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Constraining Relations

Capitalism, Gender Oppression, and Social Reproduction

Supervisor: **Dr. Emanuela Carta**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (MA)

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Leuven, 2025

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Preface

The initial topic of this master thesis was "esssentialism," or rather "anti-essentialism." I arrived at this theme through my bachelor's thesis, which was a comparative study of Buddhist notions of no-self and Dan Zahavi's contemporary phenomenological notion of the minimal self. In various Buddhist philosophies, the consensus is that the self—understood as a fixed, unchanging essence—does not exist, such a position is a form of anti-essentialism. This led me to want to investigate the notion of essentialism in my master's thesis.

The supervisor of my Bachelor thesis, Peter Reynaert[1], an expert on phenomenology at the University of Antwerp, retired in the academic year after I completed my thesis. This meant that I decided to leave the University of Antwerp. Because of my primary interest in Buddhist philosophy I initially considered doing my master's thesis at the University of Leiden,[2] but in the end, I chose KU Leuven because its curriculum included both Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology. The initial aim of my masters thesis was to do a comparative study between Buddhist and feminists philosophies on (anti-)essentialism. This is because I had noticed a parallel between the importance of the question of whether there is an essence to woman in feminist theory and the significance of the question of whether there is an essence to man in Buddhism.

I started my research without any background in feminist theory and the first author that I came across in my research on essentialism was the French-Belgian difference feminist Luce Irigaray. Soon I discovered the essentialism debates in the 1980s and early 1990s feminist literature. In the meantime, I had also developed a stronger interest in socio-political themes, and in October I joined the Belgian section of the Fourth International, which exposed me to Marxist thought

[1] Peter Reynaert is also the first doctoral student of Rudolf Bernet, a prominent scholar in the field of phenomenology and professor emeritus at KU Leuven, my current university.

[2] Jingjing Li teaches a master course at Leiden University on Yogācāra (Consciousness-only) Buddhism and also wrote an excellent work comparing Husserl's phenomenoloy with *Wei Shi* (Chinese Yogācāra) Buddhism.

and practice. My enthusiasm for researching Buddhist philosophy waned, as I found it could not provide me with the theoretical tools needed to address the kind of socio-political questions I had become concerned with. As Graham Priest, a prominent Buddhist scholar who in his later work seeks to combine Buddhism and Marxism, notes, Buddhism "never had" a "sophisticate political philosophy" (Priest 2018).[3]

There was more than enough in the feminist literature for me to engage with, and I no longer saw any benefit in trying to incorporate Buddhist philosophy on these questions. That is why, at the start of the second semester, I decided to drop the Buddhist side of my project and switch the topic of my master's thesis. This also meant a switch in supervision, from Andrew K. Whitehead, an expert in Zen Buddhist philosophy, to Emanuela Carta, whose expertise is in phenomenology and feminist philosophy.[4]

My interest in Buddhism dated back to 2017, when I first began practicing, and it was also the reason I started my philosophy studies at the end of 2022. It somehow felt as if I was parting ways with a beloved partner, marking a significant shift in my philosophical interests. My new companions became feminism and Marxism, though me and Buddhism still are on good terms. In the second semester of my masters, I also received my first philosophical introduction to Marxist theory through Matthias Lievens' course on critical social theory. Encouraged by my supervisor to start with the authors who appealed to me most, I turned to Marxist feminism to help me make sense of what is at stake in the essentialism debates in feminist history that first caught my attention. This led me to explore the work of Cinzia Arruzza, beginning with her book *Dangerous Liaisons*, co-published by the IIRE, the research institute of the Fourth International where she is a fellow.[5] She also recently co-authored the manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* (2019) with Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya.

[3]There is a strand of engaged Buddhism, but this is far removed from being a thorough theoretical political philosophy.

[4]I first encountered Carta's work in the first semester of my master's program while researching an essay on the notion of essence in Husserl's *Ideas I*.

[5]International Institute for Research and Education, "IIRE Fellows," https://www.iire.org/news-fellows

Introduction

What causes gender injustice, and how can it be remedied? These are important questions for every form of feminist theory. Some of the most canonical mid-twentieth-century figures, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, turned to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in seeking answers. Today, however, "non-Marxist or anti-Marxist feminism is the dominant modus operandi of feminist theory in the Euro-Atlantic context," and Marxism and feminism are often viewed as "de facto incompatible" (Portella and Busk 2024, 357).

My aim is to show that Marxist feminism is indispensable for theorizing gender oppression in contemporary capitalist societies, and that understanding the structural relation between gender oppression and capitalism is of vital importance. Therefore, the central question guiding this thesis is: What is the structural relation between gender oppression, other forms of oppression, and capitalism in capitalist societies?

This thesis makes three contributions. First, I challenge dominant narratives of feminist development and offer a rereading of Nancy Fraser that complicates the standard account. Second, I reconstruct radical feminism's account of patriarchy and the Marxist feminist responses, evaluating their explanatory power along three axes: historicity and etiology, primacy, and autonomy. Third, I analyze unitary or social reproduction theory, and I employ a metaphysics of internal relations to explain how capitalism relates to gender and other forms of oppression.

The first chapter starts with Clare Hemmings's account of two influential yet misleading narratives—the story of progress and the story of loss—through which dominant strands of feminist theory interpret feminism's history. My reason for engaging with this account is twofold. First, it clarifies how the essentialism debates and Black feminism of the 1980s are seen as pivotal moments in an overarching progress narrative that dominant strands of feminism tell about their own history. Second, it illuminates how Marxist feminism is often

cast through the loss narrative, which runs counter to the progress story and contributes to its marginalization. I aim to show that such narratives about the development of feminism are misleading and that a more accurate reading is needed. To make this case, I show how Butler draws on the loss narrative to frame her critique of Fraser, in a way that misrepresents Fraser's position. Through this reading of Fraser's work, I will show that economic analysis remains indispensable and that Marxist feminist theory, as exemplified in her writings, is crucial for exposing the shortcomings of other approaches to theorizing the spectrum of oppressions.

The second chapter traces how the theorizing of patriarchy arose from the experiences of women in the new social movements of the 1960s, whose demands and grievances were often sidelined within those movements. Emerging amid the era's broader critiques of entrenched social structures—from civil rights to anti-war activism—the concept was developed to frame women's oppression as structural and systemic rather than individual. Precisely because it frames oppression in systemic terms, an investigation of patriarchy is indispensable for my thesis. I focus on how and why this notion is invoked, considering radical feminist conceptions of patriarchy and Marxist feminist responses to them. These debates help clarify why patriarchy is often regarded as a system independent of capitalism, a view that remains influential today and that will be challenged in the third chapter.

The third chapter turns to a repressed history that recent scholarship has resurfaced, focusing on "triple oppression" as articulated by Black communist women in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. This carries forward the first chapter's aim of offering a more accurate account, now applied to Marxist feminism's own history. To frame unitary and social reproduction theory, I first revisit dual and triple systems theory to show how the former emerged as a response to the latter. Rather than treating capitalism and patriarchy as independent systems, unitary or social reproduction theory holds that patriarchy has become completely enmeshed with capitalism. Since poststructuralist approaches gained prominence in feminist theory, totalities have often been treated with suspicion. I therefore begin by clarifying what is not at stake in the concept, both to head off misplaced objections, such as the claim that it presumes a single organizing logic, and to open space for analyzing the structural relation between gender oppression and capitalism. The aim is to show that, given their historical development, capitalist societies do not stand in a merely contingent relation to gender oppression, while also not assuming that such oppression is necessary for capitalism's functioning.

I close with a metaphysical reflection on how gender and other forms of oppression relate to capitalist accumulation. I do so for four reasons: first, stepping back to a more abstract level allows for a broader grasp of the different ways this relationship can be conceived; second, this broader view makes it possible to recognize how these possibilities have, in fact, been taken up in existing debates; third, zooming out in this way connects the issue to similar problems of relationality in other areas of philosophy; and finally, it suggests that an internal relations model could prove valuable for further inquiries into the kinds of relationships capitalism sustains with gender and other forms of oppression.

Chapter 1

Recovering Marxist Feminism

In 1996, Nancy Fraser writes that "academic feminist theory in the United States is at an impasse today, perfectly mirroring the larger radical-democratic impasse" (Fraser 1996, 175). This impasse, she argues, arises from a growing divide between a social politics of justice and equality—such as economic egalitarianism—and a cultural politics of identity and difference—such as anti-essentialism and multiculturalism. The result is not only that these two dimensions are increasingly seen as opposed, but also that the social and economic aspects of justice have become undertheorized, as attention shifts toward questions of identity and recognition. This opposition has often produced an either/or framing, in which every injustice is understood as either economic or cultural. Fraser seeks to break with this mutually exclusive framing and insists that both dimensions are necessary. Yet she does not mean, as in functionalist accounts like Judith Butler's, that everything is simply both economic and cultural at once. Fraser, however, has often been misinterpreted—most notably by Judith Butler—through her association with one of the two dominant stories white feminism tells about its own history. We will first turn to Clare Hemmings, who details these two dominant stories.

1.1 Two dominant stories about feminism

"How does Western feminist theory tell the story of its own recent past?" is the opening question of Hemmings' essay "Telling Feminist Stories" (2005). She distinguishes two teleological narratives told by Western feminists academics about the development of feminist thought

(Hemmings 2005, 115):[1] one of progress and celebration, and one of loss and grief (116). In the story of progress, it is celebrated that we've moved from a presumed essentialist sameness in the seventies, through a growing awareness of racial and sexual difference in the eighties to an "explosion of difference in general" in the nineties (122). In the story of loss, it is grieved that we've moved from a "politicized unity" and commitment to feminist activism and material analysis in the seventies, to its institutionalization in academia in the eighties, to a "fragmentation into multiple feminisms and individual careers" in the nineties (116), culminating in today's "apolitical individualism" (126). In other words, the one story tells us we've progressed in terms of theoretical multiplicity and political plurality, and the other story says we've declined in terms of shared political commitment and focus on material and structural conditions.

The story of progress

For the story of progress, the key shift is one "from (exclusionary) sameness to (inclusive) difference (Hemmings 2005, 121). Theoretically, this marks a transition from essentialism to deconstruction and poststructuralism. The seventies function as the emblem of a feminism grounded in sameness and essentialism; seventies feminism is even seen as"necessarily essentialist" (120). As the story goes, it is in the eighties that feminism begins to interrogate its own essentialist foundations, a shift facilitated by the rise of black feminism and the contentious "sex wars."[2] This era was marked by heated debates on "essentialism," in which the accusation of essentialism itself became a powerful rhetorical weapon. By the end of the decade, several authors reflected critically on these dynamics. Diana Fuss (1989, xi) noted that the term "essentialism" carried significant rhetorical weight, implicitly casting a position as bad, dangerous, or reactionary. That same year, Naomi Schor (1989, 40) observed that the charge of essentialism had the "power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion." Rosi Braidotti (1992, 77) and Ian Hacking (2000, 17) further argued that the term had come to function as a slur, wielded to discredit opponents through dismissive or pejorative force.

Hemmings (2005, 118) confirms this assessment and even went on to add that the accusation of essentialism has produced the greatest depth of shame in feminist theory. It is the most familiar

[1] Hemmings (2005, 115) derives these stories through "an examination of recent production of interdisciplinary feminist and cultural theory journals."

[2] The "sex wars" were late-1970s and 1980s debates between radical feminists, who opposed practices like pornography and prostitution as reinforcing male dominance, and libertarian feminists, who defended consensual sexual practices as legitimate (A. Ferguson 1984).

and dominant charge leveled at feminism of the 1970s, as evidenced by the fact that it is so frequently "repeated without further comment"[3] that, by the time Hemmings is writing, it serves as a justification for not reading feminist texts from that period at all—a tendency she personally shared, having avoided those texts for over a decade (120-121).

In the progress story, "the role of the eighties is key" (Hemmings 2005, 122) in marking the shift from the entrenched essentialism of the 1970s to the expansive difference of the 1990s, with approaches such as Black feminism and analyses of sexuality often linked to this period. On the one hand, black feminists are seen as the "initiators of difference," credited with exposing the racial exclusions and white bias of earlier feminist thought. On the other hand, the writings on sexuality are portrayed as challenging the heteronormative assumptions of radical feminism, particularly its construction of female sexuality as "repressed by 'the patriarchy' " and its failure "to see women as sexual subjects in their own right" (Hemmings 2005, 123 references *Feminist Review*, 2000). In the construction of this narrative, theories like black feminism become "a trope in the service of the idea of a progressive incorporation of difference" (122), serving as the baton-passers of difference for poststructuralism. They are acknowledged just enough to show that difference has been incorporated, but their full theoretical weight is not engaged. References to black feminist texts are typically confined to the 1980s, as if its intellectual roots did not reach back further in time. Although black feminism and poststructuralism are both cited from this same period, the linear narrative of progress positions black feminism as a corrective to essentialism of 1970s feminism and as the precursor to poststructuralism. As a result, poststructuralism is portrayed as carrying forward the idea of difference and as the most sophisticated stage in feminist thought (123).

The story of loss

Standing in opposition to the progress narrative is a counter-story of loss. Hemmings (2005, 126) distinguishes two forms of counter narratives: (i) a linear return, and (ii) a circular return. (i) The linear return expresses a nostalgic[4] desire to go back to a time before the institutionalization of feminism where poststructuralism reigns, when involvement was grounded in political practice rather than academic theory, and where one was primarily a political activist rather than a

[3] Hemmings (2005, 122) observes that works from the feminist seventies are "rarely directly cited but instead implicated by juxtaposition."

[4] Judith (Butler 1997, 270) likewise speaks of this as a "nostalgia for a false and exclusionary unity," a longing for a kind of political cohesion.

professional feminist scholar. In other words, it privileges practice over theory (126-28). In this narrative, the perceived loss of feminism's institutionalization, is the depoliticization and fragmentation that happened because the category of "woman" was left behind (Hemmings 2007, 70). The reason we must go back is because "transformative feminist knowledge can never be found in or accessed via poststructuralist accounts or tools" (71-72).

(ii) While the circular return shares the critique of poststructuralism, it does not nostalgically long for an earlier period but instead seeks to "advance through a 'return' to what remains valuable" (Hemmings 2005, 126). It calls for renewed attention to "everyday lived experience or material realities," rather than remaining mired in a "conceptual or linguistic realm deemed to have no value outside of the academy" (Hemmings 2005, 128). As a key example, Hemmings refers to the debates between Fraser (1997) and Judith Butler (1997) over the distinction between "the political versus the cultural." Fraser's work is interpreted as a "circular return" to materialism because Butler views her as reviving an old split between the material and the cultural. Since the cultural is then assumed to be less important, it is treated as only of secondary political significance. As we will see in the next section, however, this rests on a misreading of Fraser that conflates the economic with the cultural.

1.2 A more accurate loss-story

In Hemming's response to Rachel Torr's critique of her article, Hemmings (2007, 107) notes that any corrective moves that aim to "tell the right story" are insufficient, yet she maintains that we can "begin to tell a more accurate story." To this end, she proposes two methods: (i) a historiographic approach that "picks at the conditions of dominant stories to establish what political, epistemological and ontological work they are trying to achieve," and (ii) authorial refiguration, which involves retelling dominant narratives "by messing directly with the representations of those thinkers most associated with engineering these stories' foundational shifts."

I take up the method of authorial reconfiguration to contest Fraser's association with the circular return narrative. My aim is to reinterpret her work in a way that destabilizes its instrumentalization within the loss-story and exposes how her representation has been shaped by this framing. Judith Butler, "the most cited" author associated with the progress-story, directly critiques Fraser in their essay "Merely Cultural," where they invoke a version of the circular return narrative to suggest a resurgence of materialism tied to Orthodox or neoconservative Marxism. Although

Butler (1997, 270) explicitly states that Fraser's views are "in no way orthodox," they nevertheless chose to frame her discussion in a way that Fraser (1997, 279) herself worried could lead readers to "the erroneous conclusion" that she endorses a "neoconservative Marxist" position. This concern seems to have been warranted, given how many have interpreted her distinction as ontological (Swanson 2005; Armstrong 2008; Kaplan 2021) and how Hemmings characterizes the debate. In describing the circular return version of the counter-narrative, Hemmings introduces the exchange between Fraser and Butler as follows: "The key arenas for feminist theory where this 'return' is pivotal are debates about the political versus the cultural that dominated the mid-late nineties (notably Butler (1997) and Fraser (1997))." Yet this framing is itself misleading, since denying that the cultural is political is precisely the kind of orthodox or neoconservative view that Butler agrees is not representative of Fraser's position. In the coming sections, I will therefore attempt to recount the story more accurately by examining this debate in greater depth.

Fraser (1997, 279) remarks: "Butler conjoins [their] discussion of my book, *Justice Interruptus*, to a critique of a group of unnamed interlocutors whom she calls 'neoconservative Marxists.' " The protagonists of this story, the neoconservative Marxists, are said by Butler to rely on "a recourse to an apparently stable distinction between material and cultural life." This distinction, they argue, serves a particular tactical purpose:

> The untimely resurgence of that distinction is in the service of a tactic that seeks to identify new social movements with the merely cultural, and the cultural with the derivative and secondary, thus embracing an anachronistic materialism as the banner for a new orthodoxy. […] That very division between the material and the cultural becomes tactically invoked for the purposes of marginalizing certain forms of political activism. (Butler 1997, 268)

Butler thus makes two claims: (i) that Fraser makes a distinction between the material/and the cultural, and (ii) that this distinction is tactically used to marginalize new social movements by identifying them with the "merely cultural."

The material/cultural distinction

Butler's interpretation that Fraser makes a distinction between the material and the cultural is, according to Fraser, a fundamental misunderstanding of her position:

> In invoking the material/cultural distinction today, Butler contends, I have lapsed into a 'theoretical anachronism'. This argument […] conflates "the economic" with "the material." Butler assumes that my normative distinction between redistribution and recognition rests on an ontological distinction between the material and the cultural. (Fraser 1997, 286)

Butler thus takes Fraser's distinction between redistribution and recognition to be a distinction between the material and the cultural, and therefore an ontological one. Yet, as Fraser clarifies, her distinction is between the economic and the cultural, which means that Butler ends up conflating "the economic" with "the material." The distinction Fraser makes is normative:

> My normative distinction rests on no ground of ontological difference. What it does correlate with, in capitalist societies, is a distinction between the economic and the cultural. This, however, is not an ontological distinction but a socialtheoretical distinction. (Fraser 1997, 268)

Fraser's economic/cultural distinction, which forms the basis for her distinction between redistribution and recognition (as we will see in the next section), is a sociotheoretical one. Fraser (1997, 286) employs anthropological arguments to support this point.

Anthropological arguments

Fraser aims to historicize "a distinction central to modern capitalism," a move that, in her view, clarifies "the social-structurally differentiated and historically specific character of contemporary capitalist society." She argues that this "represents a better approach to social theory than destabilization or deconstruction" (1997, 287). The possibility of decoupling the economic and the cultural, she contends, "is built into the structure of modern capitalist society." This is because, in capitalist societies, "economic ordering is *institutionally differentiated* from cultural ordering" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 69, emphasis mine). "Economic ordering is typically institutionalized in markets," whereas cultural ordering is institutionalized through institutions such as "kinship, religion, and law" (51). In contrast, such a distinction was absent in earlier forms of society:

> "Neither distinctively economic relations nor distinctively cultural relations existed; hence, the economic/cultural distinction was presumably not available to the members of those societies. […] Capitalist societies […] do contain the social-structural

> differentiations in question. […] In such societies a single order of social relations handles both economic integration and cultural integration, matters that are relatively decoupled in capitalist society. (Fraser 1997, 286–87)

In capitalist societies the economic structure "comprises an order of economic relations that is differentiated from kinship and oriented to the expansion of surplus value" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 24n25). This is contrary to earlier societies in which kinship relations also organized "the labor process and the distribution of goods" (1997, 286). But importantly, although culture and economy became institutionally separated under capitalism, they are "thoroughly imbricated with one another, respecting no institutional boundaries" (Fraser 1996, 40).

The poststructuralist anti-dualist critique

What is the point of this anthropological excursus? On the one hand, it serves to demonstrate that the economic/cultural distinction is not a natural or ontological given, but a historically specific feature of capitalist societies in which these domains have been institutionally separated. And while this institutional separation makes it appear as if culture and economy are two separate spheres, they are not. To claim they are separate, would be to "take the appearance of separate spheres at face value" and fall into "substantive dualism" (2003, 62). It is precisely this kind of dualism that Butler worried might be implicit in Fraser's distinction between economic and cultural ordering, which they viewed as "dichotomizing." Fraser refers to this line of critique as "poststructuralist anti-dualism" (60).

Iris Marion Young similarly applied this kind of critique in her essay "Unruly Categories: A Critique of Fraser's Dual Systems Theory" (Young 1997), where she argues that Fraser's framework reproduces a "dichotomy between political economy and culture" (152). Young contends that Fraser falls back into a model that theorizes two distinct spheres, which resembles the dual systems theory she had critiqued over a decade earlier in "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory" (Young 1981). In doing so, she implicitly suggests that Fraser's account risks repeating an anachronistic circular return to a problematic theoretical separation.

However, as Fraser makes clear, her theory does not imply a substantive dualism of two separate spheres, contrary to what Butler and Young suggest in their poststructuralist anti-dualist critiques. Rather, she insists that the economic and the cultural interpenetrate one another (Fraser and

Honneth 2003, 61). As she explains:

> What presents itself as "the economy" is always already permeated with interpretations and norms — witness the distinctions between "working" and "caregiving," "men's jobs" and "women's jobs," which are so fundamental to historical capitalism. In these cases, gender meanings and norms have been appropriated from the cultural order and bent to capitalist purposes. Likewise, what presents itself as "the cultural sphere" is deeply permeated by "the bottom line"—witness global mass entertainment, the art market, and transnational advertising, all fundamental to contemporary culture. (62)

On the other hand, the point of the anthropological argument is to show that "poststructuralist anti-dualism is no more adequate for theorizing contemporary society." In contemporary capitalist societies, economic and cultural orderings are in fact institutionally separated, which means they exhibit "actually existing divergences of status from class."[5] To insist, as the poststructuralist anti-dualist position does, that "all injustices, and all claims to remedy them, are simultaneously economic and cultural," is, as Fraser puts it, "to paint a night in which all cows are grey" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 60). Such a view presupposes a functionalist model in which society is seen as "a monolithic system of perfectly interlocking oppressions," such a "functionalist systems theory" is unfortunately a relapse to what Fraser calls "one of the worst aspects of 1970s Marxism and socialist feminism"; more on that in the subsequent chapters. Such a view fails to account for real social-structural differentiation. By contrast, a historicizing approach allows us to make sense of the divergences between status and class:

> With a historically specific, differentiated view of contemporary capitalist society, we can locate the gaps, the nonisomorphisms of status and class, the multiple contradictory interpellations of social subjects, and the multiple complex moral imperatives that motivate struggles for social justice. (Fraser 1997, 287)

The "merely cultural" tactic

Butler (1997, 268) observes that "the very division between the material and the cultural becomes tactically invoked for the purposes of marginalizing certain forms of political activism." She associates this tactic with a Marxist orthodoxy in which only the economic is regarded as

[5] Fraser (1997, 281) relies on "a quasi-Weberian dualism of status of class."

"the 'real' business of politics" (Butler 1997, 268). Within this view, the cultural is treated as politically irrelevant and of secondary importance. This orthodoxy derives from what is commonly referred to as the "base-superstructure model" of society, which, as Beasley (1999, 61) explains, conceives of social relations as "crucially shaped by the economic base of society, rather than by ideas and attitudes." As Fraser (1997, 280) notes, this leads to "orthodox distinctions between 'base' and 'superstructure,' 'primary' and 'secondary' oppressions," with the cultural reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of the economic.

According to this perspective, new social movements are dismissed as "merely cultural" and furthest removed from what counts as "real" political struggle which marks a return to a form of "false and exclusionary unity." The paradigmatic case is that of heterosexualist struggles. As Butler puts it, "queer politics is regularly figured by the orthodoxy as the cultural extreme of politicization," because, in this view, class and race struggles are considered "pervasively economic" and feminist struggles "sometimes economic and sometimes cultural," whereas queer struggles are seen as "merely cultural" and thus entirely "derivative and secondary."

While Butler (1997, 270) acknowledges that Fraser's views are "in no way orthodox," they nevertheless identify in her work the "merely cultural" assumption. Their entire framing, says Fraser (1997, 268), is somewhat of a "red herring":

> Butler conjoins [their] discussion of my book, *Justice Interruptus*, to a critique of a group of unnamed interlocutors whom she calls "neoconservative Marxists." […] Despite [their] disclaimers to the contrary, readers could draw the erroneous conclusion that I share the "neoconservative Marxist" dismissal of the oppression of gays and lesbians as "merely cultural," hence as secondary, derivative, or even trivial. They might assume that I see sexual oppression as less fundamental, material, and real than class oppression and that I wish to subordinate struggles against heterosexism to struggles against workers' exploitation. Finding me thus lumped together with "sexually conservative orthdodox" Marxists, readers could even conclude that I view gay and lesbian movements as unjustified particularisms that have split the Left and on whom I wish forcibly to impose Left unity. I, of course, believe nothing of the sort.

To say that heterosexist misrecognition is "merely cultural," Fraser (1997, 281) writes, "makes no sense," as it relies on the base-superstructure model, which is nothing other than the "sort

of economistic monism, that [her] framework aims to displace." As Fraser summarizes her own position, she does not "see sexual oppression as less fundamental, material, and real than class oppression," and she does wish "to subordinate struggles against heterosexism to struggles against workers' exploitation" (290). Now that we've dispelled the possible misreading of Fraser as "neoconservative Marxist" that can result from the confusing framing of Butlers article, we can further investigate what Butler did claim about Fraser. Butler describes it as follows:

> [Fraser] reproduces the division that locates certain oppressions as part of political economy and relegates others to the exclusively cultural sphere. Positing a spectrum that spans political economy and culture, she situates lesbian and gay struggles at the cultural end of this political spectrum. Homophobia, she argues, has no roots in political economy, because homosexuals occupy no distinctive position in the division of labor, are distributed throughout the class structure, and do not constitute an exploited class.

Fraser and Honneth (2003, 212) do indeed hold that the deepest roots of heterosexist injustice "lie not in political economy," but instead lie in the symbolic order. That is in "institutionalized patterns of value," in "social patterns of interpretation, evaluation, and communication" (1997, 282). In other words, "the ultimate cause of heterosexist injustice is the status order, not the economic structure of capitalist society" (2003, 24), while "the ultimate cause of class injustice is the economic structure of capitalist society" (23). But, and this is the key point, contrary to how Butler misinterprets Fraser, this does not mean that the "existence and effects" of heterosexist injustice are not material, because they are. They are "materially instantiated—in institutions and social practices, in social action and embodied habitus, and yes, in ideological state apparatuses." And thus, Fraser is not in disagreement with Butler who she says states that the harms suffered by gays and lesbians "include serious economic disadvantages with undeniable material effects" (282).

1.3 Redistribution and recognition

Having dispelled the misinterpretations surrounding the distinction Fraser makes, we can now shift our attention to how Fraser develops it in her work. In her 1996 Tanner Lecture, Fraser begins by explaining two types of social-justice claims: claims of redistribution and claims of recognition. Redistributive claims are a response to socioeconomic injustices by seeking "a

more just distribution of resources and goods," while recognition claims address cultural or symbolic injustices by aiming for "a difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect." Examples of the former include "redistribution from the North to the South, from the rich to the poor, and from owners to workers," while examples of the latter include "recognition of the distinctive perspectives of ethnic, 'racial,' and sexual minorities, as well as of gender difference" (1996, 3; 1995, 70–71).

In the mid-1990s, Fraser observed that claims for redistribution had been "the paradigm case for most theorizing about social justice for the past 150 years" (1996, 3), but noted that this was "increasingly" changing, as claims for recognition begin to predominate, "fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict" (1995, 68; 2003, 8). In what has

This has been referred to as the "cultural turn" (Ray and Sayer 1999), which T. L. Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2008, 134) describes as "the reification of culture as an autonomous zone of signifying practices" that "put aside a transformative politics." In this era, recognition became a defining keyword of the era (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 1). Fraser captures this shifting political climate as follows:

> Demands for 'recognition of difference' fuel struggles of groups mobilized under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, 'race', gender, and sexuality. In these 'post-socialist' conflicts, group identity[6] supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle. (Fraser 1995, 68)

In this shifting climate, where social movements became more proliferated and decentered, the critique of political economy was increasingly repressed (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 198). This also meant that claims for egalitarian redistribution declined (Fraser 2000, 107), while cultural claims gained prominence. This is not an innocent displacement because a sole focus on a politics of recognition "may actually promote economic inequality." Though not all forms of recognition politics carry the same danger, "some represent genuinely emancipatory responses to serious injustices that cannot be remedied by redistribution alone" (2000, 108–9).

This also meant that capitalist society came to be understood primarily in terms of its recognition

[6]As Fraser clarifies, however, the politics of recognition does not consist solely of movements that seek to "revalue unjustly devalued identities," but also includes those that aim to deconstruct identity categories altogether (Fraser 1996, 6).

order, as Marxism was "no longer a force to be reckoned with" and was "supplanted by culturalist paradigms, both in politics and in the academy." This reflected a broader transformation:

> The movements that not long ago boldly demanded an equitable share of resources and wealth have not, to be sure, wholly disappeared. But thanks to the sustained neoliberal rhetorical assault on egalitarianism, to the absence of any credible model of 'feasible socialism,' and to widespread doubts about the viability of state-Keynesian social democracy in the face of globalization, their role has been greatly reduced. (Fraser 2000, 107–8)

Within this broader dynamic, "the two kinds of justice claims are often dissociated from one another — both practically and intellectually." This split has led to a tendency to frame redistribution and recognition as mutually exclusive, reinforcing what Fraser calls a false antithesis (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 8). In response, she introduced the distinction between these two forms of justice in her influential 1995 article "From Redistribution to Recognition?," published in the New Left Review (Fraser 1995, 70). The distinction reflects a divide in the discourse of social justice, but Fraser's aim is precisely to show that this is not an either/or issue: both redistribution and recognition are necessary, and both are "dimensions of justice that can cut across all social movements" (1996, 6). She says her distinction serves as a heuristic, and is needed because "only by abstracting from the complexities of the real world can we devise a conceptual schema that can illuminate it." This allows her to expose their "distinctive logics" and clarify "some of the central political dilemmas of our age" (1995, 70).

However, since the distinction Fraser makes is an analytical one, it is important to remark that "in practice," "in the real world" both redistribution and recognition are intertwined (Fraser 1995, 70, 72, 75):

> Even the most material economic institutions have a constitutive, irreducible cultural dimension; they are shot through with significations and norms. Conversely, even the most discursive cultural practices have a constitutive, irreducible political-economic dimension; they are underpinned by material supports. (Fraser 1995, 72)

The problem Fraser aims to address arises when all forms of injustice are increasingly theorized in terms of a politics of redistribution or a politics of recognition. This tendency has to "an either/or choice between two mutually exclusive alternatives," which Fraser critiques as a "false antithesis." This results in two approaches: (i) economism and (ii) culturalism.

(i) In economism "culture is reduced to political economy," that is, status is reduced to class. Such a form of "difference-blind economic egalitarianism" fails "to assure justice for minorities and women" (Fraser 1996, 4). Fraser names Richard Rorty as an example of such a view. According to her, he argues that identity politics is "a counterproductive diversion from the real economic issues, one that balkanizes groups and rejects universalist moral norms." Another example from a fellow Marxist feminist around the time Fraser wrote her article, though not one she references, is Teresa L. Ebert's (1995, 19) assertion that "theory demonstrates that the 'difference' (of experience) is itself global, historical, and always already determined by the material forces of production." A decade later, she expressed the same view even more explicitly: "I understand difference as always and ultimately determined by class difference—that is, by relations of property" (2005, 34).[7]

(ii) In culturalism, "political economy is reducible to culture," that is, "class is reducible to status." As an example of this Fraser names Charles Taylor. She says he contends that "a difference-blind politics of redistribution can reinforce injustice by falsely universalizing dominant group norms, requiring subordinate groups to assimilate to them, and misrecognizing the latter's distinctiveness" (Fraser 1996, 10, 39). To better understand how the contrast between politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition, we can look at the four dimensions Fraser (1996, under "Anatomy of a False Antithesis" in ch. I) uses to analyze their differences:

Table 1.1: Four key differences between politics of redistribution and politics of recognition

4 key differences	Politics of redistribution	Politics of recognition
Conception of injustice	Socioeconomic	Cultural or symbolic
Remedies for injustice	Economic restructuring	Cultural or symbolic change
Collective subjects of injustice	Class(-like) collectivities	Weberian status groups
Understanding of group difference	Abolish difference	Celebrate or deconstruct difference

These two positions form the two ends of a conceptual spectrum of social justice. At the redistribution end of the spectrum, an "ideal-typical mode of collectivity" is conceived as wholly rooted in the political economy, such that "any structural injustices its members suffer will be traceable

[7] In her article, Ebert does not reference the works of Fraser that I draw on and falls into the very class-reductionist trap that Fraser warns against.

ultimately to the political economy." Remedying these injustices requires economic redistribution. Fraser cites the "Marxian conception of the exploited class, understood in an orthodox and theoretical way" as an example of a collectivity approximating this ideal type. At the other end of the spectrum, an "ideal-typical mode of collectivity" is conceived of as wholly rooted in culture, such that "any structural injustices its members suffer will be traceable ultimately to the cultural-valuational structure." Remedying these injustices, requires cultural recognition. As an example of a collectivity approximating this ideal type, Fraser cites "the conception of a despised sexuality," such as homosexuality (Fraser 1995, 75–76). In summary, Fraser condenses this conceptual distinction as follows:

> The politics of redistribution focuses on injustices it defines as socioeconomic and presumes to be rooted in the economic structure of society. […] The politics of recognition, in contrast, targets injustices it understands as cultural, which it presumes to be rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. (Fraser 1996, 6–7)

The key point of Fraser's overall argument is that "*both* redistribution *and* recognition" are needed. We must reject the polarizing "either/or choice" between class politics and identity politics, or between social equality and multiculturalism. The opposition between redistribution and recognition, she argues, is a false antithesis: "neither alone is sufficient" (Fraser 1996, 5).

> No proposal […] for redistribution […] should be evaluated on distributive grounds alone. All must also be assessed from the standpoint of recognition. […] No proposals for recognition should be evaluated on recognition grounds alone. All should also be assessed from the standpoint of redistribution. (Fraser 1996, 48, 52)

This is because a policy to mitigate one type of social injustice might exacerbate another, for example, claims for recognition might cause issues of maldistribution:

> Pregnancy-leave advocates claim that their opponents' stance exposes women wage-workers to risks of job loss that are not faced by men. Pregnancy-leave opponents claim that the advocates' stance gives employers a disincentive to hire women of childbearing age. Both sides, unfortunately, are right. (Fraser 1996, 52)

This example shows that tensions can exist "among a variety of different claims" (Fraser 1996, 47), even among various recognition claims. Another example, which puts forward a claim

of redistribution is that of "welfare." As Fraser (1996, 48) notes, welfare benefits are "the most directly redistributive form of social welfare," but at the same time "such benefits tend to stigmatize recipients, casting them as deviants and scroungers and invidiously distinguishing them from 'wage-earners' and 'taxpayers' who 'pay their own way'."

As a way to incorporate both dimensions, Fraser introduces a theory of "perspectival dualism" that allows for integrative thinking. According to this approach, redistribution and recognition "constitute two analytical perspectives that can be assumed with respect to any domain." This stands in contrast to "substantive dualism"—discussed earlier (see sec. 1.2)—which Fraser was accused of endorsing by Butler and Young. Substantive dualism also seeks to account for both dimensions, but treats them as "two different societal domains," or "two different 'spheres of justice.' " While Fraser concedes that this view "may be preferable to both economism and culturalism," she nonetheless maintains that it remains inadequate (Fraser 1996, 41–42).

Fraser thus put forward a "comprehensive political framework," that challenges injustice on the front of redistribution and on the front of recognition:

> On the normative philosophical level, I proposed a single, bivalent conception of justice that encompasses both redistribution and recognition, without reducing either one of them to the other. […] On the social-theoretical level, I argued for a perspectival dualism of redistribution and recognition. […] This approach alone, I contended, can do justice both to the apparent institutional separation of economy and culture in capitalist society and to their interpenetration. It alone can conceptualize the possibility of practical tensions between claims for redistribution and claims for recognition. (Fraser 1996, 66)

As the preceding examples show, gender is a key arena for practical tensions, as it represents a "bivalent injustice" situated midway along the spectrum of social justice. It is "at once an axis of economic injustice and an axis of cultural injustice" (Fraser 1996, 44–45), requiring both claims of redistribution and claims of recognition. In cases such as gender injustice, the need for "a two-pronged approach" is therefore especially evident (66). In the next chapter, an examination follows of how the social movements of the 1960s imposed an "either/or" choice between gender and class struggle, relegating gender struggles to secondary political importance. This dynamic ultimately contributed to the emergence of radical feminism and the development of the concept of patriarchy.

Chapter 2

Patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy emerged as a response to the marginalization of women in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1960s, when the movement came into full swing. The birth of these movements, Sheila Rowbotham ([1973] 2015, vii) observes, "seemed to come out of an ideological lacuna belonging neither to previous feminism nor to Marxism." Many members of the WLM in the United States, Carol Hanisch ([1969] 2006, 1) writes, came from "the radical movements of Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War, and Old and New Left groups" that were male dominated. In a speech delivered at a city-wide meeting of radical women's groups at the Free University in New York City on February 17, 1968, Anna Koedt reflected on the marginalization of women within the movement:

> Movement women found themselves playing secondary roles on every level—be it in terms of leadership, or simply in terms of being listened to. They found themselves (and others) afraid to speak up because of self-doubts when in the presence of men. They ended up concentrating on food-making, typing, mimeographing, general assistance work, and serving as a sexual supply for their male comrades after hours. ([1974] 1980, 318)

That same year, Arruzza (2013, 55) describes a similar dynamic unfolding in Europe:

> Just as in Italy, 1968 in France was characterized by the silence of women who had not been able to express themselves or play a leading role inside the movement. The Italian expression "angelo del ciclostile"—the angel of the duplicating machine points to this exclusion. […] from pots and pans to physically printing the leaflets

indicates how the sexual division of labour had not changed.

Their experiences in these circles were often marked by belittlement, as women's concerns were dismissed as "personal problems" that did not belong in the "public arena," for example, demands that men share housework and childcare responsibilities, or calls for access to abortion. This dismissal of women's concerns as private matters was directly challenged by Hanisch's 1969 essay, titled "The Personal Is Political,"[1] a sentiment that Koedt ([1974] 1980, 318) also echoed: "it became clear that what had at first been assumed to be a personal problem was in fact a social and political one." Soon the phrase "the personal is political" became a defining slogan of the feminist movement (Hanisch [1969] 2006, 1), as well as the basis for the group practice of "consciousness-raising" where the goal is "to transform what is experienced as personal into analysis in political terms" (Thornham 2006, 26).

The most infamous case of such belittlement, which "set off a chain reaction among radical women" (Barber 2008, 118), happened at the 1967 National Conference for New Politics in Chicago, which was attended by thousands of activists. A group of women drafted a resolution addressing issues like equal pay, childcare, and abortion, only to find it excluded from the agenda in favor of a token resolution by Women Strike for Peace. When the women attempted to introduce their substitute resolution, they stood at the microphone with their hands raised, but were deliberately ignored by the chair, William Pepper—"a national leader of the antiwar movement" (Barber 2008, 118). A male delegate pushed in front of them and was immediately given the floor, prompting five women to rush the podium. Pepper—the meeting chair—patted one of them on the head and said: "Cool down little girl. We have more important things to talk about than women's problems." The "little girl" in question was Shulamith Firestone (Freeman 2012; 1973, 800–801; Arruzza 2013, 71).

2.1 Radical feminism

Firestone ended up spearheading the radical feminist movement, which sought to theorize women's oppression as as an autonomous system—patriarchy—distinct from capitalism. Her book *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone 1970), did exactly that and became a key text in radical feminism. That same year, another canonical radical feminist work appeared: Kate Millet's'

[1] Koedt, along with Shulamith Firestone and Kathie Sarachild, was one of the editors who came up with the title "The Personal Is Political" for Hanisch's essay. In the 2016 introduction to the reprinted essay, Hanisch writes that she "did not give the paper its title" but that it was chosen by her editors ([1969] 2006, 1).

Sexual Politics (1970), which, as Lise Vogel (1981, 207) notes, focused on "the development of a comprehensive theory of patriarchy." The notion of patriarchy—used by radical feminists to describe the systemic domination by men—was central to this movement. As Tong and Botts (2024) explains, radical feminists[2] often "perceived themselves as revolutionaries rather than reformers" and believed that "true gender or sex equality is impossible within a patriarchal system." Vogel (1981, 207) adds that Firestone's and Millett's emphasis on "sexuality, psychological phenomena, and on the stubborn persistence of social practices oppressive to women struck a responsive chord," and that, as a result, "the concept of patriarchy entered socialist feminist discourse virtually without objection."

It struck a chord because, as Rowbotham ([1973] 2015, vii) points out, "it has given expression to a new consciousness among women." This new consciousness of the women's liberation movements found its theoretical expression in radical feminist theories. Those theories can be seen as a response to the marginalization of women in social organizations which came mostly from "the insistence of Marxists that questions of sex relations must be subordinated to questions of class relations" (Lerner 1986, 24). This meant that Marxist theory, as Millett (1970, 169) observes, was "remarkably naïve as to the historical and psychological strength of patriarchy." Women's oppression is "not simply a side-effect of class exploitation." Consequently, "socialism does not in any simple way guarantee the liberation of women" (Beechey 1979, 67). The answer is thus not simply "One solution: revolution!"—as a popular Marxist slogan has it (Veltmans 2025)—if by that is meant that a socialist revolution alone will resolve all problems and forms of oppression. However, Millet and Firestone, did not outright reject Marxist or socialist theory. They saw themselves as revolutionaries and sought to expand its framework to address the specificity of gender oppression; Firestone explicitly aimed to "enlarge their analysis" (1970, 12).

Soon, several Marxist feminists—most notably Heidi Hartmann (1979)—adopted the radical feminist conception of patriarchy which purportedly captured "the social phenomena that somehow escape Marxist categories" (Vogel 1981, 208, see also 209n12 for additional Marxist feminists). As Vogel explains, Hartmann then sought to transform this concept and articulate its connection to class struggle. Or, as Beechey (1979, 66) puts it, Hartmann aimed to analyze "the relationship *between* patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production". That is because

[2] I use the term "radical feminism" to refer to what Tong and Botts (2024, ch.2), following Ann Ferguson's categorization (59), call "radical-libertarian feminism," which they distinguish from its cultural variant.

"in present-day society […] the oppression of women is inextricably linked with the capitalist order and that therefore to understand women's oppression necessarily means that we must understand capitalism too." While the theory of patriarchy emerged in part as a response to class-reductionist Marxist theories that failed to account for the specificity of women's oppression, it often sidelined class struggle. Marxist feminists later sought to reintegrate this dimension, given their perception that women's oppression is deeply entangled with capitalism.

2.2 The concept of patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy has long been used by social scientists, including Weber "who used it to refer to a system of government in which men ruled societies through their position as heads of households," but it was radical feminism that redefined it to mean the "domination of women by men,"male domination," or "female subordination" (Walby 1990, 19; see also Beechey 1979, 68; Macey 2000, 291).[3] However, Gloria Joseph (1981, 96) argues that the radical feminists definition of patriarchy "as a social system characterized by male domination over women is far too general and simplified" (Joseph 1981, 96). Nevertheless, as Vogel (1981, 208) notes, "the theory of patriarchy could explain why certain individuals, *men as well as women*, are in particular subordinate or dominant places within the social structure of a given society" (Vogel 1981, 208, emphasis mine). This resonates with Millett (1970, xxii), who had earlier theorized that "patriarchy is not only male domination of females but also a militaristic hierarchy among males." In other words, patriarchy not only produces hierarchies between men and women, but also among men themselves.

The notion of patriarchy, as Cinzia Arruzza (2014, sec. I) observes, is often invoked "to underscore that gender oppression is a phenomenon not reducible to interpersonal relations." Women's oppression has "a more societal character and consistency." The meaning of the notion of oppression here, Iris Marion Young (1990, 41) remarks, is "structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies." Thus, women's oppression cannot simply be eliminated "by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws," because it is systemically reproduced.

The way radical feminists theorized patriarchy quickly attracted criticism for essentialism: "Post-

[3] The literal meaning of patriarchy is "rule of the father" (Macey 2000, 291), and Weber used it refer to "a system of government in which men rules societies through their position as heads of households" (Walby 1990, 19).

structuralists and postmodernists, together with some Marxist feminists and some Black feminists, argue that concepts such as 'patriarchy' […] suffer from essentialism." Three types of essentialist claims can be distinguished: (i) the claim that patriarchy presumes "coherence and stability over time and culture" (Walby 1990, 15); (ii) the claim, present in radical feminism and exemplified by Shulamith Firestone, that locates the roots of patriarchy in biology, amounting to biological determinism (Walby 1990, 12; Arruzza 2013, 99); and (iii) the claim that patriarchy is an independent system of oppression that is primary to all others, reified as a stand-alone structure with its own specificity.

From these critiques, we can distinguish three axes for analyzing patriarchy: (a) historicity and etiology, (b) primacy and (c) autonomy. (a) Historicity asks whether patriarchy has always existed across time and cultures, or whether it emerged under specific historical conditions or in specific cultures. Etiology concerns its causes or roots: are they biological, psychological, social, or something else? (b) Primacy addresses causal priority: is patriarchy the primary cause or basis of all other forms of oppression, or is it secondary? (c) Autonomy asks whether patriarchy functions as a separate, independent system, or whether it is part of a larger system.

2.3 Historicity and etiology

The "important and significant question," writes Gerda Lerner (1986, 16), is "how, when, and why did female subordination come into existence?" That is, the question of the historical development of patriarchy. One of the central claims of second-wave feminism is that patriarchy is "a system of oppression that pre-existed capitalism" (Arruzza 2013, 51). Radical feminism "tends to view patriarchy as basically unchanging through most if not all of history" (Young 1981, 45), "making patriarchy into something static and invariable," which implies that "the forms of gender oppression and the role it plays are historically always the same and uniform throughout the world" (Arruzza 2013, 107). Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2010, 8) in fact also claimed something similar when she wrote in *The Second Sex* that women "have always been subordinate to men."

It comes as no surprise, then, that Firestone dedicated *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), widely regarded as the founding text of radical feminism (Randall 2014), to de Beauvoir. In her book, Firestone sought to develop a "materialist view of sex" and credited de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* for being the first work that "attempted to ground feminism in its historical base" (Firestone

1970, 7). Firestone praises the method of historical materialism of Marx and Engels which "put historical and cultural change on a real basis" (iii), but that basis she says is "only a partial reality" because their analysis of class does "not go deep enough" (4). To identify the "real basis" proposed by Marx and Engels, Firestone (4) cites Engels's 1892 introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1976, 103):

> I use […] the term "historical materialism," to designate that view of the course of history which seeks the *ultimate* cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another.[4]

Engels locates the "ultimate cause" in "the economic development of society." More specifically, Lerner (1986, 23) explains that for Engels this meant "the development of private property and the institutions that evolved from it." From this, it followed that women's liberation would come through the abolition of private property. Firestone (1970), however, does not accept Engels' "strictly economic interpretation" of women's oppression. She argues that beneath the economic level, where Engels' analysis remains, lies "a whole sexual substratum of the historical dialectic." The "ultimate cause," to use Engels' own term, is instead to be found "in the dialectic of sex," which also gives her work its title (4). Firestone contends that the roots of class analysis are located "in the biological division of sexes" (12). Unlike economic class, sex class "sprang directly from a biological reality," since "men and women were created different, and not equally privileged" (8). This emphasis on biological difference as the foundation of sex class points to the aim of Firestone's project: "to develop a materialist view of history based on sex itself" (5).

According to this sex-based materialist view, Firestone argues that the roots of women's oppression lie not in production but in reproduction. Biological processes such as pregnancy, menstruation, childbirth, nursing, and child-rearing historically left women "at the continual mercy of their biology," making them dependent on men for physical survival (Firestone 1970, 8; see also Walby 1990, 12, 66; Arruzza 2013, 99; Eisenstein 1979, 44). The implication of this view is clear: if biology is what constrains women, then emancipation requires transcending it. Women must be freed "from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available." This leads Firestone (1970, 206) to advocate for the use of technology, calling for "the full develop-

[4] Firestone did not indicate which edition she used. I have cited (1976), which differs slightly in wording from the version she relied on.

ment of artificial reproduction."

The mistake that Firestone makes, according to Walby (1990, 67), is that she "conflates the social aspects of child rearing into the biological aspects of pregnancy and childbirth." As Michèle Barrett (1984, 124) notes, "to be at the mercy of reproductive biology is, at the social rather than the individual level, a political decision rather than a biological determination"; that is, as Arruzza (2013, 124) paraphrases, "the responses given to biological limits are always social." This is demonstrated by the fact that there are many ways in which childcare can be and has been "socialized and shared, despite women's role, for a few months, in pregnancy and childbirth" (Walby 1990, 67). Arruzza (2013) provides several historical examples of attempts to "free women from the caring role" during revolutionary periods, such as the Paris Commune in 1871 (32) and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 (38-9), "through the setting up of canteens, laundries and communal nurseries" (88).[5] This insight is also broadly shared: in *Women's Work, Men's Property* (Coontz and Henderson 1986, 35), all contributors—drawing from both French and American traditions in anthropology and history—agree that "the explanation of gender inequality must be sought in social rather than biological imperatives."

Firestone also founded the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) who, in their manifesto *Politics of the Ego* (1970), point to a psychological component—the male ego—that perpetuates women's oppression: "it is out of a need for a sense of power that he [man] necessarily must destroy her [woman's] ego and make it subservient to his" (N.Y. Radical Feminists 1970, 124). As Arruzza (2013, 108) writes, this means that "an idealist or purely psychological reading was given of the roots of male domination" by claiming that "men wanted to dominate women not so much for a material benefit but to satisfy their own egos."

There is also the view that the roots of women's oppression are mainly cultural or ideological and exist at the level of discourse and language. Arruzza (2013, 106) points out that such a view can be found in radical feminism, theories of difference, and queer theory. Julie Mitchell offers one such account in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Mitchell [1974] 2000), where, as Young (1981, 46) observes, "she takes patriarchy as a universal and formal ideological structure" that "exist as a pre- or nonhistorical ideological backdrop to changes in the mode of production." According to Arruzza (2013), such a perspective often comes "at the cost of often reducing the complexity of reality to the level of language and discourse and making psychoanalysis the key

[5] Even the burden of breastfeeding has not always fallen upon the mother alone and has been partially socialized in the past through the practice of wet-nursing (Arruzza 2013, 124).

to understanding everything." Two political consequence of this are, on the one hand, a proliferation of separate struggles that steers feminist movements away from "the question of social alliances," which is typical of identity politics, and on the other hand, "the obliteration of any critique of the relations of production which are replaced by relations of power and domination," which is typical of "post-modern tendencies" (106-7).

Contrary to these views, Marxist feminists, claim that "the oppression of women has not always existed" (Arruzza 2021, 1359), and "is not to be seen as a mere consequence of biology or psychology," as its roots lie in "a totality of social and economic phenomena" (2013, 87). These phenomena, as Arruzza (2013, 87) explains, are tied to "the transition from collectivized or group ownership to private property, the production of surplus and its dynamics of appropriation and distribution and the transition from matrilocality to patrilocality."[6] The historical and etiological debates about patriarchy underscore the limits of mono-causal explanations, suggesting that understanding women's oppression requires a multidimensional approach that bridges biology, culture, and political economy. While these theories differ in their accounts of where patriarchy comes from, they share a common concern with explaining its persistence. This question also raises issues of primacy and autonomy, to which we now turn.

2.4 Primacy

In 1940 Mary Inman, a Marxist feminist writer and member of the American Communist Party, describes a tension in her book *In Women's Defense* between feminists and the Old left in the U.S.:

> The feminists couldn't believe woman's oppression has a class base because they had evidence that it crosses class lines.
> The left sectarians couldn't believe the oppression of woman crosses class lines, because they had evidence that it has a class base. (23)

The important question that "left sectarians" could not answer was this: if the oppression of women is attributed to "rule by class," then why does male domination also exist *among* the working class? The issue was not whether women were oppressed, but how to explain the persistence of male domination among the oppressed classes and across class lines. It was the

[6] Patrilocality is "the system in which women move to their husband's kin group at marriage" (Coontz and Henderson 1986, 35).

absence of an adequate explanation from class primacists that led feminists at the time to assert that "the denial that her oppression has a class basis" defined their position (23).

This denial was also shared by later radical feminists, who faced comparable conflicts with their leftist allies and came to define themselves in contrast. For radical feminists, it was not anticapitalist but feminist struggles that came first, and these were seen as independent of one another. Not capitalism but patriarchy was seen as the "main enemy" (Arruzza 2013, 98), and they made "analyzing the oppression of women … the problem" (Mitchell [1971] 2015, 99, original emphasis).[7] In the manifesto of Redstockings (1969), an organization co-founded by Shulamith Firestone in 1969, "male supremacy" is described as "the oldest, most basic form of domination." Gender oppression is thus seen as primary, and "all other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy."

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* ([1970] 2016), as Arruzza (2013, 99) remarks, clearly expresses the view that sexual oppression is "the first form of domination, preceding all others": "All the mechanisms of human inequality arose out of the foundations of male supremacy and the subjection of women, sexual politics serving historically as the foundation of all other social, political, and economic structures (Millett [1970] 2016, 121)."

This foundational view within radical feminism is further articulated by Joseph (1981, 96), who states that its central claim is that "the motive force of history" is "the striving of men for power and domination over women." The "division between the sexes" is thereby turned into "the original and basic class division," leading to the conclusion that male domination under patriarchy "must therefore be fought before the others" (Arruzza 2013, 99).[8] As Arruzza (2014) observes, Christine Delphy ([1970] 1980) had already claimed in The Main Enemy that "being a member of the patriarchal class is a more important fact than being part of the capitalist class." The focus thus shifts away from a critique of the relations of production and towards one centered on power and domination (Arruzza 2013, 107). In line with this, the New York Radical Feminists (1970, 124) consider "economic relationships" to be only of secondary importance and assert: "we do not believe that capitalism, or any other economic system, is the cause of female oppression, nor do we believe that female oppression will disappear as a result of a purely economic

[7] As Tong and Botts (2024, 62–63) note, for radical-libertarian feminists such as Mitchell and Firestone, it is patriarchy as a system that is the "main enemy," and not individual men. In contrast to, Radical-cultural feminists who "urged women to stop relating to men on all levels beginning with the sexual."

[8] The primacy of patriarchy in radical feminism is also what caused its split with lesbian feminism because "patriarchy was given greater salience than heterosexism" (Mann 2013, 55).

revolution."

This position emerged as a direct response to tendencies within Marxist theory and the workers' movements that downplayed women's oppression. Class exploitation was treated as primary, while gender oppression was considered secondary (Arruzza 2021, 1359; Hartmann 1979, 23), based on the belief that the emancipation of women would naturally follow the abolition of capitalism (2013, 87). This perspective—often labeled orthodox, traditionalist, or economistic—is grounded in the "base-superstructure model" of society, discussed in the previous chapter.

When this "traditionalist" framework is applied to "the woman question," class is taken to be "the correct framework with which to understand woman's position," as Hartmann (1979, 23) explains. This meant that gender oppression was subsumed under class exploitation. According to Hartmann (1979, 1n1) who refers to Blackstone (1979, 442–45), this subsumption of feminism into Marxism is analogous to how, in English law, "by marriage, the husband and wife are one person." She refers to this as *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (1979), the title of her essay.[9] Susan Archer Mann (2013, 55) explains that Hartmann used the metaphor "to criticize how Marxism (like the husband) dominated feminism (the wife) because class trumped gender in Marxist feminists' understanding of women's oppression." Rather than continue in this "unhappy marriage" that "subsume[s] the feminist struggle into the 'larger' struggle against capital," Hartmann (1979, 1) argues that "either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce."

This means that, unlike Vogel (1981, 197–98), Hartmann believes Marxist theory cannot fully explain women's oppression. As Vogel (1981, 196) notes, this skepticism reflected a broader feeling among socialist feminists at the time. In the aftermath of the activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, many doubted whether socialist theory and practice could be reshaped to match their vision of women's liberation. As Hartmann (1979, 8) puts it: "Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind" and therefore incapable of grasping the specificity of gender oppression. Though, as Vogel (1981, 196–97) points out, such a conception of Marxism is "inadequate and largely economistic."

[9] "Mirroring the doctrine of coverture, in the late twentieth century the term 'unhappy marriage' virtually became a cliché for feminist theorists' attempts to wed contradictory or disparate perspectives where one approach came to dominate the other" (Mann 2013, 55).

Racial oppression

Alongside the publication of the essays by Hartmann and Vogel in the edited volume by Lydia A. Ferguson and Folbre (1981), Joseph (1981, 101) raised a crucial critique in her contribution. Although Hartmann refers to society as "patriarchal, capitalistic, and white supremacist," Joseph argues that she ultimately glosses over the racial dimension. The problem, Joseph writes, is not only that Marxist categories are "sex-blind," as Hartmann claims, but also "race-blind." Her critique also targets the radical feminist claim that "men are united in their shared dominance over women" (1981, 93), which, she contends, ignores how racial hierarchies complicate this narrative. As she explains, "there is more solidarity between white males and females than between white males and Black males" [101]. This is illustrated by the fact that "during slavery the Black male was disallowed a superior position in relation to the Black female" (1981, 99). Moreover, "there really was no question about Black men having control over white women," which led Joseph to conclude that "it is more accurate to say that all white women have ultimate power over Black men." It is worth clarifying what Joseph (1981, 100) means by "ultimate power":

> When Black males are in personal relationships with white women, it is very possible that the male dominates her and uses her money and body. In the final analysis, however, the white woman has the ultimate power because the judicial system is racist, the executive system is racist, and the legislative system is racist. If she wants "out" the system is on her side, and that's what I mean by ultimate power.

Race, Arruzza (2013, 108) notes, influences not only "the forms of oppression suffered but also on the processes of women's identification and subjectivity." Black women in the liberation movements, she writes, "refused to put their class or racial identity into the background below their female identity"—or their class identity, for that matter. These critiques ultimately marked a shift away from theoretical models that either prioritized class or gender or failed to seriously account for race as a structuring force. Against such partial frameworks, it was women of color who predominantly "attempted to put the emphasis on the interaction between gender, class and race" (Arruzza 2013, 125). This is also reflected in Joseph's contribution to the debate, as signaled by the title of her essay, *The Incompatible Menage a Trois: Marxism, Feminism, and Racism* (1981).

Other forms of oppression, such as sexuality and ethnicity, were also brought into focus. This

raised the question of how to theorize the multiplicity of these oppressions in a way that does justice to both their interconnectedness and their conceptual irreducibility. "Intersectionality"[10] has become the dominant framework for theorizing this complexity. This theory emerged within a broader theoretical landscape shaped by postmodernist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial feminisms, all of which emphasized the plurality of voices and perspectives formed through different social positions (Mann 2013, 54–55). As Arruzza (2013, 125) explains:

> This interaction must not be understood as a simple addition or summing up of oppressions. Due to this very intersection, women cannot be viewed as a homogenous subject experiencing gender oppression as primary and sexism as their main relation to power, given their diversity in racial, class, ethnic and status terms and how this diversification and interaction of elements play a part in forming their subjectivity.

By the late 1980s, feminist theory had largely moved beyond "the search for root or singular causes" (Swanson 2005, 88). As Iris Marion Young notes, a broad consensus had emerged that "no single form of oppression can be assigned causal or moral primacy" (Young 1990, 42).[11] Rather than constructing "artificial and unhelpful hierarchies of oppressions and exploitations," the focus shifted to "understanding the reciprocal interconnections" among them (Arruzza 2013, 87). This raises a central question: do these forms of oppression stem from distinct systems that interact, or are they expressions of a unified social structure? The next section turns to this issue by examining debates over the autonomy of patriarchy.

2.5 Autonomy

Radical feminism sees patriarchy as "an autonomous system of oppression by men" (Arruzza 2013, 98). As Beechey (1979, 67) observes:

> The concept of patriarchy in *Sexual Politics* and in other radical and revolutionary feminist documents grows out of the attempt to analyze the *autonomous basis* of the oppression of women in all forms of society and to provide a theoretical justification for the autonomy of feminist politics. (emphasis mine)

[10] As F.T.C. Manning (2015) points out, "intersectionality" has become a convenient term for people to express that they care about all these forms of oppression, but it often "leaves the details of these relations entirely vague."

[11] Resisting "the tendency to reduce oppression to one or two structures with 'primacy' " is what motivated Young (1997, 151) to thematize "a plural but limited categorization of oppression" in the form of the "five 'faces' of oppression" in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990).

Here, patriarchy is theorized as having its own autonomous foundation, which serves to justify feminist politics as a separate sphere of struggle, distinct from class-based movements. This view of patriarchy as "an independent system within capitalist society" remains widespread in feminist theory and continues to inform much contemporary activist practice (Arruzza 2014, sec. II).

During the period from "the 1970s to the mid-1980s," as Arruzza (2014, sec. I) writes, there was an intense debate among material and Marxist feminists about "the structural relationship between patriarchy and capitalism." One of the central questions in these debates was whether patriarchy should be understood as "an autonomous system in relation to capitalism." Hartmann, one of the key figures in these debates discussed earlier (see Section 2.4), argued that patriarchy should be granted autonomy in order to retain the specificity of women's oppression which she claimed had been denied by the subsumption of feminism under Marxism in their failed marriage. In contrast, Vogel (1981) and Young (1981) quickly responded by advocating for a unified theoretical framework that does not treat patriarchy and capitalism as autonomous systems, but nonetheless adequately accounts for the various distinct ways in which women are oppressed.

The driving force of patriarchy

If patriarchy is indeed an independent system, as many claim, then it must possess its own internal driving force rather than being sustained by something external, as Arruzza (2014, sec. II) points out. The nature of this driving force determines what kind of patriarchal system we are dealing with. Three main types can be distinguished: (i) patriarchy as a distinct mode of production, (ii) patriarchy as an ideological system, and (iii) patriarchy as a psychological structure.

(i) The view of patriarchy as a mode of production is most notably advanced by Christine Delphy in *The Main Enemy* ([1970] 1980). On this view, patriarchy is driven by men's direct appropriation of women's labor, particularly within the domestic sphere. The patriarchal family functions as a site of exploitation, where women's unpaid labor benefits men as a class. The difficulty with this view is that, while in agrarian societies the patriarchal family directly organized production, this is no longer the case under capitalism.

(ii) On another account, patriarchy is sustained by ideology itself, understood as a system of meanings, signifiers, and representations that organize the social world and shape subjects' per-

ceptions and behaviors. As Arruzza puts it, this view sees patriarchy as "an ideological system" rooted in "the process of the production of signifiers and interpretations of the world."

(iii) A third possibility is to conceive of patriarchy as a psychological system, whose motor lies in deep-seated psychic structures or drives. The two previous possibilities risk falling into what Arruzza calls "fetishistic and ahistorical conception[s]": in the second case, of culture and ideology; in the third, of the human psyche. These three models attempt to account for patriarchy's autonomy by locating its reproduction in a specific internal mechanism—economic, ideological, or psychological—but each raises its own set of theoretical difficulties. (Arruzza 2014, sec. II).

Why patriarchy is seen as autonomous

There are two main reasons why patriarchy is often seen as an independent system under capitalism: (i) it predates capitalism, and (ii) it continues to *appear* autonomous within capitalist society. Together, these factors make it difficult for many to conceive of patriarchy as anything other than an autonomous system.

(i) That patriarchy predates capitalism is widely acknowledged, and is often taken as evidence of its continued independence within capitalism. This, as Arruzza (2014, sec. III) notes, is "the most common objection." Arruzza (2021, 1360) further explains that Young (1981) challenges this assumption, arguing that the historical existence of patriarchy prior to capitalism does not "prove its persistence within capitalist societies" as a system governed by its own independent logic. The belief that patriarchy remains autonomous within capitalism because of its earlier origins thus conflates the question of origins with that of structural autonomy. While patriarchy did indeed precede capitalism, it stopped functioning as an independent system governed by its own internal logic in the transition to capitalism.

This "historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" is what Karl Marx ([1976] 1990, 1:875) defines as primitive accumulation. It primarily involved the large-scale expropriation of land from the peasantry, severing their access to the means of subsistence and compelling them to sell their labor power as a commodity. The patriarchal peasant family, Arruzza (2014, sec. III) notes, "no longer represented the unit of production with a specific productive role, generally organized through the specific patriarchal relations that prevailed in the previous agrarian society." The transition to capitalism thus both preserved and fundamentally

transformed gender domination:

> The economic and social bases that were the foundation of the reproduction of the patriarchal system have been swept away by the spread of a capitalist mode of production that, replacing the preceding agrarian society, has coopted, absorbed and profoundly modified the relations of domination between genders. (Arruzza 2021, 1360)

(ii) The interpretation of patriarchy as an independent system, Arruzza argues, is "an interpretation that reflects reality in the way this appears to us." What appears as a separate and autonomous system is in fact a product of the way our perception is fragmented "by capital itself" (2014, sec. III). In capitalist society, things take on a fetishistic character: things appear to have a life of their own and function independently. For instance, money is deposited into a bank account and, over time, it increases through interest, seemingly on its own (Lievens 2025a). This appearance conceals the complex network of social relations and processes that actually sustain it. The surface of capitalist society is filled with such fetishistic appearances.

Though, importantly, things have in reality acquired such a fetishistic character, this is not just a matter of discourse or ideology' (Lievens 2025a). The idea that reality itself can be fetishistic, that it contains forms of abstraction which are real and not merely products of thought, was most notably further developed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1978), where he introduced the concept of real abstraction. As he writes: "the essence of commodity [or value] abstraction […] is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in men's minds but in their actions." Or, as he puts it differently: "It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions" (16). As Matthias Lievens (2025a) explains, Sohn-Rethel's thesis is that real abstractions constitute "the social conditions of possibility of abstract thought."[12]

The universalization of commodity exchange under capitalism has produced a fetishistic and fragmented reality that, in turn, fragments our perception. Within this context, gender inequality is experienced and perceived as distinct, governed by its own logic—"a logic that is different and separate from that of capital"—because this is how such relations "manifest themselves" (Arruzza 2014, sec. II). It is no surprise, then, that the theoretical claim that patriarchy is not an independent system within capitalism "inevitably encounters rejection and doubt" (§III), as

[12] For the theorization of gender as a "real abstraction," see Endnotes Collective (2013). Arruzza (2015), however, finds their argument "unpersuasive."

it clashes with a "more immediate explanation" (§II).

F.T.C. Manning (2015) takes issue with Arruzza's (2014, sec. III) conclusion that "those who have developed an awareness of gender inequality" tend to see it as separate from capital because of our fragmented perception. Manning points out that for many these things do *not* appear to be separate:

> In concordance with the arguments of many feminist theorists of color that race, gender, and class never appear as distinct, or of working-class feminist theorists who describe their inability to disaggregate their gender oppression from their class oppression, of trans women activists and theorists who articulate the mutual constitution of these axes with transmisogyny, and of prison abolitionists who, in their work, are fully confronted with the imbrication of race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, and so forth, we must acknowledge that *for many people, these things do not tend to manifest themselves independently*. (emphasis mine)

Besides this critique, Manning and Arruzza are in agreement that class, feminization, and racialization are "mutually constituted parts within a whole," where "at every moment all of them are really at play" (Manning 2015). The next chapter explores the broader structural relationship between these forms of oppression and examines why patriarchy can no longer be regarded as an autonomous system. How we understand this relationship has significant implications for both theory and political strategy.

Chapter 3

Enmeshed with Capitalism

Although Marxist theory broadly lost influence in the wake of the cultural turn described in the first chapter, Marxist feminism has seen a "small renaissance" in the past fifteen years (Vogel 2017, 11; Bhattacharya, Farris, and Ferguson 2021, 53; Farris 2021, 289). The renewed interest in Marxist feminism has reopened questions about the structural links between capitalism, gender, and other axes of subordination (Arruzza 2014, sec. I). Susan Ferguson and David McNally (2014, xvii) describe this moment as marked by "a growing hunger for theoretical work that integrates accounts of diverse forms of oppression into an overarching anti-capitalist analysis." They wrote this in the introduction to the 2014 republication of Lise Vogel's 1983 book Marxism and the Oppression of Women, a work that had long remained "below the radar" but gained renewed interest through this resurgence (Sue Ferguson and McNally 2014, xvii). Vogel outlines what came to be known as unitary theory, which emphasizes that different forms of oppression in capitalist society are unified, though not reducible to a single logic. This approach was developed in response to dual systems theory, which instead held that patriarchy and capitalism function as two distinct but interacting systems, as discussed in the previous chapter. Unitary theory, however argues that patriarchy lost its relative autonomy in the transition to capitalism and became thoroughly enmeshed with capitalist accumulation.

The choice between these two approaches has been framed in different ways. Johanna Oksala (2015) sees them as responses to the economic reductionism discussed in the previous chapters. One choice, that of dual systems theory, seeks to "supplement the existing economic analyses of capitalism with their own analyses of other, complementary or intersecting forms of oppression," the other choice, unitary theory, sought "to adopt a broader," non-economic" conception of

capitalism" (Oksala 2015). Elizabeth Portella and Larry Alan Busk frame this choice in terms of the transhistorical status of patriarchy discussed in the previous chapter:

> Attempts to unify Marxist and feminist social critique have been vexed by the fact that 'patriarchy' predates the advent of capitalism (its transhistorical status). Feminists within the Marxist, socialist, and materialist traditions have responded to this point by either granting patriarchy a certain autonomy relative to capitalism (the 'dual/triple systems' approach), or by suggesting that patriarchal relations have a foundational and necessary status in the history of capitalist development (which we term the 'origins-subsistence' approach). (Portella and Busk 2024, 353)

One important reason for the marginalization of these theories is that they were regarded as a "futile (and unfashionable) exercise in totalizing thinking" (Susan Ferguson et al. 2016, 3). This means that by far the most widely cited framework for theorizing multiple axes of oppression remains intersectionality. Intersectional theory is often introduced through the kind of progress narrative discussed in the first chapter. Also, Fraser went along with this narrative in the nineties, who describes the emergence of intersectionality as an "unsurpassable gain," presenting it through a reconstruction of "the history of debates about difference in second-wave U.S. feminism." She distinguishes three phases:

> In the first phase, which lasted from the late 1960s through about the mid-1980s, the main focus was "gender difference." In the second phase, which ran roughly from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the main focus shifted to "differences among women." A third phase, which is currently under way, is focused on "multiple intersecting differences." (Fraser [1997] 2014, 175)

While a broad-strokes summary of feminist positions can be useful, aligning these in a timeline from the 1960s to the 1990s—as in the white feminist progress-story discussed in the first chapter—even when acknowledged as "necessarily to simplify and abstract," uncritically reproduces a paradigm that sidelines forgotten histories and thereby perpetuates what Fraser herself would call "cultural injustice." One such case is a neglected strand within Fraser's own tradition: the theory of "triple oppression" developed by Black Communist women in the 1930s, who analyzed the entangled dimensions of race, class, and gender in the lives of Black women workers.

3.1 The forgotten history of "triple oppression"

Aside from a few Black Marxist feminists like Angela Davis, the history of "triple oppression" articulated by Black women within 1930s Communist circles had almost not been acknowledged by Marxist feminists until recently. In *Women, Race, and Class* ([1981] 2011), which Arruzza (2021, 1364) calls "the most famous text within the Marxist current of Black feminism," Davis devotes an entire chapter to "Communist Women" (ch. 10), including a section on Jones, the key theorist of this tradition. Yet it took nearly four decades after Davis reintroduced these histories before it was taken up by leading Marxist feminists such as Vogel (2018), Arruzza (2020, 2021), S. J. Ferguson (2020), and Bhattacharya, Farris, and Ferguson (2021).

Even theorists of "intersectionality" had not acknowledged this history. In recent years, however, building on early twenty-first-century scholarship detailing the work of these women (Weigand 2001; Boyce Davies 2007; McDuffie 2009), a growing number of scholars have sought to trace the genealogical roots of intersectionality to these thinkers (McDuffie 2011; Jones 2011; Gore 2011; Higashida 2011; Lynn 2014).[1] This research has only recently begun to be taken up more widely (Carastathis 2016; Smiet 2020).

In the foreword to the edited volume *Social Reproduction Theory* (Bhattacharya 2017b, xi n2), which has perhaps become the reference work for social reproduction theory, Vogel already referenced her article on this history, which was still in press at the time. Yet strikingly, as Wright (2020) notes in her review of the volume, there is no reference to the 1930s Black Communist women. She argues that the book would have benefited from doing so:

> Contextualizing the book within the long tradition of Black Communist women's theorizing of which it is a part would yield further insights important for social reproduction theory while also identifying some of the unresolved theoretical problems of that tradition.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that Vogel did not address this absence herself, especially given that in the very article she references, "Beyond Intersectionality," she acknowledges the "important role" these women played and emphasizes the importance of recovering this history:

> I think it matters above all [to get the history right] for what is lost when we get history wrong. […] We miss a lot when we buy into the "white feminism" paradigm.

[1] "Intersectionality" was introduced by the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 and further elaborated in 1991 (Carastathis 2016, 1)

> We overlook the importance of the many black women activists who over more than a century forged a tradition of resistance. We neglect the role of the U. S. Communist Party and of the Congress of American Women. We give short shrift to the contributions of individual communist and left-leaning activists and writers, both white and black. (Vogel 2018, 281)

Efforts of scholars tracing the genealogical roots to the 1930s challenge what McDuffie (2011, 4) identifies as the dominant view, which holds that it originated with 1970s Black feminism, particularly the 1977 Black socialist feminist manifesto of the Combahee River Collective.[2] McDuffie traces its roots to the activism of Black Communist women in the U.S. Old Left of the 1930s, arguing that they were the first to explicitly articulate this theoretical paradigm through the concept of "triple oppression."

McDuffie is not alone in this assertion. Alan Wald (2016, 24) notes that several scholars, including Higashida (2011) and Gore (2011), regard the concept of "triple oppression" as "a decisive anticipation of intersectionality" [see also Smiet (2020); under "Recovering a socialist legacy in US black feminisms" in ch.5] Anna Carastathis (2016, 18–19) disputes the claim that intersectionality was first formulated by Black Communist women active in the U.S. Old Left. She cautions against reading earlier theorizations of race, gender, and class oppression as equivalent to intersectionality. According to Carastathis, such retrospective projections risk collapsing important conceptual differences and overlook intersectionality's distinct analytic and political function. She insists that intersectionality is not simply a new name for familiar ideas but a specific theoretical intervention with its own situated origins and meaning.

For our purposes, what matters is not whether these earlier articulations can be considered a true prefiguration of intersectionality, as Carastathis questions, but that Black women in communist circles were already using "the terms 'triple burden' and 'triple oppression' to describe the status of black women who were exploited because of their race, class, and gender" (Weigand 2001; see also Wald 2016; Davis [1981] 2011, ch. 10 "Communist Women"). As McDuffie (2009, 27) notes, these women understood gender liberation as inextricably connected to race and class liberation and "their theorizing on Black women's triple oppression was years ahead of its time"

[2] Kathryn T. Gines (2014, 14) locates it origins earlier, by arguing that the idea of intersectionality had already been articulated "in early Black feminism from the 1830s to the 1930s," while Edwina Barvosa (2014) traces it to Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851). The version of Sojourner Truth's speech referenced here is the widely circulated one attributed to Frances D. Gage, which has become iconic within feminist scholarship. As Smiet notes, however, this version is problematic due to the racialized accent imposed on Truth and doubts about its historical accuracy (Smiet 2020, 1n1).

(2011, 192). This understanding took shape during the 1930s, at the height of the so-called Popular Front era (Weigand 2001; Teal 2009), when Black women "made significant inroads" into the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and its mass organizations, with many of them becoming "middle-level" Party leaders Kelley (1990).[3]

McDuffie (2011, 112) claims the possibly first documented instance of the term "triple exploitation" in print appeared in Louise Thompson's (1936) article "Toward a Brighter Dawn" in Woman Today, the magazine considered to be "the official voice of the CPUSA's National Women's Commission." In which she writes: "Over the whole land, Negro women meet this triple exploitation—as workers, as women, and as Negroes" (14). In that same year, the National Negro Congress was founded (Teal 2009), and at that conference a statement was made that "Negro women are thrice exploited, as women, as workers, and as Negroes." This moment was later recalled by Mary Inman in her widely read 1940 book *In Woman's Defense* (1940, 22–23), who, as Higashida (2011, 190) notes, was considered "the leading feminist of the Communist Party."

Although, as Wald (2016, 24) points out, while the concept of "triple oppression" had already emerged in the 1930s, it is widely held (McDuffie 2011; Higashida 2011; Gore 2011) that "the formulation achieved a pre-eminent expression" in Claudia Jone's seminal (1947) essay in the CPUSA's magazine *Political Affairs* titled "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman." In which it is noted that "Negro women—as workers, as Negroes, and as women—are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population" (52). Jones continues: "In 1940, two out of every five Negro women, in contrast to two out of every eight white women, worked for a living" (52-53).

As Davis ([1981] 2011, under "Claudia Jones" in ch. 10) remarks," Claudia Jones was very much a Communist," so much so that she wished to be buried next to Marx. This wish was fulfilled when her ashes were interred *Left of Marx*, as the title of Boyce Davies' (2007) book indicates, at Highgate Cemetery in London on February 27, 1967 (27n42). Boyce Davies sees this as symbolic, writing that it "indicates a politics that, by its practice, critiques Marxism-Leninism," even though that tradition remained "her basic orienting politics" (27):

> Her location in death continues to represent her ideological position while living: this black woman, articulating political positions that combine the theoretics of Marxism-Leninism and decolonization with a critique of class oppression, impe-

[3] Angela Davis would later become a prominent member of the CPUSA.

> rialist aggression, and gender subordination, is thus "left" of Karl Marx. (2)

Though as Boyce Davies also remarks, her gravestone is unlike that of Marx:

> Next to it is a simple flat stone, minus all the power and might of Marx, and easily overlooked by all visitors not knowing that there is a black woman "left of Marx." A black woman's history is again, literally, overlooked by many, even as she remains, forever, and definitively," the black woman buried left of Karl Marx." (xiv)

This is deeply symbolic of the history of Black Communist women from that period, a history that has long been forgotten and politically repressed (Carastathis 2016, 16; Smiet 2020, 126). In 2009, Eric S. McDuffie noted that this history was beginning to receive renewed scholarly attention (26n7), a development in which he himself played a key role.

3.2 Dual systems theory

As Vogel (2017, 11) writes: "One of the oldest debates among women's liberationists concerned dualism, or dual-systems theory." It holds that patriarchy and capitalism are "separate but interacting systems" (Scott 1986), that is, two independent interacting systems each governed by their own specificity, structures and "laws of motion." The origins of this theory lie in a combination of "a Marxist feminist account of class power with a radical feminist account of sex status" (Tong and Botts 2024, 145; also see Young 1981, 33; Walby 1990, 2; Arruzza 2021, 1359). As Young (1981, 45) points out: "All versions of the dual systems theory start from the premise that patriarchal relations designate a system of relations distinct from and independent of the relations of production described by traditional Marxism." Class relations only go beyond the economic level through their interaction with patriarchy (Arruzza 2014, sec. I).

Although the term "dual systems" did not originate with Hartmann, she is the theorist most commonly associated with this perspective and her work has been extensively discussed as a result (Sargent 1981; Young 1981; Walby 1990, in Introduction under "Dual-systems theory"). Dual systems theory takes over the radical feminist view that it is patriarchy that subordinates women, and it is patriarchy that is "used by capitalism for its own ends" (Arruzza 2021, 1360). The main contribution it sought to make was to move beyond the radical feminist position by linking patriarchy to capitalism without treating one as causally prior to the other. It does so not by treating gender as a class, as radical feminism does, but by theorizing "the systemic

connection of gender and class relations."[4]

Racism was later also added as a third system, Arruzza (2021, 1360; 2014, sec. 2) mentions Walby (1990) as an example. However, these dual and triple systems theories remain tied to an economist interpretation of capitalism that renders its categories "sex-blind" and "race-blind" because "capitalist laws of accumulation are indifferent to the sex of labor-power" (Arruzza 2014, sec. II). Within this framework, Marxist categories account only for economic exploitation, those of feminism for women's oppression, and those of anti-racist theory for racial oppression. What ends up happening is that "the plural complexity of society" gets reduced "to mere economic laws without correctly grasping the irreducibility of power relations" (Arruzza 2014, sec. I). As a result, instead of resolving the impasse, they ended up reinforcing it (Arruzza 2021, 1360). This framework thus falsely assumes that there can only be an economistic interpretation of capitalism. While economic laws are the driving force of capitalism:

> This type of reductionism does not correspond in the least to the richness and complexity of Marx's thought, and even less to the extraordinary sophistication of a large part of the Marxist theoretical tradition. […] To try to explain what capitalist society is only in terms of surplus-value extraction is like trying to explain the anatomy of the human body by explaining only how the heart works." (Arruzza 2014, sec. III)

Shahrzad Mojab (2015) argues that a "class reductionist position" amounts to an "undialectical understanding of Marxism." This aligns with Fraser's dual-perspective approach, discussed in the first chapter, where the economic is seen as only one part of the picture. There is a broad consensus among Marxist feminists such as Vogel, Fraser, and Arruzza that gender and capitalism cannot be treated as separate systems. However, dual/triple systems theory still remains "*the* dominant" view within feminist theory and contemporary activism (Portella and Busk 2024; Arruzza 2014, sec. II).

[4] Somewhat confusingly, Susan Ferguson et al. describe Hartmann's account as an attempt "to offer a compelling unitary theory," although the term unitary theory is generally used to contrast with approaches like Hartmann's. As Vogel notes, a "unitary" account emerged from "a desire to replace the dualism of earlier analyses," referring specifically to dual-systems theories.

3.3 Unitary or social reproduction theory

The project of building a "unitary theory" can, according to Portella and Busk (2024, 359) be traced from early Marxist feminists such as Clara Zetkin ([1889] 1984), through Lise Vogel ([1983] 2013) in the early 1980s, to later contributions by Martha Giménez (2019), and more recently by Cinzia Arruzza (2013), and Susan Ferguson and McNally (2015). The term itself became introduced through Lise Vogels' *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory* (Vogel [1983] 2013). As Arruzza (2015) notes, Vogel primarily used this term of "unitary theory" to distinguish her position from dual systems theory, which relied on "dualistic explanations and economistic interpretations of the functional mechanisms of capitalist society" (Arruzza 2021, 1861). Reflecting on this period, Vogel recalls that by the early 1980s, a " 'unitary' account" was emerging among Marxist feminists "who shared a desire to replace the dualism of earlier analyses." Whereas dual systems theory treated patriarchy and capitalism as distinct, unitary theory held that patriarchy had become integrated into capitalism:

> The essential thesis of "unitary theory" is that for Marxist feminism, gender oppression and racial oppression do not correspond to two autonomous systems which have their own particular causes: they have become an integral part of capitalist society through a long historical process that has dissolved preceding forms of social life. (Arruzza 2014, sec. IV)

Within this "unitary theory," the notion of "social reproduction" is central. This notion refers to "the processes of reproduction and maintenance of human life" (Arruzza 2016, 10):

> Social reproduction designates the way in which the physical, emotional, and mental labor necessary for the production of the population is socially organized: for example, food preparation, youth education, care for the elderly and the sick, as well as questions of housing and all the way to questions of sexuality… (Arruzza 2014, sec. IV)

From the start the notion of "social production" has been "developed in connection with a unitary understanding of the relation between capitalism and gender oppression" (Arruzza 2021, 1361–62; 2016). However, it has been pointed out that the term "unitary" can be misleading since it seems to suggest that all forms of oppression function according to a "single logic can be studied with a single theoretical tool or mode of critical analysis"(Arruzza 2017; Oksala 2015).

It appears that this is the reason why "social reproduction theory" (SRT) has come to replace the earlier label of "unitary theory."

What it is not

Social reproduction theory distinguishes itself from four main accounts of how oppression relates to capitalism: (i) an economic reductionist account, (ii) a homogenizing account, (c) a functionalist account, and (d) a contingent account. (i) An economic reductionist account holds that all forms of oppression in capitalist society can be causally reduced to the economic, meaning they are ultimately nothing more than effects of capitalist relations. On this view, the end of capitalism would entail the end of all such oppressions. (ii) A homogenizing account treats the conditions and experiences of different groups as shaped by a single organizing logic, thereby erasing the specificity of distinct forms of oppression, their histories, and their forms of struggle.

(c) A functionalist account holds that some or all forms of oppression are functionally necessary for capitalism and serve to reproduce it. Something is seen as functional if it serves a role or function in capitalist accumulation or reproduction. Unlike economic reductionism, this does not require that oppression is caused by capitalism in order to be functional to it. These forms of oppression could exist without capitalism, yet capitalism relies on them for its survival. (d) A contingent account holds that certain forms of oppression are contingent for capitalism, meaning that capitalism is indifferent to them and can operate with or without them.

Homogenizing account

Social reproduction theory does not support the idea that capitalism is organized according to a single logic that homogenizes all conditions and experiences:

> The idea that capitalism homogenizes social conditions and experiences is mistaken. Or better said, the actually existing elements of homogenization need to be understood against the background of equally relevant processes of fragmentation and differentiation intimately linked to the logic of capitalist reproduction. (Arruzza 2017, 255)

As pointed out, capitalism does possess "elements of homogenization" or equalization, but as Arruzza (2017, 857) remarks: "equalization and the generation of inequalities and differences

are *both* inherent phenomena of the mechanisms of capitalist reproduction."[5]

Functionalist account

The idea that all forms of oppression are functional to capitalism means that capital *needs* them for its functioning. A recent example of such a functionalist account can be found in the latest manifesto of the Fourth International, an international anti-capitalist organization:

> Capitalism *needs* the patriarchal oppression of women to maximize surplus value and ensure social reproduction at a lower cost; *needs* the discrimination against LGBTQI people to validate patriarchy; *needs* structural racism to justify the looting of the periphery by the centre; *needs* inhuman "asylum policies" to regulate the industrial reserve army; *needs* to submit the peasantry to the dictates of junk food-producing agribusiness to compress the price of labour power. (Fourth International 2025, emphasis mine)

In this account all forms of oppression serve capitalism's needs in some way, they are seen as necessary for its functioning. This is the type of functionalist account that Marxist feminists strongly seek to avoid. Fraser rejected the functionalism in Butler's account in their debate discussed in the first chapter, as Fraser describes Butlers account:

> The claim is that the heteronormative regulation of sexuality is economic—not by definition, but because it is functional to the expansion of surplus value. Capitalism, in other words, "needs" or benefits from compulsory heterosexuality. It follows, according to Butler, that gay and lesbian struggles against heterosexism threaten the "workability" of the capitalist system. (Fraser 1997, 285)

Fraser calls this an "overtotalized view of capitalist society" that sees it as "a monolithic 'system' of interlocking structures of oppression that seamlessly reinforce on another" (Fraser 1997, 285–86). Both Fraser and Arruzza point to empirical findings that dispute these claims, Arruzza (2017, 856), for example mentions that "the persistence of patriarchal relations has been an obstacle to capitalist interests at various points throughout capitalist history." Capitalism's "totalizing effect" should thus not be understood in terms of functions, Arruza holds that instead it should be understood in terms of constraints:

[5] Sandro Mezzadra thematizes the "tensions between the diversifying and homogenizing aspects of contemporary capitalism" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 3) in several of his works.

> While various forms of oppression interact with each other or even grow together and cannot be phenomenally thought of without one another, capitalist accumulation poses necessitating constraints that determine to a large extent all other forms of social relations. The fact that the constraints posed by capitalist accumulation are pervasive and have the capacity of coloring all other social relations is one of the grounds for speaking of the capitalist world as a contradictory and articulated moving totality. (Arruzza 2017, 857)

In Arruzza's view, capitalism is a kind of totality that poses necessitating constraints on all social relations.

Contingent account

The opposite of the functional account is the contingent account. Rather than requiring certain forms of oppression for its functioning, capitalism is seen here as merely utilizing them. In other words, capitalism may draw on and instrumentalize particular forms of oppression, but it does not depend on them. Arruzza calls this view "indifferent capitalism" (Arruzza 2014), since capitalism is considered structurally indifferent to such oppressions. This perspective emerges from a highly abstract conception of capitalism, in which certain forms of oppression, such as gender and racial oppression, are not regarded as logical preconditions for its existence (Arruzza 2015). While capitalism may benefit from and exploit gender and racial inequalities, they are ultimately not necessary for its survival. Class exploitation, on the other hand, is logically necessary for capitalism, which could not exist without it (Arruzza 2014, sec. III).

The main theorist associated with this position is Ellen Meiskins Wood: "if capital derives advantages from racism or sexism, it is not because of any structural tendency in capitalism toward racial inequality or gender oppression." This means that capitalism could *in principle* operate without gender oppression or racial inequality because it can "in principle be conducted without any consideration for colour, race, creed, gender, any dependence upon extra-economic inequality or difference." In fact, Wood claims that capitalism gave rise to ideas critical of these inequalities and simultaneously made possible new degrees of freedom and emancipation for women beyond those offered by any prior society (Farris (2015) refers to Wood (1988, 6)).

Arruzza (2015) challenges this view by making two distinctions that undermine the premises of indifferent capitalism: (i) the distinction between logical and historical forms of possibility and

necessity, and (ii) the distinction between logical preconditions and necessary consequences of capitalism.

(i) Arruzza makes a distinction between logical and historical (or practical) possibility: "what is possible from a logical viewpoint and what happens at the level of historical processes are two profoundly different things" (Arruzza 2014, sec. II). On the one hand, something that is possible in a logical sense—that is, it does not contradict a logical law or definition—within a theoretical framework, does not necessarily imply it is practically possible in the real world. On the other hand, the necessity that pertains to "history, social practices, and social relations" is of "a different and weaker kind" than that which pertains to logic. As Arruzza (2015) clarifies, terms such as "necessity" and "laws" in the historical, practical or social sense does not correspond to how we generally understand such terms in the natural sciences. For example, "capitalist 'laws of motion' are 'tendencies' in that, qua social practices and relations, they do not operate with the necessity pertaining to certain physical laws."

Historical or practical possibility refers to what *can* happen within a given social context, subject to certain necessitating practical constraints that qualify outcomes according to degrees of probability. The concrete history of capitalist societies involves several such constraints. One example Arruzza (2015) names is the role of racism in American capitalism:

> We may […] conceive of a version of American capitalism without racism, as such a possibility does not contradict either a given definition of capitalism or its formalized laws of motion. However, this scenario is historically implausible.

While capitalism without gender and racial oppression is a logical possibility, it is not a practical possibility—it is not "a plausible vision from a historical point of view." It is far from certain that other forms of hierarchical relations could easily replace gender oppression, precisely because gender appears so "natural" and "deeply rooted in the psyche." It is difficult to imagine another form of domination that could so readily take on this appearance and function with comparable force.

Indifferent capitalism "fails to take into account forms of practical necessity or constraints that cannot be formalized into laws of motion," such as racism in American capitalism, because it fails to see that "logical formalization is not the sole rational means of grasping reality," concrete historical analysis is needed too.

(ii) The distinction between logical preconditions and necessary consequences of capitalism is important because the premise of indifferent capitalism holds that, for gender and racial oppression to be a necessary consequence of capitalism, they would have to be logical preconditions of it, but they are not thought to be. For indifferent capitalism, at a highly abstract, theoretical, logical level gender and racial oppression are not considered necessary preconditions for capitalism. Arruzza, however, does not rule out that they could be a logical precondition, but considers it very difficult to prove and remains agnostic about this possibility. Nonetheless, even if gender and race are in fact *not* logical preconditions for capitalism, it can not be concluded that capitalism is therefore indifferent to them, or that their relationship is merely contingent or opportunistic: "Sets of social phenomena can be necessary consequences of the logic of capitalist accumulation, even if they are not logical preconditions for it, and that, moreover, these necessary consequences can be analyzed, at least to some extent, in abstract terms" (Arruzza 2015).

When gender are racial oppression are not a logical precondition to capitalism they can still be " 'necessarily' produced and reproduced by the logic of capitalist accumulation" regardless of whether they are a logical precondition for capitalism. And they are in fact " 'necessarily' produced and reproduced" in various forms in the concrete historical functioning of capitalism. An examination of this necessity entails looking at "the role of gender differentiation in reproductive activities" and seeing how this links to the logic of capital accumulation (Arruzza 2015).

3.4 Gender oppression under capitalism

Social reproduction

The aim of social reproduction theory is to answer why and how women are oppressed in capitalist societies. Given that capitalist accumulation poses necessitating constraints on all relations, as Arruzza pointed out, and given that gender oppression is a bivalent oppression—both economic and cultural—as Fraser pointed out, feminism can not do without away with investigating how capitalist relations constrain women.

The key capitalist constraint imposed on women and emphasized by Marxist feminists such as Tithi Bhattacharya (2017a, 2) centers on social reproductive labor—that is," labor dispensed to produce people." As a human being, a worker needs to reproduce her life. The caveat is that

under capitalism, the worker has been separated from the means of production (to produce use values) and must therefore enter into a wage relation in order to buy commodities that are used or consumed to sustain her live and enable her to return to work (Bhattacharya [2015] 2017, 77). For example, food is bought, prepared, and consumed for its nourishment or sustenance. The preparation of that food constitutes social reproductive labor. More generally, it encompasses all activities that "enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day" (Bhattacharya [2015] 2017, 1).

The general constraint on people in capitalist societies discussed so far is that the majority lack access to the means to produce the use values they need to sustain themselves. This constraint lies in the fact that, in order to obtain those use values, one must enter into a wage relation—a system that cannot be opted out of altogether (Bhattacharya [2015] 2017, 83). Arruzza (2017, 856–57) describes the specific constraints that capitalism imposes on women:

> Capitalist accumulation produces, or contributes to the production of, varying forms of social hierarchy and oppressions, including heterosexist oppression. Women and feminized people still fulfill the large majority of social reproductive work, whether this is performed within the household, commodified in the market, or organized by the State. The subordination of social reproduction to production, which is a distinctive historical phenomenon produced and expanded on a world scale by the affirmation of capitalist social relations, subjects social reproductive activities to the pressures of capitalist accumulation.

She makes two key claims here about social reproductive labor: (i) social reproductive labor is performed predominantly by women and feminized people, both within the household and outside of it (in institutional or market-based settings), in waged and unwaged forms; and (ii) social reproductive labor is structurally subordinated to productive labor—"labor dispensed to produce commodities." As Bhattacharya (2017a, 2) explains:

> Capitalism, however, acknowledges productive labor for the market as the sole form of legitimate "work," while the tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labor power, is naturalized into nonexistence.

The constraint imposed on women is thus that the burden of undervalued social reproductive labor falls disproportionately on their shoulders and is either uncompensated or poorly compen-

sated by capital, despite its dependence on and appropriation of this labor. Because women are assigned this type of social reproductive work under capitalist social relations the result is that "most [women] land in dead-end jobs that don't pay enough to support a family" (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019, 28).

So far, we have discussed only one form of women's oppression—namely, that related to social reproductive labor, such as women being unpaid or underpaid for this work. But what about gender-based violence, for example? Is that also linked to capitalism? According to the sixth thesis of the manifesto *Feminism for the 99 Percent* (2019) by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser," gender violence takes many forms, all of them entangled with capitalist social relations" (2019, 25). Gender violence takes on two unified forms: (i) private, and (ii) public. (i) The private form of gender violence arose with the shift from "extended kin-based households" from pre-capitalist societies to more "restricted, heterosexual nuclear families" where gendered assault became more "informal and 'psychological', less 'rational' and controlled." (ii) The public form involves an "instrumentalization of gendered assault as a technique of control" such as rape of women as a weapon of war or as a tactic by pimps and traffickers to break their will and make them more obedient and easier to control (2019, 26–27).

However, these two forms of gender violence are not separate and can mutually reinforce one another (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019, 28). For example, in the public sphere of 'productive' work, women's limited ability to participate as equals weakens their capacity to exit relationships in the private sphere of the home, leaving them disempowered.

Internal versus external relations

Arruzza argues that "capitalist accumulation produces, or contributes to the production of, varying forms of social hierarchy and oppressions as its necessary consequences." In this sense, capitalist accumulation does not merely coexist with other forms of social hierarchy but plays a structurally determining role in shaping them. She emphasizes that her claim is more robust than simply stating that "something is connected to something else," because capitalist accumulation imposes "necessitating constraints that condition all other forms of social relations." This capacity to impose such constraints gives capitalist accumulation "a greater consequential and determining power than other forms of social hierarchy" (Arruzza 2015).

At the same time, she does not suggest that capitalism organizes all hierarchies according to a

single, unified logic. Rather, she stresses the contradictory and articulated nature of capitalist totality, which is illustrative of dialectical thinking. Dialectics, as developed in Marxist theory, refers to the dynamic, contradictory, and mutually shaping relationships between social forces within a unified whole.[6] While Arruzza's main point concerns this structural role of capitalist accumulation, her insistence that various forms of oppression are not merely connected—that their relationship to capitalism is not "merely contingent"—invites a deeper metaphysical reading (Arruzza 2015).

It appears that what she is trying to explicitly distinguish herself from is what, in metaphysics, is called a view of external relations, in favor of a view of internal relations, where the connection between capitalism and patriarchy is not external or contingent but constitutive (see MacBride 2025, sec. 1; Marmodoro and Yates 2016, sec. 1.3). Following Kasulis' (2009, [2019] 2022) explanation of this distinction, when we say that *a* and *b* are related, this can mean two things: (i) in an external relationship, the relationship *R* is external, meaning it exists outside *a* and *b*; (ii) in an internal relationship, the relationship *R* is internal meaning it is shared part *a* and *b*.



(a) External relation (b) Internal relation

Figure 3.1: Comparison of external and internal relations. Source: Kasulis (2022)

External relations

According to the paradigm of external relations, when the relationship *R* between *a* and *b* dissolves, then—because the relationship is external to *a* and *b*—they both continue to exist independently, each retaining their own integrity. In that sense, their relationship is contingent or opportunistic because it is neither necessary nor constitutive of *a* and *b*. This sort of mere contingency is something Arruzza (2015) explicitly seeks to avoid in explicating the relationship between capitalism and various oppressions. Dual systems theory follows this model: it treats

[6]For Ernest Mandel, materialist dialectics requires not just examining internal dynamics but considering phenomena as wholes: "to grasp it under each of its aspects, to consider it as a whole, to avoid any one-sided approach that arbitrarily isolates one particular aspect of the whole, neglects another aspect in a no less arbitrary way" [(1980); §6, own translation from Dutch].

capitalism and patriarchy as two separate systems that can relate to each other, but each remains intact when the relationship ends. When something is encountered that contains two (or more) aspects that can be distinguished, regardless of whether they are viewed as independent, the external relational model asks: what connects the two? An external connection must then be sought, but if it is not found or is not assumed to exist, the only remaining option is to reduce one to the other, rendering one an epiphenomenon of the other (Kasulis [2019] 2022). This is precisely what happened when radical feminism in the 1960s theorized patriarchy by collapsing class into gender. Conversely, economistic Marxists reduced gender to class. In response to this kind of approach, which was common at the time, dual systems theory took the opposite route and sought to identify an external relation connecting the two.

Internal relations

According to the paradigm of internal relations, when the relationship *R* between *a* an *b* dissolves, then, because the relationship is internal to *a* and *b*, "*a* loses part of itself, as does *b*." Unitary theory follows this model: it does not treat capitalism and patriarchy as independent systems, but as intrinsically connected in such a way that they form a whole, where separating them would mean that neither remains the same. From this perspective, patriarchy has never been fully autonomous. It is correlationally constituted,[7] meaning it is formed through its internal relation to the prevailing relations of production. This implies that there has never been, and can never be, a "pure" patriarchy. As Arruzza puts it:

> From this standpoint it is not possible to speak of pure patriarchy, as its material structures are always rooted within determined relations of production and this inextricable relation modifies their characteristics and nature. Instead, one must speak rather of slaveholding patriarchy, feudal patriarchy, capitalist patriarchy and so on. (Arruzza 2013, 116–17)

I take this to mean that patriarchy had only relative autonomy prior to capitalism, losing it in the transition to capitalist society when it became reorganized and thoroughly enmeshed with capitalist accumulation. As Arruzza (2013, 116–17) notes, Hartmann acknowledges that there never was a "pure" patriarchy, yet "despite this close correlation between mode of production

[7] I borrow this term from Andrew K. Whitehead (2020, 70), who defines correlationalism as "a view whereby relationality is taken as originary, as that out of which discrete existents are thought to *become*, and this in a way that is specific to the relation that gives way to them."

and patriarchal system, each of these operates according to an internal logic and specific laws." This creates a tension in her position: by conceding the nonexistence of a "pure" patriarchy, she affirms the internal-relations view, but she also reverts to an external-relations model by treating patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems.

I would therefore contend that it does not make sense to speak of patriarchy as an autonomous system before the advent of capitalism, as it has always been internally related to the prevailing relations of production. Its relative autonomy has, however, diminished drastically under capitalism. In other words, in the transition to capitalism the intersection between patriarchy and capitalism has grown so large that it no longer makes sense to describe patriarchy as relatively autonomous, as illustrated in the following image:

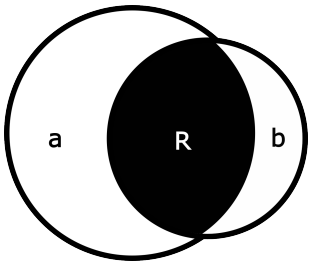


Figure 3.2: *b* (patriarchy) lost its relative autonomy to *a* (capitalism)

Now that we have considered both internal and external relations, Hartmann's metaphor of a happier marriage or divorce between capitalism and patriarchy signals an underlying external-relations view. Kasulis ([2019] 2022) uses marriage as a paradigmatic example of an external relation, he describes marriage as "an external, contractual relation into which two individuals enter." In marriage, two independent persons enter into a relation through something external to them, the marriage contract. In much the same way, Sartre ([1960] 2004, [1985] 1991) theorizes the serialization of individuals in capitalist societies, where people are related through an external thing (Lievens 2025b). People remain separate yet become connected by a thing. Consider, for example, women waiting in line at a gendered restroom.[8] They are related through the thing of the restroom itself, which not only mediates their relation but also constrains their possibilities for action by determining where—behind the gender-marked door—and when—once others before them have finished—they can satisfy the bodily need that brought them there.

This illustrates how capitalist societies divide and reify relationships, with external relations

[8]For this example I draw on Sartre's ([1960] 2004, 1:237)'s example of people queuing for a bus and Young's (1994, 730) example of women being constrained in their action when confronted with a "gender marked door." This last example comes from Young's influential essay *Gender as Seriality*, in which Young adopts Sartre's concept of seriality to suggest that women form a particular kind of social collective: a series.

coming to predominate over internal relations. Internal relations are increasingly displaced by external relations in which the relationship is constituted by a thing. The internal–external relations distinction could be a productive avenue for further research, serving both as a comparative lens for engaging with existing approaches to relationality in Marxist and feminist theory, such as Sartre's work as used by Young, and as a basis for dialogue with other philosophical domains that have addressed relationality, from which further insights could be drawn.[9]

[9] An example in philosophy where the difficulty stems from understanding the relation between two seemingly distinct domains is the mind–body problem in Western philosophy. Yasuo Yuasa (1987), as referenced by Kasulis (2022), points out that modern Western philosophy has typically treated mind and body as independently existing entities because of an implicit model of external relations. This inevitably raises the question of "what connects the two." When no such connection could be found, one was reduced to the other—for example, "by making the mind an epiphenomenon of the body." Yuasa notes that "such formulations of the mind–body problem are alien to the Japanese philosophical tradition, both ancient and modern." In contrast, Chinese and Japanese philosophy predominantly follow a model of internal relations. The Chinese and Japanese languages already express body and mind as compound terms—xin (Ch.) and shin or kokoro (Jp.)—meaning something like "heartmind" or "bodymind" (Dijkstra 2025). As Kasulis (2022) explains, referring to Yuasa, the bodymind is conceived as "a single complex of two intersecting circles," such that "without the somatic conjunction, the mind is not fully the mind and without the mental conjunction, the body is not fully the body." The philosophical significance here lies in a shift of perspective: rather than seeking to connect two discrete entities, the focus turns to what is already intrinsically shared—their interrelation.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will first summarize the central arguments of each chapter before turning to the broader implications of the study. Through an engagement with Fraser in the first chapter, I showed that economic analysis remains indispensable for developing an adequate feminist theory of oppression in capitalist societies and that a reductive opposition between economic and cultural approaches to oppression should be avoided. I also maintained that Fraser's analytical distinction between both dimensions of injustice is valuable for clarifying the institutional separation of these domains within capitalist society while emphasizing that in reality they are inseparable and that both perspectives are needed for analyzing any form of injustice. My examination of Fraser's work further showed how her misrepresentation as being emblematic of the "loss-story" narrative of a return to materialism serves as an example of the way Marxist feminism is often dismissed and demonstrated that Marxist feminism remains highly relevant today.

In the second chapter's discussion of patriarchy, I identified three common claims: (i) that gender oppression is systemic rather than reducible to individual attitudes or actions, (ii) that patriarchy, as a system of male domination, predates capitalism, and (iii) that it exists as a system independent of capitalism. The fact that patriarchy predates capitalism led radical feminists to argue that gender is primary and that capitalism arose within pre-existing patriarchal structures. It also prompted dual and triple systems theorists, whose largely economistic understanding of capitalism could not explain women's oppression within capitalist society, to adopt the radical feminist notion of patriarchy and conceptualize the two as distinct but interacting systems, each with its own underlying causes and internal logic. This idea is identified by several Marxist feminists as the dominant way of understanding the relationship between gender oppression and capitalism (Arruzza 2014, sec. I; Portella and Busk 2024, 357).

However, as shown in the third chapter, this view is strongly challenged by Marxist feminists

such as Vogel, Arruzza, and Bhattacharya. These theorists advance a unitary or social reproduction theory, which, as I have argued, entails understanding patriarchy as correlationally constituted, meaning that it is always internally related to prevailing relations of production. There has never been, and there cannot be, a "pure" patriarchy. In the transition to capitalist society, however, patriarchy lost its relative autonomy and became reorganized and thoroughly enmeshed with capitalist accumulation. Capitalist society should thus be theorized as a contradictory totality, not a homogeneous system that reduces all conditions and experiences to a single logic. It continually produces contradictions, stratifications, and differentiated oppressions that are shaped—though never fully subsumed—by the constraints of capitalist accumulation. While capitalist accumulation imposes necessitating constraints on all social relations, this does not mean that hierarchies and oppressions simply function to maintain or reproduce capitalism. They can also be in tension with it and are neither accidental to nor wholly external from capitalist society. Although it is debated whether capitalism requires these relations on a purely abstract level, its historical development has made them integral to its concrete operation. This means that, in practice, capitalism is not indifferent to the forms these relations take.

This means that acknowledging the struggle against patriarchy, racism, and other forms of oppression cannot be separated from the struggle against capitalism itself. These relations are embedded in the way capitalism has historically developed in forms that impose practical constraints making certain social hierarchies such as gender oppression likely to remain constitutive features of it, and it is not evident how another form of oppression could easily replace those. For this reason, a feminism adequate to our historical moment must also be an anti-capitalist feminism and, conversely, any anti-capitalism that fails to take the eradication of gender, racial, and other oppressions as central to its project remains incomplete.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the structural relationship between capitalism, gender, and other forms of oppression. It traces the theorization of gender oppression and patriarchy through debates in Marxist feminism, engaging especially with the work of Heidi Hartmann, Cinzia Arruzza, Nancy Fraser, and Lise Vogel, as well as contributions by Tithi Bhattacharya. It argues that feminism cannot do without a theorization of capitalist accumulation and that Marxist feminism offers indispensable tools for understanding how capitalism, in its historically specific forms, has developed in ways that impose practical constraints that make certain social hierarchies, such as gender oppression, likely to remain constitutive features of it. The thesis challenges dual systems theory, as articulated by Hartmann, by advancing a unitary or social reproduction perspective developed by Vogel, Arruzza, and Bhattacharya. This view holds that while patriarchy had relative autonomy in pre-capitalist societies, under capitalism it became reorganized and deeply enmeshed in capitalist society, losing much of its former autonomy. It further argues that not all forms of oppression are functional to capitalism, yet capitalist accumulation imposes necessitating constraints on all social relations, generates social hierarchies and oppression, and constitutes a contradictory social totality that does not operate according to a single, homogenizing logic. Clarifying these theoretical distinctions is not only of academic interest but also shapes the strategic possibilities for contemporary feminist politics.

Word count: 20.205