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Patriarchy as Ideology: An Examination of Marxist Feminism

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Abstract

Marxist feminist scholars have gone through a rather long and tortuous process of understanding the capitalist system and patriarchy. At first, they argued that the capitalist system and patriarchy go hand in hand and together keep women in subservient positions. Later, they examined related concepts and argued that the capitalist system and patriarchy merge and intensify the oppression of women. At the same time, later Marxist feminist scholars returned to Marxist theory and suggested that the capitalist system is the key to the current women's problems and patriarchy is its ideological tool to defend the ruling class's interests.

Keywords

marxist feminism, patriarchy, reproduction

1. Introduction

The feminine question, as Gayle Rubin puts it, "In a narrative that spans cultures and runs through history, no theory can explain the oppression of women as well as the Marxist theory of class oppression, with its endless diversity and monotonous similarities." (Rubin, 1975) The problem of female oppression has always existed in different historical periods of human society. The changing social environment of Western capitalism after World War II and the flourishing of the women's liberation movement have opened up a new theoretical perspective for feminist scholars to construct a theory of women's liberation. For Marxist feminist scholars, it is particularly important to draw strength from Marxist theory. Although Marx and Engels did not systematically discuss women's issues, thanks to the theoretical research of numerous Marxist scholars, feminist scholars have been able to carry out an in-depth analysis of women's problems based on various categories. The concept of reproduction was one of the main focuses of Marxist feminist scholars.

The reproduction concept is an essential category in Marx's analysis of capitalist social formations. Marx believed that for any social formation to be sustainable, it must constantly reproduce the conditions of production on which it depends. Marx himself did not develop an extensive and detailed

construction of the concept of reproduction. Still, by examining the relationship between the productive forces and the mode of production, Louis-Pierre Althusser pointed out that the dominant mode of production determines any social formation. To ensure orderly reproduction, the first task is to control the reproduction of the production mode, which includes the reproduction of the productive forces and the reproduction of the relations of production.

The reproduction of material goods and the reproduction of labor are indispensable keys to maintaining the reproduction of productive forces, and the reproduction of modes of production is the key to guaranteeing the sustainable development of social forms. By examining and analyzing the concept of reproduction, scholars have realized the importance of women's participation in reproduction. They have tried to reproduce different perspectives to explore the root causes of women's oppression and seek strategies for women's liberation movements. In response to women's oppression in the reproduction of productive forces, scholars' theories, although interpreted differently in different contexts, such as dualism and social reproduction, remain essentially firm in Marxism. But Marxist feminism has undergone a more complex process when it comes to exploring women's oppression in the context of the reproduction of relations of production.

Althusser says: "It is ensured by the exercise of state power by the state apparatus, the repressive state apparatus on the one hand and the ideological state apparatus on the other." (Althusser, 2014) The reproduction of relations of production is, as Althusser argues, the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation. In the capitalist social formation, the capitalist system, armed with a patriarchal ideology, constantly reproduces the relations of exploitation of women.

2. Two Parallel Regimes

Early Marxist feminism viewed patriarchy as a social system alongside capitalism, and Juliet Mitchell theorized that women's oppression resulted from a combination of capitalism and patriarchy. She subdivides the four structures of production, reproduction, sexuality, and child socialization, arguing that women's problems are determined by the multiple roles they play in these four structures together. As Mitchell argues, industrial labor and automated technology provided the preconditions—but only the preconditions—for the emancipation of women. Implicit in this is the logic of Mitchell's thinking that advances in productivity have not changed the oppressed status of women, that women's issues remain unresolved, and that, therefore, patriarchy still oppresses women in addition to the exploitation of women by the capitalist system. Mitchell explores in detail the oppression of women in the reproduction of relations of production in three areas: fertility, sexuality, and the socialization of children. Women need to break the social cult of maternity, transcend the limits of the sexual system, and break the image of women as wives and mothers inherent in capitalist society.

Capitalist ideology makes women constantly reproduce their relations of production as wives and mothers exploited within the family. Mitchell tries to transfer women from the private sphere of the family to the public sphere but overstates the bondage of the family to women and ignores the value of

women in family production. Heidi Hartmann, who argues that both the capitalist system and patriarchy have created women's problems, argues, "It is my contention that the roots of women's present social status lie in this sex-ordered division of labor." (Hartmann, 1976) She argues that the expansion of capitalist reproduction has led to increased separation of the public and private spheres, with the private sphere being subordinate to the public sphere and the resulting gendered division of labor allowing men to control female labor. Hartmann, like Mitchell, ignores Marx's early recognition in *Capital* that the so-called gendered or technological division of labor in capitalism is essentially a social division of labor and that the relations of production fundamentally determine the division of labor.

Therefore, Mitchell and Hartmann's view that the capitalist system and patriarchy simultaneously create the oppressive status of women is essentially the reproduction by women of their exploitation by the bourgeoisie in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, and the domination of women by men is the ideological guarantee of this exploitative relationship by the capitalist state apparatus.

3. Capitalistic Patriarchy

Reflecting on the ideas of scholars such as Mitchell and Hartmann, Zilla Eisenstein distinguishes between the material bases of exploitation and oppression, suggesting that women are exploited as proletarian laborers in capitalist production and oppressed in patriarchal gender hierarchies. Marxist feminist scholars at this time saw patriarchy as inextricably linked to the capitalist system, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa. She suggested that starting with the male definition of class, women's emancipation was reduced to equal pay for equal work and a fairer and more effective welfare state. Capital is the main enemy for these women, but it is because it is backward, not because it exists (Costa & James, 1972). The patriarchy lends itself to the capitalist system to maintain male domination over women, while the capitalist system lends itself to the patriarchy to expand its reproduction. When the women's liberation movement was in full swing, she called on working-class women to resist the capitalist system and the oppression of men within the family.

To reveal the essence of capitalist patriarchy, Nancy Chodorow, while affirming that "our mode of production is increasingly exclusively capitalist," points out that women are increasingly represented in the reproduction of relations of production as a relationship of exploitation. In capitalist social formations, all women are subject to an ideological norm that defines them as members of the traditional nuclear family. The result is that women appease the resentment of their husbands who participate in social production and influence the development of gender temperament in their children. This leads to a default social perception, which is the rejection of what is feminine and the construction of a male world, where children are raised in such a way as to produce a workforce that participates in capitalist social production as a result of the bourgeoisie's efforts to reproduce exploitative relations within the family to guarantee social production.

To maintain its domination, the bourgeoisie establishes or reproduces patriarchal hegemony and oppression of women by taking advantage of the fact that women can only rely on the men in the family for their means of subsistence during the intergenerational alternation, transforming class into gender conflict. After analyzing the roots of capitalist patriarchy's oppression of women at the level of reproduction of production relations, Iris Young goes on to discuss the fact that this system pushes women to the margins and thus relegates them to secondary labor in capitalist society. Having achieved the goal of using women as a reserve army of labor, capitalists have actively promoted it in the past. They continue to encourage the idea of the nuclear family, emphasizing women's contribution to the family to justify low wages for women. Since the birth of capitalist social forms, women have been confined within the family and excluded from social production, and the reproduction of this exploitative relationship has guaranteed capitalist production. With the development of capitalist society and the need for expanded capitalist reproduction, women have become increasingly involved in direct production. They have become more and more aware of the essence of this exploitative relationship. While Alison Jagger sees reproductive activities as central to the domestic sphere, she does not share the Marxist division of production and reproduction, arguing that this division is masculine-biased.

The classification of women's labor as only in reproduction implies that production is created and changed by men, while women merely maintain production. Views that characterize women's childbearing as reproductive labor fundamentally deny women's place at the production level. Although Jagger has a lot to say about the division between the concepts of production and reproduction, a deeper examination of her views shows that her dissatisfaction is due to the neglect and exploitation of the value created by reproductive labor in a male-dominated society, which leads to the subordination of women involved in reproductive labor in the capitalist social form, a feature that suggests that women do the same essential labor over and over again, generation after generation. This is the result of capitalism's exploitative relations to reproduce itself constantly.

4. Reproduction of Exploitative Relations

As the twenty-first century draws to a close with the second wave of Western feminism, post-Marxist feminist scholars have become more explicit about the oppression of women in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. In the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation, as Bonnie Fox points out, mothers have played a central role in preparing children for success when they grow up, as the bourgeoisie has done since the development of the modern ideology that defined "good motherhood" for white middle-class women in the nineteenth century.

The bourgeoisie uses this ideology to secure its domination over the proletariat. Unlike previous Marxist feminists, Martha Jimenez does not emphasize the role of patriarchy, suggesting that in social formations where capitalism is the dominant mode of production, the production mode determines the social organization as well as the mode of human reproduction and that the reproduction of exploitative

relations deprives a large proportion of proletarian workers (both men and women) of access to well-paying jobs at the ideological level, so their ability to reproduce themselves and to carry out intergenerational alternation is seriously impaired. Their subordination to the bourgeoisie is perpetuated from generation to generation in the capitalist relations of production and reproduction.

To maintain domination and continue to conceal contradictions, the bourgeoisie wished to reproduce the representation of women as subordinates in the family, using the ideology of patriarchy to solidify this pattern for its exploitative purposes continually. Marxist feminist scholars of the middle and later periods used the concept of reproduction in the Marxist sense, that is, reproductive labor as an activity necessary for the survival and advancement of human beings, rather than assimilating all activities to industrial production and then rigidly assigning it the same status as production as a way to raise the status of women in reproductive activities. The subordination of reproduction to production not only constitutes gender inequality as a macro level of capitalist social formations but also affects people's existence, practices, and ideologies.

5. Patriarchal Ideology and Motherhood

However, the bourgeoisie, to alleviate the contradiction between the immediate need for surplus labor and the long-term demand for surplus labor for the whole class, forced women to stay within the family to reproduce the new generation of labor. The ideology of patriarchy as an instrument of domination came into play, forcing the original female maternity to evolve into a maternal vocation based on which women had to choose between work and childbirth, a choice that concerned their professional destiny, whereas men had almost no such concerns.

Almost all current pregnancy policies address women's issues by granting welfare benefits to women during pregnancy and extending pregnancy and maternity leave. Still, at their root, these policies were enacted to safeguard women's labor within the family, meaning that the policies in question were aimed at maintaining the stability of the family unit, not at protecting women's rights. Therefore, such policies fail to pursue equality based on respect for differences. Marxist feminism has strongly criticized the alienation of women's motherhood into bounden duty, and many scholars, after examining female pregnancy bills enacted in Europe and the United States, have suggested that women are oppressed and exploited during pregnancy and gestation. Still, women do not have a legitimate status in the labor market as mothers. The enactment of the Pregnancy Act may seem to guarantee the welfare and treatment of women in childbirth as a vulnerable group. Still, it is a significant cause of further entrenchment of women within the family. The benefits of maternity leave and financial assistance that this pregnancy bill talks about essentially work to alienate women's nature as mothers into a duty, where women are conceptualized as "mothers" for giving birth and are required to "sacrifice" because of their irreplaceable and vital role in the reproduction of the labor force. As a result, these protective policies for women have become, to some extent, a means of restricting women, i.e., they are purely formal equality.

Marxist feminism puts forward an essential principle in women's struggle for emancipation and equality: the battle for gender equality between men and women should be based on the inclusion of differences rather than concealment. Therefore, policies aimed at safeguarding women's rights should be based on transcending the boundaries between work and family and granting equal privileges to women in pregnancy and gestation rather than maternal privileges. Otherwise, they are highly susceptible to extreme feminist distortions. It is undeniable that feminism in this new era, combined with further development factors, has given rise to many new issues that have never existed before. Firstly, the emergence of various disadvantaged groups and niche groups, which are not in the mainstream, are in urgent need of social recognition, and the commonality of these groups lies in the desire to elevate the status of human beings from individual existence to social existence, emphasizing the recognition and tolerance of social ideology. The reasons for their emergence remain to be examined.

6. Discussion

Some feminists suggest that intergender oppression causes women's problems, but in reality, intergender oppression is not the cause but the conclusion. This is because almost all theories that treat the cause of female oppression as resulting from gender oppression end up increasing gender antagonism and discrimination. Perhaps in the eyes of most feminist scholars, Marxist feminist theory overstates the oppression of women by class factors, ignores the bondage of men to women, and even ignores the differences in social status between men and women from the time they are unborn.

However, a closer examination of Lise Vogel's analysis of the various types of current female pregnancy policies and workfare bills proposed in response to women's biological characteristics reveals that mid- to late Marxist feminists placed great value on social distinctions between gender in terms of equality and difference. Some of the benefits and bills proposed for women's specificity seem to protect the benefits and rights of women in childbirth. Still, they force employers to push female workers out of production, which means that enacting these policies exposes women's possible disadvantages due to childbirth, further increasing social differences and even invisibly aggravating gender bias and stereotypes against women.

Marxist feminism is convinced that if properly developed, Marxism can solve the problems faced by feminist theory. But their shortcomings are also evident in their belief that intergender oppression or the bondage of patriarchy to women is interpreted as resulting solely from class oppression. However, different social trends have profoundly influenced social civilization when we look at the new socio-historical period. Although society's attention to marginalized minority groups is far greater than before, various extremism has seriously hindered the regular social order, and feminist theories that genuinely contribute to the cause of women's liberation have not made any breakthrough in recent years. The achievements of the feminist movement are far from comparable to those of the last century.

Since its inception, Marxist feminist theory has been oscillating between Marxism and feminism, as scholars do not have a clear and profound understanding of Marxism and believe that the neglect of gender issues is an essential obstacle to the recognition of Marxism in the modern era. Therefore it is necessary to complement the development of Marxism with feminist theory. In contrast, some other scholars try to find other scholars have attempted to find a way to “marry” Marxism and feminism by finding a theoretical connection. Undoubtedly, whether it is to complement Marxism with feminist theory or to find a balance between the two theories to integrate Marxism and feminism into a new theory, Marxist feminism needs to develop itself in the process of trial and error. At the end of the twentieth century, scholars such as Vogel, Jagger, and Jimenez already foresaw that the issue of gender antagonism would not help to solve the problem of female oppression. Today, as human civilization has developed, the purely biological differences between men and women are no longer able to create the subordination of gender groups on a large scale, and the new forms of class oppression and exploitation are more worthy of criticism and resistance than the opposition, discrimination and mutual attacks between the sexes.

Women must realize that they should live for themselves in their short lives and take the initiative to break the scope of activities set for them by backward ideologies. For today’s women’s liberation, the first step in the women’s movement is to liberate themselves from the consciousness that they have the same status and rights as men, that they have the same responsibilities and duties, and that only when the concept of “equality between men and women” is genuinely rooted in mind can women’s affirmation of themselves be promoted worldwide. We need to break down artificial barriers in the workplace and make it easier for women to integrate into public life. Capitalist oppression prevents women from being fully emancipated, while an atmosphere of equality and freedom is necessary for freedom from control and oppression. Women’s emancipation requires the protection and support of a robust system, which requires constant self-reflection and revision as we build and explore all aspects of our economy and society.

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