

Original Paper

The Alienation of Women in the Context of Social Reproduction

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Abstract

As a wave of women's liberation movements has swept across the world over the past century, Marxist feminism has examined the theories and concepts found in classic Marxist literature, providing an in-depth critique of the importance and alienation of women in the context of social reproduction. An analysis of the different positions of women in social reproduction identifies the mechanisms underlying the alienation of women's 'motherhood' into 'motherhood' in the context of social reproduction. The Marxist feminist examination of this alienation is based on an emphasis on women's biological differences, followed by a division between the public and private spheres, examining the oppression of women in the domestic sphere in terms of both intergenerational alternation and domestic work and the public sphere in terms of the exploitation of women's participation in social production.

Keywords

social reproduction, motherhood, alienation, female emancipation, Marxist feminism

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, motherhood refers to the instinct to be a mother and, by extension, to the mother-like instinct of compassion for people or things that women have. No matter how it is defined, motherhood is an innate instinct that naturally arises from being a mother. However, when talking about women as mothers in our time, motherhood is most often used in the sense of "mother's job", meaning the state of being a woman as a mother. The transformation of motherhood from maternity to the "mother's job" is essentially an alienation of women. Exploring the forms and roots of this alienation inevitably focuses on the gender differences women acquire due to their fertility. However, more importantly, the study of this alienation must be placed in the context of social reproduction and the place of women in reproductive labour.

Social reproduction is essential in Marx's analysis of capitalist social formations. Marx argued that for any social formation to be continuously sustainable, it must constantly reproduce the conditions on which it depends: the conditions of production. Louis Pierre Althusser, by examining the relationship between

the productive forces and the mode of production, pointed out that the dominant mode of production determines any social formation and that to ensure orderly reproduction, the first task is to control the reproduction of the mode of production, which involves the reproduction of the productive forces and the reproduction of the relations of production. The reproduction of material goods and the reproduction of labour are indispensable for maintaining the reproduction of productive forces, and the reproduction of modes of production is the key to the sustainable development of social forms. Examining the roots of the material basis of the alienation of motherhood from maternity to the “mother’s job” must focus on the different positions of women in the reproduction of productive forces.

Firstly, the reproduction of material goods refers to the constantly renewed and repeated process of the production of material goods. Any production process consumes a certain amount of material goods, including the various means of production and the various means of consumption consumed by the producers. In other words, the reproduction of material materials provides the conditions for the following production process and the material prerequisites for meeting people’s living needs. Secondly, labour reproduction refers to the restoration and renewal of workers’ labour capacity, which includes maintaining and restoring workers’ labour capacity, accumulating and transmitting labour skills, and replenishing new labour. An examination of the different conceptions of reproductive labour reveals that the position of women in reproduction is not fixed except for the reproduction of new labour - the intergenerational alternation. Therefore, how women’s alienation occurs in the context of overall social reproduction requires a more detailed and in-depth inquiry.

2. The Born Oppressed

In the overall context of social reproduction, intergenerational alternation is an inevitable component of labour reproduction for women, and some scholars abhor the role of women in labour reproduction, arguing to the extreme that it is women’s particular position in labour reproduction that leads to the birth of gender hierarchies and the forced oppression of women from birth. Juliet Mitchell, one of the most prominent contemporary Marxist feminist scholars, asserted that as long as procreation remains a natural phenomenon, women are destined to become objects of social exploitation. As Nancy Chowdoro puts it, the reason for this is that “the role and work activities of women in the contemporary family contribute to the social reproduction characteristic of capitalism.” (Chowdoro, 1979) With the development of society and the revolution’s success, they believed that women’s emancipation would eventually be achieved. Still, no matter how women’s roles changed, their role in intergenerational alternation could never be replaced, and this was the root of women’s oppression. To equate intergenerational alternation with the reproduction of labour, to equate women’s ability to bear children with ‘motherhood’, and to assume that this is how gender hierarchies are constructed is to fail to analyse women’s reproductive labour in the context of social reproduction as a whole.

When the so-called gender hierarchy is analysed in the context of overall social reproduction, Marxist feminism suggests that the key to breaking down gender hierarchies is to break down gender itself. When

Jagger explores female oppression at the level of labour reproduction, she refers to the fact that “women’s work remains invisible and men continue to benefit from it directly or indirectly. Men gain more leisure time and a higher quality of life directly from women’s reproductive and nurturing activities.” (Jagger & McBride, 1985) That is because women are hindered in their competition for employment and career advancement by the responsibility of ‘two jobs’; capitalists choose men who have an ‘advantage’ over women. In this way, reproduction is categorised as reproduction rather than production, and men can exploit and appropriate the fruits of women’s labour reproduction. Bonnie Fox poignantly identifies the historical roots of female oppression and exploitation. She suggests that men created patriarchal societies to compensate for alienation from reproduction and that appropriating the reproductive fruits of women became a common way for men to interact with the world. Marriage and the privatisation of women within the family were the primary forms of this appropriation, through which men could appropriate the surplus value generated by women’s reproductive labour and their children. She also argues that women in pre-capitalist times were excluded from social production. Still, as in any exploitative class relationship, women’s labour is appropriated and exploited today, especially the fruits of their reproductive labour. The Marxist feminist view of the irreplaceable role of women in the intergenerational transition due to their biological structure, i.e., the innate instinct of ‘motherhood’ as a mother, does not explain the oppression of women in all reproductive labour. Marxist feminism seeks to explore the different aspects of women’s alienation in the various forms of reproductive labour.

3. Back in the Family

To further analyse the relationship between women and the reproduction of labour, Peggy Morton delineates the public and private spheres, starting from within the household, to analyse the position of the household in capitalist production. The family is an economic unit that maintains and reproduces labour. Its task is to maintain the existing labour force in the production and to produce the next generation to participate in it. She then argues that women are not only fully involved in producing and reproducing labour but also play an essential role in giving the next generation the necessary skills and values to participate in the production. Morton realised that women had an irreplaceable role within the family and were forced out of social production to ensure the integrity of capitalist production.

Scholars have also attempted to explain the position of women in all social forms from a historical materialist perspective, such as Nancy Chodorow, who has proposed the role of the “mother’s job”, describing it as a social institution, one that exists in all human social forms. Because of the “seemingly natural link between women’s fertility and ability to nurse and their responsibility to care for children, and because of the unique human need for long-term care during childhood, women’s work as mothers is taken for granted.” (Chodorow, 1979) On this premise, the gender system was established, in which the family gradually became a unit outside social production. Women were confined within the reproduction of labour, within the private sphere of the family, and thus lost their authority within the public sphere associated with social production.

As the women's emancipation movement flourished, women in the mid to late twentieth century fought for the right to participate in social production. However, they still had to return to the domestic sphere because of childbirth and breastfeeding. In this context, women were forced to leave the production process in the public sphere and to take on the upbringing of children because they had to complete the intergenerational part of the reproduction of labour. Still, since the reproduction of labour took place within the family and was only responsible for the family in the private sphere, women were forced to leave the production process in the public sphere and to take on the upbringing of children, which became a responsibility that took place within the private sphere. The "motherhood" of the child is then a "maternal duty" to be performed by the mother alone. However, the root cause of female alienation cannot be attributed solely to the reproduction of labour within the family, as Lise Vogel argues that although labour reproduction is responsible for women's present predicament, it is not strictly within the family. She suggests that labour reproduction is not a productive process that takes place within the household but rather a way of renewing the owners of labour and that the household is not the only place where labour reproduction is created and sustained, nor is it the only source of socially renewed labour. It is a one-sided understanding of the theory of social reproduction that has led to a single definition of the concept of the family. That is, the family is not the site, let alone the source, of the alienation of women in the context of social reproduction.

4. Women's Responsibilities—Domestic Work

An examination of the changing role of women within the family reveals that domestic work plays a vital role in the process of female alienation. However, the nature of domestic work remains strictly debatable, as it can be a part of the reproduction of material goods as much as it can be a part of the reproduction of labour.

Mitchell explores the position of women in production, arguing that under the combined influence of the capitalist system and patriarchy, women were excluded from the domestic sphere. On this basis, the domestic work performed by women within the domestic sphere was not considered productive. It, therefore, was not considered by capitalist society to be part of the process of reproduction of material goods, which directly led to the neglect of women's role in the reproduction of material goods and, therefore, to their subordination. Margaret Benston endorsed that women were not required to have any unique relationship with the means of production. Defining domestic work as a form of production, Benston suggests that reproductive labour, such as housework and the socialisation of children, is equally productive. In capitalist societies, however, it is not usually considered 'real work' because the fruits of reproductive labour 'neither participate in trade nor enter the market' (Benston, 1997), and women, therefore, become a group of people who work outside the commodity economy and whose work does not generate monetary value and is therefore not considered to be productive. In contrast to Mitchell's production perspective, Benston places the study of the household directly in the context of reproduction, explicitly suggesting that women's domestic work is a guarantee of the

successful reproduction of the means of subsistence in the sense that each household constitutes a separate unit of production regarded as domestic work and child-rearing, and that men and women within the household should be equal in their participation in reproductive labour. The family should be similar in its participation in reproduction. However, Bengston, who was heavily influenced by the women's movement, pointed out that in the vast majority of households, domestic work was the responsibility of the woman, who had to combine her reproductive work with her socially productive work, and that the exploitation and oppression of women as mothers was therefore evident.

Aware of the fact that domestic work is an integral part of the reproduction of the means of subsistence, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, through her contribution to the women's liberation movement, not only detailed the injustices suffered by women in the reproduction of material goods but also argued that "we are forced to take a second job outside the home, to take more low-paying jobs, then our alternative to isolation and getting paid is to fight socially for wages" (Costa, 1997). To construct a theory that could guide the women's liberation movement, Costa points out that the role of the family as the basic unit within different social formations is directly related to society's mode of production. In capitalist societies, the family is the unit that reproduces the means of subsistence as well as the production of a particular commodity, labour, and women create use not only value but also surplus value in the reproduction of material goods, but the bourgeoisie pays wages to the husbands in proletarian families to appropriate the surplus value of women. Gail Rubin also argues that, as domestic work is not paid for, women's labour in the domestic sphere contributes to capitalists' maximisation of surplus value. Alison Jaggar, based on this sober analysis and summary of the position of women in reproduction, argues that women are "particularly prominent in three features of reproductive labour" (Jaggar, 1985): firstly, most reproductive labour is performed by women, both in the home and in the public sphere Firstly, most reproductive labour is performed by women, both in the home and in the public sphere; secondly, it is often low or even unpaid; and finally, the value created by reproductive labour is meagre compared to other productive labour. Jaggar establishes that the reproduction process of material goods, which does not produce value in its own right as social production does, places the women involved in it in a rightly subordinate position.

In short, women reproduce not only the means of subsistence but also the labour force in domestic work, allowing it to renew itself and alternate from generation to generation, thus allowing for the complete reproduction of capitalist productivity. The idea of paid domestic work, while attempting to provide a strategic guide to women's emancipation, would commodify the social relations of the family and implicitly conceal the alienation of women as mothers to the "mother's job" in the form of wage payments.

5. A Reserve Army of Labour

In capitalist societies where the bourgeoisie owns the means of production, proletarian women have taken on a more significant share of socially reproductive labour, which has been undervalued. Patricia Connally does not begin her analysis directly with women's participation in reproductive labour but

suggests that women, as a numerically powerful reserve army of labour, cannot escape being oppressed in the reproduction of material goods. She first argues for the inevitability of a reserve army of women labourers, as “the reserve labour army is both an inevitable product of the capitalist accumulation process and a necessary condition for it to occur.” (Connally, 1983) Moreover, since a reserve army of labour is essential for capitalism to maintain its production and reproduction, we can only explain the historical and empirical reality of married women as a reserve army of labour if we expand the concept of a reserve army from the abstract to the more concrete level. At various times in history, women have never actually been far from capitalist production, despite being engaged in activities that appear unrelated to social production, i.e. reproduction. At other times, they were purged from the labour force when they were no longer needed and re-invested entirely in reproduction. This precarious situation results from capitalism’s efforts to keep social reproduction running steadily.

Martha E. Gimenez returns her attention to classic Marxist literature. After a close reading of classic Marxist texts such as *Capital*, she again emphasises that it is the production that determines reproduction that leads to the subordination of women. “In a capitalist system, the mode of production determines the mode of reproduction. This concept is not a form of economism or economic reductionism, but a structural understanding of the macro-process and complex network of the relationship between men and women.” (Gimenez, 2005) In Jiménez’s theory, the capitalist mode of production is a mode of production that consists of the accumulation of capital rather than aiming to satisfy the needs of the people. The subordination of reproduction to production, which implies the satisfaction of human needs and the requirements of future generations of workers, makes it imperative for capitalism to complete this reproduction process at a controlled minimum cost, with women being the ones who are duly sacrificed in the process. When Marxist feminism explores women’s issues at the level of the reproduction of material goods, it is generally accepted that because women’s reproductive labour is not considered productive, women’s contributions are disregarded. The surplus value created in reproduction is exploited. In social reproduction, the surplus value created by women as a reserve of labour and a significant participant in reproduction is used by the bourgeoisie. Still, the wages paid by the bourgeoisie to the husbands of the proletarian families conceal this and transfer the class conflict to the family, as if the birth of the “mother’s job” was pure. This makes the root of the problem of female oppression even more invisible, as it is due to inter-gender oppression.

6. Discussion

In the later stages of the second wave of women’s liberation movements, the tendency of women’s liberation movements everywhere to weaken in terms of both scale and quality, and the growing call for women’s movements to dismantle gender hierarchies due to the influence of radicalism and postmodernism, Marxist feminism began to analyse the essence of women’s exploitation in the reproduction of labour, emphasising that the study of women’s issues should be situated in the context of overall social reproduction and that isolating the problem to gender differences leads to gender

antagonism. The study of the problem has to take the overall social reproduction as its primary context while isolating the problem to gender differences leads to gender antagonism. It is through gender antagonism that the capitalist system conceals the essence of its exploitation of women in reproducing the surplus value of labour, which is the key to the decline of the women's movement.

Looking back at Western Marxist feminism's examination of women's oppression from the perspective of labour reproduction, some scholars have overlooked the fact that under the capitalist mode of production, the direct producers themselves have nothing to do with the gender of the labour force, but rather the intergenerational alternation of labour. Women are the natural bearers of the intergenerational alternation of labour. The ruling class does not want the female labour force as a direct producer to interfere with production in the short term by participating in the intergenerational alternation of labour. Still, it needs to maintain the reproduction of labour for a long time, so there is a subtle but sharp contradiction between the short-term need to produce and the long-term need to reproduce. However, women did not gain sufficient status as a result. Still, they had to depend on the men in the family due to the decline in their labour power resulting from their full participation in the reproduction of labour. However, due to the lack of a systematic analysis of theories of reproduction and the absence of a historical materialist perspective, Marxist feminism does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the oppression of women at the level of labour reproduction, failing to realise that although women's role in intergenerational alternation is irreplaceable, intergenerational alternation is not the only component of labour reproduction and that women's subordinate position in labour reproduction is. The subordination of women in the reproduction of labour is a choice made by the capitalist system to ensure the smooth reproduction of labour and to maximise the exploitation of surplus value.

With the advent of the twenty-first century, the second wave of women's emancipation movements in the West is coming to an end, and the oppression of women in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production is becoming more acute. In the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation, as Bonnie Fox points out, mothers have played a central role in preparing their 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 used this ideology to secure its domination over the proletariat. However, Marxist feminism is not all about the influence of patriarchy; Martha Jimenez suggests that in a social formation where capitalism is the dominant mode of production, where the mode of production determines the social organisation, as well as the mode of human reproduction, the reproduction of exploitative relations, deprives a large proportion of proletarian workers (both men and women) of access to well-paid jobs at an ideological level so that their ability to reproduce themselves and Their ability to reproduce themselves and to carry out intergenerational alternation is severely impaired. Bourgeois subordination is perpetuated from generation to generation in capitalist relations of production and reproduction.

To maintain domination and continue to conceal contradictions, the bourgeoisie wants to reproduce the subordination of women within the family, using the ideology of patriarchy to entrench this pattern to

achieve its exploitative aims. The analysis of the overall context of social reproduction shows that women are not oppressed purely based on their biological sex but instead based on the capitalist mode of production and the subordination of reproduction and production in which the gender hierarchy is a macro-component of social formations. Under these conditions, ‘motherhood’, an instinctive nature, is alienated into the “mother’s job”. Even though the current policies for women’s living conditions are becoming more and more friendly, this does not conceal the alienation of women in this day and age, and the ideological oppression and exploitation of women as mothers have not diminished. This has led to a sad situation in which women are called great mothers when required to sacrifice.

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