

## BOOK REVIEW

Martha E. Giménez, *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays* (Haymarket Books, 2019)

### The Resurgence of Marxist Feminist Analytics

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SEMINAL WRITINGS OF A GIVEN FEMINIST SOCIAL THEORIST ARE RARELY anthologized, highlighting how modes of knowledge production render silent the important contributions of these scholars. Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe (1978, 3, 6) observed the need for “theoretical practice” that bridges social movement activism with “the very urgent and specific need for constructing an analytical and effectual understanding of women’s situation.” *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays* by Martha E. Giménez challenges the material conditions of women’s historic erasure from genealogies of knowledge. The collection spans the course of her academic career from 1973 to 2007. Giménez critiques different aspects of feminist theorizing while taking on the anthology as a critical methodological tool, disrupting practices of intellectual bypassing that limit the longevity of feminist modes of knowledge production.

Feminists have long engaged Marxist analyses of the material conditions of capitalist economic production and distribution. This system dictates the conditions of labor that create extreme forms of social inequality and

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individual alienation. With the expansion of neoliberal social policies, Marxist feminist scholars have steadfastly registered structural changes vis-à-vis women's labor participation. There are intellectual disagreements among scholars around the nuances of Marxist economic philosophy and the expansion of the theory to include other modes of difference (e.g., race, sexuality, disability, citizenship status). However, feminists have interrogated gendered labor conditions in ways that reflect transdisciplinary, transnational perspectives. These scholars include Ann Ferguson, Lise Vogel, Angela Davis, Maria Mies, Heidi Hartmann, Chandra Mohanty, J. K. Gibson-Graham, and Tithi Bhattacharya.

Giménez is a pioneer in theorizing the intersection of capitalism, labor, and feminist politics, and her work is rooted in an orthodox Marxist feminist analytic. In this collection, Giménez presents her work as critical analytical tools that center structural class analysis beyond discourses on the gender binary or how gender is coconstitutive of other modes of social group formation. Giménez (2018, 24) focuses on defining social reproduction as “the economic survival of the working classes, their access to their conditions of reproduction, [which are] subordinate to changes in capital accumulation that constantly create a surplus population or reserve army of labour.” She claims that under late capitalism, globalization results in “the polarisation of income and wealth ownership everywhere” and that phenomena such as migrant labor exploitation and the feminization of labor “indicate that global capitalism is changing the relationships between men and women, and among women both in Western and non-Western countries ... creating a very complex terrain” for advancing Marxist feminism (ibid., 25).

Giménez's rich body of work advances social reproduction theory. As a system that dominates modes of exchange and consumption across geopolitical systems, capitalism creates the conditions whereby “production *determines* reproduction” (ibid., 16, emphasis in original). In “Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited,” she argues that “capitalist determinants of the oppression of women” are rooted in Marx's dialectics of abstraction (ibid., 348). Her interpretation of Marxism shines in her ability to make legible his “dialectical ontology” and methodology of historical materialism, or the relationship between “the analysis of the historically specific structures and relations” that undergird social inequalities and the “distinction between the observable and the unobservable aspects of social reality [which] direct us to search for the underlying conditions and social relations that render possible that which we are able to observe” (ibid., 348–49).

Giménez takes to task the presumed epistemological question of liberal feminist analytics, “Why are women oppressed – ‘as women?’” (ibid., 349). She challenges the premise that women’s oppression is merely a determinant of gender and recalls the value of Marxist methodology to uncover “the inequality between men and women in their historical context” (ibid., 350). Marx’s mode of production theory posits that the phenomenality of “the production of things” creates “historically different structural conditions of possibility under capitalism, conditions that remain unchanged despite changes at the level of observable phenomena” (ibid., 359). In “Reproduction and Procreation Under Capitalism,” her critique of conceptive and genetic modification reproductive technologies warns of the dangers in propagating “the separation of reproduction – understood as the unity of social and physical reproduction – and procreation, understood as the biological side of physical reproduction” (ibid., 207–8). This estrangement creates a “mode of procreation” that not only fuels the social reproduction economics, but also serves as another mechanism of class warfare by deepening health gaps and creating “genetic inequality between classes” (ibid., 209). This advances the precariousness of women’s productive labor across the public and private spheres.

Giménez offers unique perspectives on the materialist turn in early twenty-first-century feminist research amid what she calls a hegemonic “theoretical shift towards idealism and contingency” (ibid., 111). In “What’s Material about Materialist Feminism? A Marxist-Feminist Critique,” she suggests that the lines have blurred between socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, and materialist feminism. Each concedes that patriarchy is firmly rooted in historical modes of production, yet they differ in the degree to which scholars examine the interrelationship between the base (means and relations of production) and superstructure (the ideological structures and institutions that uphold production). Giménez privileges Marxist feminist analytics in identifying how to make sense of the polymorphic nature of oppressions and their impacts on the lives of the most vulnerable. She teeters on a form of Marxist fundamentalism which she acknowledges is what distinguishes her from scholars who attempt to bridge the structural determinants of production that uphold capitalism with relations of power and social reproduction. For Giménez (ibid., 334), capitalist social reproduction is the basis for all modes of production, which “is a necessary condition for reproduction and vice versa.” Scholars like Tithi Bhattacharya and Ann Ferguson (cited in Giménez 2018, 331) argue that social reproduction serves as the “foundation on which markets, production and exchange rest.”

Throughout the collection, Giménez goes from constructing and debating theory to the application of historical materialism in examining specific modes of production, sex-segregated labor hierarchies, and the material conditions of women's labor. In "Connecting Marx and Feminism in the Era of Globalisation: A Preliminary Investigation," she addresses the class divide where middle-class women's upward mobility is predicated on the domestic labor of migrant, working-class women, supporting multiple forms of capital. Domestic workers promote the economic advancement of middle-class and elite women, what Giménez (2018, 315) describes as "the emergence of a female aristocracy" formed out of "the exploitation of the third world." They also support the development goals of countries where remittances are a key source of national economic growth plans. Giménez (*ibid.*, 315) argues that

structured inequality at the world level of analysis remains relatively unchanged, even though some nation states may move up or down the ladder, just as wealth and income distribution in the core or advanced capitalist countries are not substantially altered.

She advocates for a feminist politic that "courageously acknowledges that all women do not share the same class interests" through recognizing the shared class interests of the majority of the world's women, forming the basis for locating systemic alternatives to capitalism (*ibid.*, 328).

The desire to maintain this deep class consciousness among women is the rationale behind Marxist feminist critiques of discourses around difference (Lorde 1984), intersectionality (Collins 2019, Collins & Bilge 2016, Crenshaw 1989, Yuval-Davis 2011), the matrix of domination (Collins 1990), and interlocking systems of oppressions (Combahee River Collective 2000). Giménez (2018, 327) cites Marx as the source for feminist theory and activism around "combined forms (e.g., gender, ethnic, national origin, racial, or cultural) in which women become conscious of their collective needs and struggle to attain their goals." In "Reflections on Intersectionality," she engages in an indiscriminate analysis of intersectionality. She even goes so far as to say that the foundational critique of the intersectional framework—what Elizabeth V. Spelman (1988) called the additive analysis of identity and oppression—and what the framework has become are one and the same, adding "there are no substantive differences between the basic analytic framework today known as intersectionality and the original race, gender and class approach ... intersectionality is the trilogy writ large" (Giménez 2018, 94). She asks a series of questions around how intersectionality engages

different modes of analysis, how the framework explains the multiplicity of identities, and the relationship between identity and social roles, landing on the claim that intersectionality functions as a “consensus-creating-signifier” that glosses over important political and theoretical differences and conflicts among feminists” (ibid., 98).

Giménez (ibid., 99) wrongly suggests that intersectionality is “a framework unattached to a specific theoretical foundation,” which has made it, as a conceptual tool, vulnerable to “co-optation, transformation and multiple interpretations.” She refers to it as “*the* hegemonic feminist perspective today” (ibid., emphasis in original). Although I agree that intersectionality has been popularized and made accessible to academic and community-based feminist theorizing practice, the logic of her criticism is deeply flawed. For example, she attempts to distinguish between narrow and broad understandings of intersectionality. For the former, she makes the point that “if *narrowly understood*, intersectionality is applicable to women only” and that “within the logic of intersectional thinking, only women at the bottom in all the axes of oppression have complex, intersectional identities” (ibid., 101–2, emphasis in original). Giménez cites the practice of centering “black women’s experiences of subjectivity and oppression” (McCall, cited in Yuval-Davis 2011, 159) as the basis for reducing “the logic of intersectional thinking” to the basic premise that “only women at the bottom in all axes of oppression have complex, intersectional identities” (Giménez 2018, 102). Thus, the genealogy of the intersectional theoretical project, rooted in Black women’s experiences, is used to render it as narrow in scope. In defining intersectionality more broadly, Giménez (ibid., 102, emphasis in original) surmises that it is a “gender and race ‘blind’ analytical framework according to which everyone, *including white males*, is placed at the intersection of axes of oppression,” and, as a result, makes intersectionality more of an “analytical framework for the study of social inequality, rather than ... a feminist theory.”

What I find troubling about these assessments is that they fail to engage some of the fundamental arguments of intersectional critical inquiry. Patricia Hill Collins (2019, 5) offers the most insightful discussion on the nature of social theory (explanations of the social world), the promise of critical social theory (explanations along with the mechanisms to change it), and the praxis orientation of intersectionality as a “broad-based, collaborative intellectual and political project with many kinds of social actors ... [whose] heterogeneity is not a liability, but rather may be one of its greatest strengths.” She presents intersectionality as “a critical social theory that is under construction” (ibid., 6). An intersectional heuristic can offer

philosophical bridges between Marxist feminist theorizing. The Marxist moral imperative toward the eradication of injustice should fuel the desire to locate common ground amongst feminists engaged in antioppression theorizing. In the quest to maintain the centrality of “the fundamental role of class relations and struggles in the production of oppression and inequality,” Giménez (2018, 99) sacrifices intellectual and political solidarity with an entire mode of knowledge production rooted in the social movements of women of color and women of the Global South.

This collection is a call to feminist scholars to catalog their work in ways that challenge the citation politics that persistently leave feminist thinkers outside modes of knowledge production and preservation. It is part of a legacy of anthologizing the work of praxis-oriented thinkers like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Zora Neale Hurston, Angela Davis, Bea Medicine, Sylvia Wynter, Joy James, and Ana Castillo. Giménez is dedicated to Marxist feminist theoretical commitments, even at the expense of building much-needed coalitions among feminist thinkers in ways that expand the political project of eradicating unfreedom. Historical materialism provides the tools to unearth the transhistorical structural conditions sustained by capitalism. When combined with an intersectional lens, which reveals the nuanced specificity and polymorphic constitution of inequality, the possibilities for alternatives to capitalist social reproduction become greater and more recognizable across communities of difference.

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