

MARXIST FEMINISM AND ANTICAPITALISM: RECLAIMING OUR HISTORY, REANIMATING OUR POLITICS

Meg Luxton

These are hard times for those of us who loathe capitalism—with its inevitable exploitation, competition, and rewards for selfishness and greed, along with its hostility towards values of compassion, economic sharing, co-operation, and solidarity. The capitalist classes, especially their Right-wing advocates, have done a thorough job of smashing their opponents. One of their greatest victories has been the way they have almost made alternative visions and the movements supporting anticapitalism seem impossible. They have, with the help of many of the regimes of twentieth-century communist governments, even stolen our language and our history. So many activists talk about anticapitalism because the terms “communism” and “socialism” have been robbed of their earlier, positive meanings.

But while the power of neoliberal capitalist and Right-wing attacks is clearly responsible for the current rout of anticapitalist movements worldwide, I suggest that those of us trying to remobilize anticapitalist politics might do well to re-examine our own iterations of our histories and what we can learn from them. As Sheila Rowbotham has noted, political movements have two major weaknesses that leave them vulnerable to misinterpretation and defeat.¹ They have no way of handing down memory, so the history of their struggles is easily forgotten. When the social and political transformations they struggle for appear impossible, they are liable to revert to the reiteration of protest. In what follows, I argue that both Left-wing and feminist movements have either ignored or distorted the politics

of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s–1980s, and particularly its Marxist feminist current, in ways that undermine our capacity to organize effectively in the current period, especially our ability to envision and fight for a viable and attractive future.

I come to this project as an English-speaking, Marxist/socialist feminist in Canada² who came of age during the period of Left-wing mobilizations and the global revitalization of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, and who has lived through the defeats of Left-wing politics, the rise of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s, and its entrenchment in the 2010s. This paper is a contribution to what I think and hope is a renewed interest in anticapitalist politics. Mobilizations such as the World Social Forum, the demonstrations against the G20 meetings, and the Occupy movement³ are initiatives that reflect such interests, but for many feminists the excitement of those movements is tempered by a concern that feminist and women's issues are once again not central to those anticapitalist movements.⁴

My main argument is that when both the Left and the feminist movement disregard the history of the women's liberation movement and ignore or misrepresent the lessons of Marxist feminist politics, we seriously weaken our capacity to challenge capitalism and its current neoliberal policies. If we forget, or worse, distort, we risk sustaining or even deepening the oppression of women, of working class, racialized, Indigenous and other subordinated peoples. As I argue elsewhere,⁵ the women's movement in Canada and Quebec in the period from the late 1960s to the late 1980s had a well-developed socialist feminist current, supported by a robust working-class feminism in the labour movement that was strongly social democratic in orientation, with key leaders who were Marxists and whose political analyses carried weight in the labour, antiracist, and women's movements. It produced a significant socialist feminist political movement that shaped feminist organizing for two decades and continues to generate feminist theory designed to inform anticapitalist political action. What I present here reflects that perspective. I hope readers with different perspectives take up these issues and help us to collectively remember the history of anticapitalist feminism, explore the possibilities for feminist anticapitalist futures, and come together to build a new movement.

In order to argue that Marxist feminism is vital to current anticapitalist politics, I explore three issues: the question of memory and the way that Marxist-feminist politics have been misrepresented in ways that undermine and silence their contribution; the importance of reclaiming Marxist-feminist politics and affirming their centrality to the fight against neoliberal capitalism; and the challenge posed by the politics of women's liberation for the current period, particularly as those politics relate to what feminist political economy now calls "social reproduction" and what most people refer to as managing the competing demands of paid employment and informal care—or living our lives—under capitalism.

Reappropriating Our History: The Politics of Memory The first issue is related to how we know what we know and the importance of history. Like many people who engaged with the political ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, I am alarmed by the extent to which prevailing interpretations contradict my sense of what happened then. Many contemporary histories of the Left leave Marxist feminism out of the discussion altogether, while feminist histories tend to distort and misrepresent it. This disjuncture between memory and interpretation is not only an inevitable consequence of time passing; it has been produced by the politics of the intervening years and thus is part of the politics of the current period, undermining the traditions and practices of Left-wing feminism.

Let me offer two widely publicized examples from the prevailing histories of the English-language women's liberation movement in the United States. The first refers to media coverage of various women's organizing efforts. In September 1968, a small group of mostly white young women protested against the Miss America beauty contest by crowning a sheep and depositing girdles, curlers, and editions of the magazines *Ladies Home Journal* and *Playboy* into a trash can to protest the manufactured and commercialized ideal of female beauty. They got enormous publicity, including a report by *The New York Post* that used the phrase "bra burning." Although they did not actually burn anything, their reputed bra burning went down in history.⁶ That same year on Mothers' Day (12 May 1968), women's liberation activists helped to organize a Poor People's March in which about 5,000 working

class and poor women—Black, white, and Chicana—marched on Washington to protest attacks on welfare recipients and the lack of child care and jobs; they chanted the slogan “Mother Power—Income, Dignity, Justice and Democracy.”⁷ They got much less publicity even though this march, led by Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, was part of the larger Poor People’s Campaign protest mobilizations following King’s assassination. It is well-known in the history of the US civil rights movement, but is not an established part of US women’s liberation history.⁸ Such media representations, or their absence (and a dearth was more typical for Canada and Quebec), present a distorted image of the activists and issues of the women’s movement and contribute to the widely accepted assertion that the women’s movement of the 1970s was preoccupied with white, middle-class women’s concerns. The concerns and organizing efforts of working-class, poor, Black, Chicana, and Aboriginal peoples, including their understanding of the centrality of women as workers and as mothers, are easily forgotten or denied, and the politics of anticapitalist, antiracist, Left-wing feminism are obscured.

The second example comes from contemporary feminist presentations of the history of what is called “second-wave feminism” (usually identified as covering the period of the 1960s–1980s in English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). Many reiterate the claim that this period of activism focuses on the concerns of white, middle-class women, usually to the exclusion of women of colour, Indigenous women, working-class women, and poor women.⁹ Others present overviews of Left-wing feminist politics that seriously misrepresent these politics. For example, with a compellingly self-confident tone and legitimated by its university press imprimatur, Victoria Bromley’s recent text presents an overview of Marxist and socialist feminism that ranges from caricature to completely incorrect.¹⁰

What disappears in these versions is the actual history of the ways in which Left-wing activists engaged in often intense and complicated negotiations around the issues they took up, the demands they raised, and the actions in which they engaged. At the level of practice, lesbians, women of colour, women with disabilities, Aboriginal, poor, union, immigrant,

Francophone, and rural women all struggled to make their concerns heard and to ensure that women's liberation politics reflected their issues and positions. They certainly encountered homophobia, racism, imperialist practices, ignorance, indifference, and sometimes outright hostility. But through those struggles, activists learned and reworked their politics, and Marxist feminism developed new analyses. Ignoring the history of those struggles denies the political activism of anyone who isn't white and middle class. It also obscures the reality of what political organizing involves, rendering such politics incomprehensible to those without that experience and adding to the difficulties of mobilizing new activists.

At the level of theory, Marxist feminists have taken various positions that are often denied or misrepresented in summary texts. For example, Bromley claims that Marxist feminists argue that women are an oppressed class.¹¹ Most Marxist feminists reject that idea. She also claims that socialist-feminist theory integrates patriarchy.¹² On the contrary, many reject patriarchy as an appropriate way to think about men's domination.¹³ A more sophisticated but equally problematic position is expressed in the recent writings of a number of prominent US feminists who claim that late twentieth-/ early-twenty-first-century feminism has been "co-opted" by neoliberalism. As Joan Sangster and I argue elsewhere,¹⁴ Nancy Fraser presents an undifferentiated second-wave feminism as legitimating "a structural transformation of capitalist society."¹⁵ Fraser and others argue that second-wave feminism turned away from issues of redistribution to recognition or identity politics, critiqued the family wage, fought for women's access to paid employment, and showed how welfare state policies harmed women. The result is that second-wave feminism served to legitimize the marketization, state retrenchment, and valorization of the cheap, waged labour central to neoliberalism.¹⁶ As a recounting of history, such arguments serve to silence, and even deny, the important roles played by working-class women,¹⁷ women of colour,¹⁸ and Indigenous women,¹⁹ and ignore their struggles for collective responsibilities for care. By conflating second-wave feminism with one specific activist current and strand of theorizing—liberal feminism—they obliterate Left-wing or socialist feminism, even when, like Fraser, they clearly support its politics.

This interaction of distorted memory and problematic interpretation has significant impacts on the kinds of political activism that seem possible in the current period. The combination of misrepresentation and denial fail to challenge the widespread Right-wing initiatives designed to defeat the radical politics of the 1960s to 1980s. Fuelled by the capitalist economic crisis of the 1970s and by the threats posed by equity-demanding groups, such as the labour movement, anti-imperialist and antiracist movements, and the women's movement, the leading procapitalist institutions and actors led a global initiative reasserting free enterprise capitalism, demanding cuts to existing welfare states while attacking both socialist and social democratic regimes. By the 1980s, they had established neoliberal economic and social policies as the dominant global policy and practice. The victories of the women's movement, especially economic gains, were attacked and undermined. The Right-wing mobilizations of the last 40 years, and the politics of neoliberalism under which we are currently living, are in part a systematic effort by Right-wing, procapitalist advocates to assert capitalism as the only possible system and to destroy the alternative political vision formulated by the Left-wing, anticapitalist activists of the 1960s–1980s in the women's liberation movement.²⁰

Neoliberalism is a term used primarily by its critics, rather than its advocates, to refer to policies that advance free-market, laissez-faire capitalism, such as free trade, privatization, and unfettered exploitation of natural resources and the environment. It aspires to reduce government regulation of markets and of the well-being and income security of working and poor populations. Central to that project is the drive by capitalists to lower wages and reduce state expenditures on social welfare in order to increase profits and private wealth. The more individuals and private family households can be forced or persuaded to absorb the costs of caring for people, the more wealth is available for profits. While the goals, successes, and impacts of neoliberalism's market policies have been well documented,²¹ the ways in which neoliberalism also involves an explicit and sustained attack on collective practices and actions, from the communal land ownership of Indigenous peoples to workers' co-ops and collective responsibility for each other, is acknowledged less often.²² Similarly, the growing power and wealth inequal-

ities generated by the global ruling and capitalist classes' attacks on working class, Indigenous, and poor people, and the ways in which class struggle is implicated in sexism, racism, and neocolonialism, tend not to be recognized.

Much political opposition to neoliberalism tends to critique it for undermining the social democratic gains won in the early- to mid-twentieth century, rather than organizing as anticapitalist initiatives that, in calling for the liberation of everyone, require antiracist, anti-imperialist, Left-wing feminist politics. As neoliberalism has gained near-hegemony around the world, the socialist vision of a possible future has become almost incomprehensible; indeed, the "death of socialism" has been declared widely and celebrated.²³ Instead of a viable inspiration for political movements, the radical Left-wing vision that inspired so many people in so many parts of the world is now readily dismissed as outdated, unsuccessful, or impossibly utopian. In the present period, much opposition to capitalism is expressed as protest, rather than as alternative visions that might inspire people to actually work and organize to make them happen. While important, such responses are not in themselves useful for developing transformative politics.

I suggest that reclaiming Marxist-feminist politics and affirming its centrality to the fight against neoliberal capitalism is essential for Left politics of the current period. But doing so involves overcoming the damage done by forgetting, misrepresentation, and denial. It also requires persistent vigilance to overcome all of the forces that undermine Marxist feminism's commitment to collective action and solidarity. One of the first challenges confronting this project involves the politics of history as articulated in language. Terms developed in one political and linguistic milieu may be difficult to translate into another, and the same term can mean different things in different circumstances.

Underlying the various meanings adhering to Marxist feminism are the histories of the social locations and political struggles that have generated them. Sometimes a number of related terms are interchangeable, but in other contexts those terms may represent different and opposing politics. For some, Marxist feminism augments, positively, the powerful analyses of modes of production and critiques of capitalism developed by Marx and Engels

with analyses of gender relations that put women at the centre.²⁴ For others, especially those who lived under repressive Communist regimes, Marxist feminism is associated, negatively, with those who adhere to a Soviet-style communism that advocates class politics and takes a relatively conservative position on issues such as marriage, women's domestic labour, and sexuality. In some cases, socialist feminism serves as a homonym for Marxist feminism. In other cases, socialist feminism refers to those who advocate reformist, social democratic politics. Both socialist feminism and Marxist feminism often refer to politics that link gender, race, and class and prioritize women's issues, while recognizing the diversity of women's situations and advocating an openness to nonmonogamous sexuality and various sexual orientations. Attempting to avoid the terminological political pitfalls, some refer to "Left-wing feminism."

Here, I use the term "Marxist feminist" to refer to political theorists and activists who base their analyses on Marxist principles of historical materialism and Marxist critiques of class societies, especially capitalism, while insisting on theorizing and developing politics that put women's oppression and liberation, class politics, anti-imperialism, antiracism, and issues of gender identity and sexuality together at the heart of the agenda. In practice, Marxist feminism is closely linked to socialist and other radical and Left-wing feminists who, without necessarily relying on historical materialism, advocated similar goals. From this perspective, Marxist feminism emerged as a new political orientation in the mid- to late-twentieth century as a feminist current within Left-wing, anticapitalist movements and a Marxist current with feminism.²⁵

Marxist feminism refuses any anticapitalist class analysis that ignores other systemic forms of discrimination and oppression and rejects the limitations of "formal equality" policies that bring women into the public realm like men without transforming the domestic sphere—a strategy attempted in both capitalist and state socialist countries. It instead calls for a radical transformation of all aspects of social, political, and economic life at the level of both individuals and society.

A second challenge to reanimating Marxist feminism is posed by the way the inevitable tensions between local and transnational politics are exacer-

bated in the current period of globalization. Both Marxism and feminism as theoretical projects and political movements have been international and transnational in orientation since their beginnings, but as capitalism and its neoliberal policies become more globally integrated, the struggles to oppose them require more effective transnational politics. Both Marxist and feminist theories and politics are rooted in specific times and places. They have been shaped by imperialist and colonial histories, national identities, and issues of linguistic, religious, and cultural differences. They reflect local norms and practices relating to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, class politics, and other systems of inequality. For example, during the anti-Apartheid struggles, South African Marxism developed sophisticated analyses of race and class in which feminism remained marginalized.²⁶ Indigenous peoples around the world raised issues related to the land and the relationship of people to their environments.²⁷ In the same period, Marxist feminists in the United Kingdom and Canada developed sophisticated analyses of gender and class, but offered little on racialization until antiracist feminists challenged them.²⁸ While such uneven developments may invite productive exchanges, they can also reinforce misunderstandings and political differences, undermining solidarity among activists from different places.

The politics of language also affects the ability of political movements to learn from each other and to work together. The current dominance of English means that many native English speakers learn no other languages while many people from other language populations must learn English. This dynamic is reinforced by the politics of publishing: English language texts, particularly those aimed at the large US market, are read more widely than texts written in most other languages, and authors from the United States and United Kingdom are better known than writers and activists from other countries. Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti challenge readers to name five American feminists and then ask them to name five German feminists and then eight feminists from other European countries, pointing out that while most can name Americans, few readers know many European feminists.²⁹ Gertrude Mianda also demonstrates the power dynamics of language relations and imperialism, noting that Awa Thiam from Senegal, writing in French in 1978, argues that the struggle against patriarchy for

women in Africa should be conducted simultaneously with struggles against racism and imperialism, insisting that there is no basis for prioritizing one struggle over another.³⁰ Mianda points out that Thiam's argument was one of the first to emphasize the centrality of interconnections, but her work did not get read, appreciated, and taken up in the same way as the same argument made by Black women from the United States.³¹ The latter are widely regarded as making innovative and leading contributions to feminist theory while Thiam's contribution remains largely unknown other than by francophone feminists in Africa. Thus knowledge that is taken for granted in one region or language may be controversial or unknown in another, while the dominant theories available may not reflect the circumstances of other locales. Any efforts to reclaim the contributions of Marxist feminism as part of contemporary anticapitalist strategies needs to be attentive to the problems of language, translation, and interpretation³² while addressing the dialectics of local and global.

Reclaiming Marxist Feminist Politics In the general Left-wing radicalization that swept many countries in the 1960s, there was a widespread radicalization of women as Marxists and socialists and also as women. These perspectives emerged in the mid 1960s and remained a vibrant political movement into the 1980s. As a movement, women's liberation activists had close ties to the socialist, communist, and other Left-wing progressive political movements of the time. They were inspired by the anti-imperialist struggles in places like Algeria, Mozambique, and Vietnam; by the mobilizations of Indigenous peoples over land claims and self-determination; by the civil rights movement in the United States and antiracist activism in Canada and Quebec; and by the struggles of the labour movements and antipoverty movements in many countries. Women's liberation also shared most of the concerns of the broader women's movement based in the labour movement and the unions, and in women's rights organizations and services, many of which had their origins in the late nineteenth century.³³

Many young women in the 1960s (especially in Western Europe and North America), however, were also mobilized by at least three other forces. They were appalled by how constrained most of their mothers' lives were

and they aspired to something more, an aspiration made possible by the expanding education system and the growing labour market for women.³⁴ Disrupting the reformist orientation of the larger women's movement, they also dreamed of a cooperative, classless society free of racism and all forms of systemic discrimination. But what exactly that "more" might look like was hard to imagine. They were committed to identifying and challenging women's oppression—the myriad ways in which women are subordinated to men and discriminated against because they are women—while fighting for women's liberation.

They were outraged by the blatant sexism and hostility they faced, especially from their Left-wing comrades. The opposition to women's liberation was fierce from the start, not only from politicians and the media but from Left-wing men.³⁵ The Left typically ignored the issues women activists were raising, and it used ridicule and sexualization to humiliate and depoliticize them. For example, in 1964 in the United States, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson presented a paper on "The Position of Women in SNCC," denouncing the treatment of women civil rights workers in the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC). Stokely Carmichael, one of the movement's key leaders, responded that "The only position for women in SNCC is prone."³⁶ In response, women's liberation activists developed critiques of the inadequacies in existing Left politics, challenging the male-dominated Left to deal with its profound sexism and its authoritarian traditions.

Activists struggled to find new ways of being women, rejecting the way Marxist versions of socialism had obliterated subjectivity. They turned, despite its sexism, to the work about cultural domination written by anti-imperialists, such as Franz Fanon, and to Black Power thinkers, such as Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael.³⁷ But there were few guides to help activist women figure out new forms of subjectivity and ways of being. Many women aspired to be strong, independent, and self-actualizing while struggling with insecurities, fear, and a need to rely on others, especially men. For many, the rage they experienced about sexism complicated their sexual and emotional attractions and attachments to men.³⁸ For others, homophobia crippled their ties to other women.³⁹ One key area of struggle

was ending women's enforced dependence on men by ensuring women's capacity to live autonomously, as lesbians with other women, or in egalitarian ways with men. Obviously this involves a complex set of issues: changing sexual mores and advocating an openness to nonmonogamous sexuality and various sexual orientations and identities; control over biological reproduction; changing legal regulations and access to the means of economic independence—education, decent jobs, and equal pay. It means struggling with men's violence against women and with gender identities and relations. It also involves new ways of ensuring that care for children and adults could be provided without penalizing people who withdraw from the dependent labour force to provide care. Such changes, in turn, require profound and difficult changes in personal values, emotional reactions, and interpersonal practices.

Many Left-wing feminists in the 1960s and 1970s felt like outsiders everywhere, cut off from mainstream society, and often from their friends and families, by their politics, but treated with suspicion by many other feminists for their Marxism and treated with hostility by many Marxist men. Only later as the writings of earlier women activists were republished could young women of the 1970s learn that earlier generations of women had faced similar struggles. The lives of Eleanor Marx, Alexandra Kollontai, Inessa Armand, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, and Simone de Beauvoir reveal the history of personal anguish and pain that most socialist women have experienced. The fact that their lives were largely unknown made it "seem as if there [was] a conspiracy to conceal daily life and woman."⁴⁰ Learning about the women "hidden from history"⁴¹ offered activists ways of understanding their own experiences as political, making it possible for them to organize to protect themselves from the double alienation they often experienced as feminists from the Left and as Leftists from the women's movement. What made the experience of this new generation of activist women different and more bearable was the sense of "sisterhood," the shared comradery of being in collectives and coalitions and part of a Left-wing women's movement. What made it exciting and energizing was their experience of being part of actively transforming themselves and their world in exhilarating ways.

During the 1960s and 1970s in Canada, there were many grassroots organizing efforts and mass mobilizations as women took to the streets in large numbers to engage in direct action for their liberation. Women began forming consciousness-raising groups, holding study groups, and writing articles and books to educate themselves and others. They turned to direct action to provide services for women—for example, providing birth control and abortion services, health centres, childcare centres, shelters for battered women, and rape crisis centres. They created feminist social and cultural initiatives, such as feminist newspapers and journals and publishing houses, when existing publishers rejected feminist books. They developed militant theatre, music festivals, and art projects. In workplaces, they organized for equal pay and equal access to jobs, struggling within unions for women's issues to be recognized. In schools, they developed feminist curricula and set up women's studies programs.⁴² They insisted on changes in law and argued that governments should support women's issues politically and financially. Captured by the slogan "No Socialism without Women's Liberation! No Women's Liberation without Socialism!" a strong Marxist feminist current was central to this mobilization of the women's movement.

This Marxist feminism advances at least five main principles:

- The liberation of women depends on the liberation of everyone—as long as even one person is oppressed or exploited, we are all at risk;
- The overthrow of ruling elites and existing structures requires mass mobilizations, coalitions, and a politics of solidarity that aspire to a genuine democracy;
- The way we deal with and relate to each other, the way we do politics now, the way we live our lives in the here and now, will inevitably shape the future we create—we can't "wait til after the revolution." Rather, we have a responsibility to try to live our politics, however hard that may be;
- Capitalism depends on women's unpaid caregiving labour, and any anticapitalist politics must make that issue central if it is to succeed; and
- The future society that Marxist feminists aspire to is something we can't even imagine at this point. It will emerge from the ongoing efforts and struggles of people resisting their oppression and exploitation and creating new ways of organizing and living together.

Translated into organizing initiatives, Marxist feminists' starting point is the recognition that women's liberation depends on women's collective self-determination. Marxist feminists strive to build an autonomous women's movement organized by and for women who work together to identify both the ways in which sexism and other systems of discrimination and oppression function in their lives, and what they want to do to resist and challenge their subjugation. At the same time, they argue that women's liberation depends on solidarity and coalitions with other political movements fighting against discrimination and oppression and for the liberation of all peoples, even when those movements have significantly different goals. Such organizing efforts must explicitly strive to create effective practices that recognize the power inequalities among participants while working to overcome them. Concretely, this means that Marxist feminists tried to build broad-based coalitions of women and men from many different political projects, in workplaces and unions, in schools and communities, and around a wide range of issues.

As it developed, this new Marxist-feminist current insisted that equality in daily life cannot be obtained through simple legal, political, or institutional reforms. It developed scathing critiques of "the system"—meaning the whole of existing society, the essential exploitation inherent in capitalism, the industrial-military complex, all institutions, cultural practices, and normative values. It was clear that the whole organization of society has to be changed, from large capitalist economic structures to the intimacies of interpersonal interactions. It struggled to find a theoretical language to contest the power of prevailing assumptions and to reveal the minutiae of subordination. Insisting that "Until All of Us Are Free, None of Us Are Free!" these Marxist feminists envisioned a future free from oppressions and exploitation, articulated demands that challenged gender, race, and class hierarchies, and imagined an economy based on cooperation, not competition. They strove to create alternatives—egalitarian personal relationships, not-for-profit, worker-user controlled collectives, and processes and practices that foster genuine equality—alternatives that, they hoped, would prefigure the egalitarian society they hoped to build.⁴³

But many Marxist feminists of this period knew little or nothing of earlier

Left-wing feminist movements, and, at least at first, had no idea that what they were doing was part of a larger historical movement. They came together in small, locally-based groups, and, at least initially, had the sense that they were inventing their politics autonomously and for the first time in history. For example, new Left activists in Canada, recognizing that the majority of women were housewives, tried to understand the position of women by using Marx's analysis of capital.⁴⁴ They were exhilarated by the new theoretical advances of the domestic labour debate and excited by the politics of mobilizing housewives.⁴⁵ It was only later as feminist social historians explored earlier movements that they learned that the same debates and organizing efforts had occurred in Britain and Europe in the 1840s, and realized they had been forced to "reinvent the wheel" because the history of earlier socialist movements had been suppressed and unavailable to them.⁴⁶

When they turned for inspiration to the history of communist and socialist activists in the early twentieth century, their findings were contradictory. On one hand, a central premise of Marxist theory and communist politics held that women's oppression was a result of specific historical and social relations, and it could be overthrown by new social relations in which family responsibilities ceased to be the private obligation of women and instead became collective social responsibilities and woman could become fully integrated into the labour force.⁴⁷ They learned that women played key roles in most revolutionary movements, women's equality was formally supported in most communist or socialist societies, and women's access to education and the labour force was encouraged. From this perspective, Marxism and the communist movement were attractive to women's liberation activists.

On the other hand, however, despite the communist tradition of calling for the socialization of domestic labour, in most communist countries women's equality was considered to be implemented when women were integrated into the labour force. Little or nothing was done to relieve the domestic burdens women endured or to challenge the sex/gender division of labour.⁴⁸ Despite a long tradition within communism of critiquing the private nuclear family,⁴⁹ there was little support for efforts to develop communities and communal living instead of existing privatized family and

household forms, to foster collective child rearing, or for transforming interpersonal relationships—all part of prefiguring a future communist world.

Instead of incorporating such understandings, most Left-wing movements did not take seriously or consider relevant the histories of earlier twentieth-century radical efforts to do so in the Soviet Union, in Palestine and Israel, and in a number of other communist and socialist countries. On the contrary, most communist regimes adopted deeply conservative, heterosexual, nuclear family norms. The struggles of early twentieth-century Marxist women to make domestic labour, and especially care, a central concern were forgotten and their defeats were deemed insignificant.⁵⁰ The communist and socialist parties of the late twentieth century continued those political traditions, despite women's liberation advocates inside and outside of their organizations. In this context, women's liberation activists recognized that efforts to advance their politics faced daunting challenges.

Despite this, in the 1960s and 1970s socialist feminist women's liberation politics were full of hope and possibilities. Working collectively, the activists struggled to learn how to put into practice their antiracist commitments, their goals of cross-class collaboration, and their efforts to build links with Indigenous and international and transnational struggles. For a brief moment, radical activists attempted to translate their vision into immediate demands. They started by addressing issues of immediate concern to most women in ways that might prefigure the social relations to which Marxist feminists aspired, and then organizing around those demands in ways that promoted collective self-determination, respected difference among women, and fostered links with women and men in other political movements. Demands for free, high-quality childcare for all incorporated social democratic demands for the state to provide childcare in order to support early childhood education and parents' labour force participation, and went further by envisioning collective child rearing and responsibility. Demands for reproductive rights included not only women having access to ways to prevent or terminate pregnancies, but also women having the means to have the children they want and all resources necessary to raise their children well—income security, housing, childcare, health care, and education. Similarly, these activists insisted that people have the right to good quality

care when they need it, and that people should have the time and resources to provide care if they wish, without having care responsibilities imposed onto them. For a while, these activists could see their victories and they lived with changes they had made happen.⁵¹

As activists watched their gains eroding, and as the broad-based mobilizations of the women's movement declined in the face of neoliberal gains through the 1980s, optimism waned. Nevertheless, a Left-wing feminism remains active and organized in groups such as the *World March of Women* and *RebELLEs* and in the writings of Marxist feminist scholars and advocates.⁵² Marxist feminism remains an active current in feminist scholarship and, as individuals, many Marxist feminists try to advance their politics in their workplaces, their unions, their communities, and their daily lives. While their explicit political perspective may appear to be lost, many ideas and political demands have been incorporated into the general consciousness and understandings about gender issues.

Marxist Feminism and Social Reproduction One major contribution that Marxist feminism offers to anticapitalist politics in the current period is an expanded analysis of class that integrates gender and race and is focused on social reproduction. Central to this argument is the recognition that capitalist economies depend for their existence on the unpaid care work that most women and some men do. For a capitalist economy to function, employers rely on workers showing up each day ready and relatively willing to work. This requires that workers be appropriately socialized, educated, and healthy. It also requires that new generations of workers be available to replace those who retire or die. Marx stated that employers could leave this responsibility to the self-interests of workers: "But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation. All the capitalist cares for is to reduce the worker's individual consumption to the necessary minimum..."⁵³

Marxist feminists argue instead that the production and reproduction of the working population must not just be taken for granted, but must be theorized. They point out that considerable labour is required for the maintenance of workers and for their generational reproduction, including

pregnancy and childbirth and child rearing, and that typically this labour is not done entirely by workers themselves. The labours involved in looking after people are not just private activities associated with intimate personal and familial relations, but work that is socially necessary and central to the production of both subsistence and wealth in any society. Unpaid care work that produces the working-class population essential to capitalism acts as a subsidy for private profitmaking. The divisions of labour, which make this work central to women's lives and which rely on the exploitation of racialized women when care work is commodified, is a key to women's oppression and subordination.

Marxist feminists have built on the assertion that capitalism depends on women's (and men's) unpaid caregiving labour, mobilizing the concept of "social reproduction" to refer to all of the labours that produce the labouring population.⁵⁴ These range from conception and birth; childrearing; all immediate work associated with caring for and maintaining people at the immediate daily level, such as obtaining and preparing food, cleaning and laundry, and nursing; to services provided by larger institutions, such as educational and health care systems. Marxist feminists argue that social reproduction is provided by individuals; by families and their households; by the state through public services, such as education, health care, income security, and welfare provisions; and by the market, where private services are available for a price. From this perspective, struggles over who bears the costs of social reproduction, as well as over standards and quality of life, are at the heart of class struggle and are central to the oppression of women, and racialized and poor peoples.⁵⁵

This understanding of the links between class exploitation, racism, and women's oppression has prompted Marxist feminists to argue that struggles around such issues are central to any efforts to challenge the hegemony of capitalism. Arguing that the hegemonic, heterosexual, nuclear family form is intrinsically oppressive to women and children and to men; that it is antisocial—fostering individualism and competition and undermining collectivity and co-operation; and that it is central to the maintenance of capitalist class inequalities, women's liberation initially insisted that no one family form should be privileged; that the state had no business regulating personal relationships through marriage; and that children should be cared for collec-

tively.⁵⁶ Women of colour critiqued the failure of this formulation to recognize that racialized women and men were often prevented from forming nuclear families. Others pointed out that everyone, regardless of age or ability, should be provided with care. By now, there is an extensive literature and a well-developed analytical understanding that the production and reproduction of labour power, and therefore of the labouring population globally, is essential to capital accumulation. It shows that both its organization in family households, where it is carried out as unpaid labour mostly by women, and its organization in the market in low-paid, service-sector jobs carried out mostly by racialized immigrant women, assure greater profits for the capitalist class.⁵⁷ As a result, Marxist feminists argue that any successful anticapitalist movement must make the production and reproduction of labour power a central priority.

Capitalist advocates, especially neoliberals, have a fundamental and essential opposition to such politics, and they continue to oppose any initiatives they deem contrary to free-market capitalism. Lack of support from the Left, however, is also a problem. Much of contemporary Left-wing politics retains the tendency of earlier communist and new Left movements to ignore or downplay feminist concerns. The analysis central to Marxist feminism—that the production and reproduction of labour power is essential to the survival of capitalism—has not been taken up seriously as part of contemporary anticapitalist struggles. Those who advocate doing so face considerable resistance, not only from those supporting capitalism, but from men and some women on the Left. In many places, socialist feminists have been told that raising women's issues is divisive and weakens anticapitalist or anti-imperialist struggles. "Wait til after the revolution and we will deal with that," they are told. In practice, most activist initiatives focus on organizing employed workers' struggles against capitalist employers, on military efforts to seize state power, or on building social democratic parties able to contest elections. Issues directly relating to the daily domestic lives of working-class, poor, and even middle-class women are ignored. I suggest that this failure undermines anticapitalist struggles, that we need to reclaim Left-wing feminist politics, and building on it, develop a politics in which issues of social reproduction are taken up actively and centrally.

Conclusion Central to the efforts of neoliberal advocates to consolidate capitalism's hegemony is their denial of the existence of social classes, of systemic racist exploitation, and of the need for women to contribute to social reproduction. Neoliberals must demonize as vehemently as possible the ideals and promises of feminist, antiracist socialism, and, as we see repeatedly from the G20, Occupy movement, and Idle No More movement, to restrain or prevent progressive mobilizations. Neoliberal advocates are committed to repressing the history of alternative political movements and to exterminating these visions of how societies might be organized.

In the face of the gross inequalities and widespread misery that the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism has produced, it is easy to understand why so many call for a return to basic social democratic reforms—higher welfare benefits and minimum wage rates, greater job security and more secure pensions, reduced tuition fees for postsecondary education, and a reduction in the income gap between poor and rich. Those are important struggles and any such victories make life a little easier for many people. But fighting capitalism's most blatant economic inequalities can too easily leave untouched the myriad ways in which capitalist social relations engender oppression and subjugation.

Marxist feminism provides a powerful critique of free-market enterprise and offers an alternative vision. It demands that we question some of our most basic assumptions about personal life, sexuality, and the sex-based divisions of labour that make women primarily responsible for unpaid care. It insists that we reveal the ways in which private family and household forms, individual childrearing, marriage practices, and family property laws help to perpetuate the individualism that makes people competitive. It insists that class analysis be used to understand the gender, race, and ethnic dynamics that reproduce the class relationships that are based on labouring populations selling labour power for their livelihood, and on a large population unable to secure employment serving as a reserve army of labour as a reserve army of labour, whose existence weakens the capacity of the labour force to demand a greater share of the wealth it produces. Issues such as the environment and climate change and their relation to keeping people alive and healthy are central to Marxist feminism's focus on social reproduction.

In the current period, Marxist feminism has not yet succeeded in developing a political program that moves beyond protest to advance a viable vision with demands that can mobilize poor and working women and men in large, sustained activism. A starting place would involve bringing people together to talk about their concerns, identify problems, and advocate for changes to make future transformations possible. I suggest that the Marxist feminist political vision and goals of the 1960s' women's liberation movement offer a useful oppositional perspective that we might find inspiring today.

Notes

In January 2013, Abigail Bakan asked me to give a talk about Marxist feminism and Anticapitalism to the Education Committee of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly (GTWA). The talk was videorecorded by Pance Stojkovski, who posted it on YouTube: <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/hssje/Faculty_Staff/Faculty_Profiles/370533/Abigail_Bakan.html>. Frigga Haug saw the video and asked me to submit a paper to *Das Argument*. She and Edeltraud Schwabedissen translated a shorter version of this paper, which appeared as "Unsere Geschichte zuruckgewinnen und unsere Politik wiederbeleben," *Das Argument* 303 55 *Jahrgang Heft* 4/2013, pp. 508–521. I thank Abby, Pance, and Frigga for inspiring me to write this paper. I thank Susan Braedley for making me think and rethink just about everything; and Barbara Cameron, Jackie Cock, Ester Reiter, and the *Studies in Political Economy* editorial board for their comments, help, and support.

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