which plays a more fundamental determining role (Gimenez, 1997, 20–25).

A more persuasive perspective is the one offered more recently by Bakker and Gill, who, against "reified notions of structure or of agency," have insisted on the fact that, in order to understand how a

social formation reproduces itself, we need to analyze the social relations of production and the mediation and transformation of these relations through purposive activity *together* with the role of human subjectivity, which also includes the way this subjectivity is constituted through class, gender, racialization, sexuality, and so on. These are not different *levels* or *structures*, relating to each other in an external way, but rather different *moments* of a contradictory unity (BG, 2003).

In conclusion, functionalism is not an intrinsic weakness of the concept of social reproduction, but rather the outcome of the difficulty socialist and Marxist feminists had in articulating social reproduction into a consistent theory. Identifying these limits in the literature produced so far, therefore, is a necessary first step to unleash the potentialities of the notion of social reproduction.

Conclusion: Social Reproduction Reloaded

The aim of this article was to show that the concept of social reproduction as such does not imply any of the theoretical weaknesses attributed to it by its critics, whereas it has an enormous explanatory potential. Moreover, often those who have criticized it have not been able to offer a solid alternative and have ended up in even greater theoretical impasses, particularly exemplified by dual and triple systems theories. Also, as a consequence of the crisis and of the delay in the articulation of the concept of social reproduction, the standard form of explanation of the relationship between gender, race, and capitalism became that of the distinction between systems of oppression, their "relative autonomy," their "reciprocal articulation or intersection," or their "consubstantiality." The reference to the divine Trinity in the notion of consubstantiality is most appropriate, since in the end, the reason why these systems should articulate each other, or why they should be consubstantial, remains precisely a mystery.

The notion of social reproduction has the potential to avoid this impasse, while at the same time suggesting a non-reductionist account of the capitalist mode of production: one in which capital is not seen as the subject of a strictly "economic" process. As Daniel Bensaïd puts it:

> In Marx, capital is the subject of a process that is not strictly "economic." It articulates the processes of production, circulation (therefore of distribution) and of total reproduction. The "critique of political economy" is first

of all a critique of economic fetishism and of its ideology, which condemns us to think "in the shadow of capital." (2001, 47–48.)

A unitary theory of social reproduction would imply understanding the overarching logic of capitalist expanded accumulation in a way that is substantially different from a mechanical law. Capital, indeed, is not a machine. While automatism is one of the features of the process of self-valorization of value, the understanding of the process of reproduction of capitalism cannot be given simply on the basis of the understanding of its automatic aspects. These, indeed, are constantly combined with human agency and class agency within the process of total reproduction, so that losing sight of one of these aspects leads to a rather poor understanding of the fundamental functioning of capitalist expanded accumulation.

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