

The Feminised Labour of Care - Social Reproduction under Capitalism

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Our presentation will be broken up into two parts. My analysis centres around what capitalism is, and how it operates. I then go on to discuss social reproduction. Cait's presentation focuses on colonialism in Aotearoa, and the great witch hunts in medieval Europe. Each of our research relies on the other's, and should not be heard or read as separate pieces.

Patriarchy and capitalism... Two class structures which work together to doubly oppress women.¹ Capitalism universally exploits all workers, paying us less than the value we produce in the workplace. And, patriarchy systematically privileges men and oppresses women, historically excluding some women from the workforce altogether, or paying those who were included substantially less than the male wage.² A study completed by the UN found that women employed in full-time work earned up to 30% less than their male equivalents in the same profession.³ The gender pay gap is an obvious indicator of gender bias operating in a professional context. It clearly shows that women's work is undervalued, and as a result, we are underpaid. 30% less across a lifetime really adds up.

The pay gap is not the only way in which we are degraded in capitalist societies. We also experience violence. Gendered violence runs rampant, in our workplace, in our social lives,

¹ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 12.

² Fraser, "After the Family Wage," 592.

³ United Nations Statistics Division, "*The World's Women 2015*."

and in the home. Aotearoa has the highest rate of family and intimate partner violence in the OECD.⁴ We know that family and intimate partner violence is a gendered phenomenon, that the victim of this violence is overwhelmingly female.⁵ High levels of violence are generally associated with poorer countries, or countries in civil war.⁶ Aotearoa is a pretty wealthy country, which has not experienced civil war since the colonial period. So, this level of family and intimate partner violence is appalling. The form sexism takes in this country is extremely serious and must be addressed. What is it about Aotearoa which allows this form of violence to perpetuate and even flourish? In addition to our unsettling rate of family and intimate partner violence, we have equally disturbing rates of sexual violence. In this country, one in three women will experience sexual assault in their lives.⁷ The Metoo movement, and closer to home, the Russell McVeagh scandal shows us that women are regularly predated on within their workplace.⁸ And not only does this sexist activity exist, but it has existed for years without serious intervention. Sexual assault is so rampant that is almost seen as ‘a right of passage’, or something that women themselves must work to avoid.⁹ We see that through the plethora of self-defence courses being offered to women by public institutions and hardly any, if none anti-sexism or anti-rape workshops being run for men. As women, we experience many forms of gender based degradation in our everyday lives. After literally centuries of campaigning for feminist rights and organising against the shackles of sexism, we still experience many different forms of gendered oppression. So why is sexism so bloody

⁴ Leask, “Family Violence: 525,000 New Zealanders harmed every year.”

⁵ hooks, *feminist theory from margin to centre*, 122.

⁶ Abdo, *Captive Revolution: Palestinian Women’s Anti-colonial Struggle within the Israeli Prison System*, 29.

⁷ Leask, “Family Violence.”

⁸ MacLennan, “Why the review into Russell McVeagh ended up as a cop-out.”

⁹ hooks, *feminist theory*, 120.

rampant? And how is it linked to capitalism? The first half of my presentation today will be centred around what capitalism is and how it operates. I will be drawing on an area of analysis called political economy. Political economy is a discipline which analyses how politics and economics intersect, and argues that the economy could never be separate from politics. My analysis is largely drawn from Karl Marx. The second half of my presentation will be around Marxist feminism, and women's work.

So, capitalism. Where does one begin with such a complicated concept? It's a word that has been thrown around a lot recently. Pamela Anderson thinks it sucks, and Winston Peters wants to put a 'friendly face on it again'. So what does this all mean? And what exactly is capitalism? To answer this question I will be explaining five of Marx's concepts: primitive accumulation, the commodity, class antagonism, labour-power, and the labour theory of value.

Primitive accumulation is a concept Marx uses to describe the establishment of the conditions necessary for capitalism to occur.¹⁰ It describes the working classes' mass dispossession from their land and other resources during the historical processes of colonialism, and resource privatisation. Primitive accumulation forces people into the capitalist wage market, by stripping them of their means to reproduce themselves outside of it.¹¹ This generalises exchange relations across society: access to food, land and shelter, are now mediated in new ways through financial exchange, which creates a mass of individuals with nothing to

¹⁰ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, 873.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, 875.

exchange but their labour-power. So the removal of people's access from the means of which they can reproduce themselves is a precursor to capitalism.

In order for capitalism to succeed in Aotearoa, Pakeha colonisers violently expropriated land from Maori.¹² Stripped of their land, and therefore their means to survive, Maori were forced into the Pakeha labour market. Primitive accumulation and colonisation show us that during capitalism's implementation, people were forced into the exchange relation, to sell the only thing they had left to sell: their capacity to work. Capitalism was not a 'natural' development in human society, as it is commonly understood to be. The concept of primitive accumulation shows us that capitalism was violently implemented over centuries, and people all over the globe resisted this implementation through protests and wars. As Marx states in *Capital* Volume 1 "Capital comes [in] dripping from head to toe, from every pore, in blood and dirt".¹³ So capitalism was not a 'natural progression' in human life, but a violent one which was forced on people through brutal means. Capitalism is simply another kind of class society.

Wealth inequalities in modern societies are close to aristocratic levels. A report done by Oxfam shows that in Aotearoa, the richest two men in the country own more wealth than the bottom 30%.¹⁴ So in a population of roughly 4.8 million, two men own more wealth than the poorest 1.4 million people combined. How did this stark a divide in wealth come to be?

Marx's concept of class antagonism gives us valuable insight into this wealth divide. He

¹² Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*, 186.

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, 926.

¹⁴ Oxfam, "Nz's two richest men own more wealth than the bottom poorest 30%."

argued that capitalism is a fundamentally parasitic mode of production, which accumulates wealth by exploiting a large underclass.¹⁵ This underclass is called the working class, or as Marx refers to it, the proletariat. Marx understood capitalism as a division between two distinct groups, the capitalist class and the working class. He emphasised this distinction, there are no classes in between. Further, the ‘middle class’ myth is used to distract the working class masses from our concrete reality. If you wake up in the morning and think, I need to go to work today, otherwise I will have no money to pay for the things I need to survive, you are a worker. Workers sell their capacity to work. Marx called this working capacity ‘labour-power’.¹⁶ Alternatively, if you wake up in the morning and do not have to go to work, because you own stuff you will get more stuff - then you are a capitalist. An example of this is that you own a factory which has workers producing goods for you, or you have rental properties from which you harvest income. Pure capitalists do not have to labour to survive. Instead, they simply live off the profit that is produced by other people’s work. How can this be so if we commonly think that capitalist societies are ‘free’? Because freedom under capitalism is conceived of as a very narrow kind of freedom, the freedom to participate in exchange on the private market. The freedom to control one’s own life, or decide what is meaningful in it, is subordinate to this exchange. Let’s go into this.

What constitutes wealth under capitalism? Stuff. The more stuff you have, the wealthier you are. Under capitalism, our basic human needs such as food, shelter, and water are turned into things that we need to purchase. This is a relationship to human need has not always been the case. This point will be elaborated on by Cait shortly. Marx states that “The wealth of

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 874.

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 270.

societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities.”¹⁷ What is a commodity? On the one hand, a commodity is an external object which satisfies a human need, want or desire.¹⁸ I need a hamburger, as I’m hungry. I want some new stationary, so my writing looks better. I desire a new pair pants from Kate Sylvester, which will make me appear fashionable to others. Often our wants or desires are simply a craving for social recognition. However, this does not make the desire any less real, and in need of a useful object to fulfil it. This usefulness of a thing, is part of which makes it a commodity. The other key aspect of a commodity is that it can only be accessed by exchange, or an act of purchase. In capitalism things are produced for their exchangeability, not because they are useful. This is because via the process of exchange, profit is accumulated. Capitalists must attain profit in order to make their businesses sustainable. So what matters to the capitalist, and what matters to Kate Sylvester is not just your desire for her fashion label. What matters is your ability to exchange for it, that is your capacity to pay for the pair of pants you desire with money.

So where does all this profit come from? Marx argues that it relates to the value of a commodity, which is different from its price. Value is something different from what we might ordinarily think, and we must spend a moment on it to understand where it comes from. Value is synonymous with what Marx calls socially necessary labour time. This is the average amount of human labour required to produce a particular good in a society. Let’s take the example of two commodities with different examples of labour-time it takes to create them. Firstly, a crepe. What labour-time is required to end up with a crepe? Wheat must be

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 125.

¹⁸ Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*, 16.

sown, grown, gathered and turned into flour. Flour must be packaged and transported. A crepe mixture needs to be made. Chickens must be fed. Eggs must be laid, collected, packaged, transported and cracked into the mixture of the flour. Lastly, the crepe must be fried. Let's contrast this with a burger. This requires a larger amount of labour time to create it, as it has the bun, lettuce, cheese, meat and sauces. All of these have their own process of being worked on by humans. So, the labour-time expended on a burger is larger than the labour-time expended on a crepe. This is reflected in the price, or exchange-value of these commodities. So, where does the value of a commodity come from? It comes from the average amount of human labour expended to produce this commodity in a particular society. The big difference in price between a fancy crepe and a fancy burger, does not just come from supply and demand as it is understood to be by mainstream capitalist economists. Value does not just magically appear in thin air when goods are exchanged on the free market. It comes from what is socially necessary to create the supply of these goods. Value comes from human labour. The labour theory of value recognises that the source of all value produced in capitalist societies is human labour. Capitalists employ workers. Labour-power (the capacity to work) produces profit. The capitalist pays the worker less than the value they produce. This is the necessary condition for profit, and is fundamentally how all capitalist industries are sustained. Thus, all profit is derived from the exploitation of human labour.

So that's capitalism done... Now onto Marxist feminism! In its most basic terms, Marxism argues that capitalism is a system which exploits the working class masses, while privileging the few (capitalists). Feminism is an international movement to end sexism and sexist oppression in order to create equality for all people.¹⁹ So.. Marxist feminism analyses how

¹⁹ hooks, *feminist theory*, 5.

capitalism and patriarchy work together as structures of dispossession which oppress women, trans and non-binary people. Those of you who are familiar with the concept of patriarchy will know that patriarchy also subjugates many men, however in a way that is less acute than women.²⁰ A core concept in Marxist Feminist theory is social reproduction. Social reproduction is a term coined by Marxists feminists to describe the activities required for human beings to reproduce themselves. The way that this reproductive process occurs is intrinsically social, that is, it relies on individuals cooperating with each other, either in a direct or indirect way. A simple example: in a village, some people fetch the water, and others tend to the eel traps in the river. Although these individuals are completing separate tasks, they are cooperating. It is only because some people fetch the water, that the eel farmers do not thirst. This is a simple division of labour, or individuals producing in a cooperative way. This cooperation is not necessarily visible to the workers completing their divided tasks, but is nonetheless essential to a productive society.

So, the word social means cooperative or inter-dependent, dependent on each other. What does reproduction mean? If production means the creation of something, re-production means to re-create something. Let's put these together to understand the concept of social reproduction. Human life is reproduced through cooperation across a society, reproduction is social and relies on others. So the study of social reproduction is the study of how this reproduction occurs. As discussed above, we now understand that under the capitalist mode of production, workers produce commodities. Social reproduction theory asks: who produces the workers, and what work must occur in order for them to be reproduced?²¹ My analysis is

²¹ Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 2.

drawn from Italian Marxist Feminists, which involved feminist academics such as Silvia Federici, Maria Mies, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James. I also draw on the work of Shanti Daellenbach and Tithi Bhattacharya.

The social reproduction of workers for capitalism, then, includes a variety of activities resulting in both the day-to-day subsistence and the generational reproduction of workers. Workers must exist in both the short and long term for capital to continue profiting off them. As discussed earlier, labour-power is a necessary component of the production process. Because we are mortal, not mechanized, certain tasks must be completed for us to be able to work, or to have labour-power. On a short-term basis, social reproduction is the regeneration of the worker's body, via the process of commodity consumption. Basic human needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, must be met relatively frequently for the worker to continue living. Under capitalism, however, these things that meet our needs exist in the form of commodities. In order to access these use-values, or useful things, we have no choice but to exchange money for them. So, our reproduction as workers relies heavily on an income, or the wage. And how do we get access to the wage? Participate in waged labour. So, in order to reproduce ourselves on a short-term basis, we have no choice but to work for wages.

On a generational basis, reproductive labour includes pregnancy, lactation, child-raising, and the reproduction of labour-power through activity such as agricultural work, education, and eldercare.²² The activity of social reproduction firmly centres around self-preservation: the maintenance and preservation of human life. In capitalist societies, socially reproductive labour is generally excluded from the wage relation. Because this work does not contribute to

²² Daellenbach, "Feminism, Finance and Social Reproduction," 710.

the market economy as directly or immediately as waged labour does, it is deemed valueless according to labour market.²³ Yet social reproduction is the form of labour *most basically* required for society to function, because it is the work which *unpins all economic life*. So how could this work be valueless?

If we reflect historically on social reproduction, we can see that the burden of social reproduction is disproportionately imposed on women, migrants, and indigenous people.²⁴ It is no coincidence that capitalism exploits those most vulnerable in society. Marxist feminist Silvia Federici argues that this vulnerability was engineered specifically for the purposes of exploitation through violent processes such as slavery, land enclosure, and other colonial methods. Paid forms of socially reproductive labour do exist, such as care-work for example childcare, eldercare, healthcare, and paid domestic work for example, cooking and cleaning. However, this type of work is overwhelmingly unpaid: it is the ‘miscounted’ work that capitalist societies rely on to optimise levels of exploitation and thereby fatten the profit margins of those in positions of power.²⁵

Families are one of the main sites of social reproduction.²⁶ Familial units under capitalism predominantly exist in the form of the nuclear family: consisting of a heterosexual couple, and some children. Families, across history, have not always exist in this form. This concept of a family is not tran-historical, but is particular to the capitalist mode of production.

Families reproduce labour power in both the immediate and generational sense. On a daily

²³ Bezanson, *Social reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neoliberalism*, 175.

²⁴ Daellenbach, “Feminism, Finance and Social Reproduction,” 710.

²⁵ Jones, “The value of work and the future of the left,” 161.

²⁶ Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women Toward a Unitary Theory*, 145.

basis, the family allows for the regeneration of multiple workers labour-power, through the provision of meals, shelter and other care work. In a generational sense, the family produces new workers to replace the old in the labour market. The name commonly used to give voice to the socially reproductive work which occurs within the context of a family is ‘domestic labour’. Those who have raised a family will surely know the importance of this work. However, domestic work is not recognised by our government as a significant process. We know this as domestic labour is predominantly unpaid, that is, those who complete this labour are not compensated for it with a wage. In our economy the wage is used to indicate the significance of our work to the others, and to ourselves. The wage is the main identifier of work, as work.²⁷

Today, women are still doing the bulk of the unpaid labour which keeps society running. A 2018 study completed in Australia showed that women living in the state of Victoria do 63.2% of the unpaid labour in the home, which is about 1.7 x the unpaid work of men.²⁸ When the Victorian Government was asked to estimate the worth of this labour, they put a sum of \$205 billion Australian dollars on it (that’s about 255 billion in NZ dollars). This data was collected by the Australian government as a part of their approach to addressing the gender pay gap, and more generally gender inequality in Australia.²⁹ So, as a result, we can conclude a worth can indeed be placed on women’s unpaid labour in capitalist societies, however, the aforementioned study completed in Australia shows us this. However, under capitalism, even though this work is extremely valuable, it is still not allocated a wage. We

²⁷ Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 39.

²⁸ Yu, “Women’s unpaid work is worth billions of dollars.”

²⁹ Yu, “Women’s unpaid work.”

must critically reflect on *why* this work is persistently unwaged, and how this is links to female oppression under capitalism.

Another name for domestic labour, historically, has been ‘women’s work’.³⁰ This is because women have generally been understood to be more biologically disposed to raise children, do the dishes, and cook meals than men. There is nothing inherent to domestic work which requires a female body, yet, this work has been unequally imposed on women.³¹ This work has been, and continues to be naturalised, in that biological narratives are used to rationalise why this work has been disproportionately forced on one gender. Having a female body, or a uterus, does not necessarily make you a better nurturer than a man. So, the deep seated assumption that women are inherently better nurturers of children than men is false.

Particular women are indeed better carers for children than men. But this is because of the expectations of mothering and domestic care that are forced on women without their consent. This is what we would call processes of socialisation under patriarchy. Women’s socialisation includes being pressured into performing particular roles, such as dressing and speaking in particular ways, monitoring their appearance, trying to balance sexuality with bodily safety, and so on. These socialisation processes occur as early as birth: girls pink, boys blue. Girls dolls, boys guns. This is not only imposed on women, but internalised by them. As such, women learn to judge themselves and each other against these expectations. The men in their lives judge them as well.

³⁰ Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” 99.

³¹ Daellenbach, “Feminism, Finance and Social Reproduction,” 714.

What social reproduction shows us is that capitalism exploits women *far* more than it exploits men. In feminising unpaid work like domestic labour, capitalism is able to impose this work on women. In turn, the value produced by this work appears elsewhere in the capitalist economy, and is absorbed by others participating in the waged workforce. Federici argues that if women's unpaid labour was fully compensated, the capitalist economy would become unstable and eventually collapse. Therefore, the gendering of this unpaid work, and the degradation of women in general under capitalism, is necessary to a profitable economy. Because we are degraded, our situation of completing 65% of society's unpaid labour is accepted, and unquestioned.³² Overt and subtle forms of violence devalue a woman's worth from an early age, and we internalise sexist ideologies. Because we are subject to domestic and sexual violence, our potential to revolt and resist this subordinate situation is jeopardised.³³

To reiterate, then, domestic violence towards women, female sexual assault, the gender pay gap, hyper-sexualisation of female bodies, and feminised unpaid work are *not* separate phenomena in our society. These interlocking forms of oppression function together to strengthen men's place in the patriarchy and marginalise the place of women. These instances of structural violence create the conditions for a profitable economy. Patriarchy and capitalism are interdependent class structures, that is, they rely on each other to function. We cannot break out of one while the other still exists. Let's talk about how to do this in the second part of this evening - the consciousness raising session.

³² Yu, "Women's unpaid work."

³³ Abdo, *Captive Revolution: Palestinian Women's Anti-colonial Struggle within the Israeli Prison System*, 14.

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