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A RESPONSE TO MEG LUXTON'S
"MARXIST FEMINISM
AND ANTICAPITALISM"

Susan Ferguson

Perhaps it is the nature of the Marxist Left that its legacy be both amorphous and contentious. After all, so many people drop in and out of it over time, debates regularly flare up and die down without much resolution, and our groups and activities are generally small and scattered. Today, only a few journals, organizations, and books exist as spaces in which we can disentangle the threads of our history and present, offering some form or definition. And that task, as Luxton's contribution shows, is important. In revisiting the Marxist-feminist story, capturing the vibrant, multivalent character of organizing and protest, and provoking a discussion of its contours in the pages of this journal, she helps to cultivate what Alan Sears calls "a learning Left."¹ Such a Left should neither dismiss casually the incredibly significant achievements of Marxist feminism, nor should it mount a wholesale defense of them. Rather, it should draw on the tradition's valuable resources, identify its gaps and flaws, and develop new ideas and modes of organizing suited to today's realities. My contribution to this forum adopts this spirit of critical re-evaluation, focusing on certain unresolved questions of theory. I do so not to deny or overlook the positive lessons and resources Luxton stresses, but to suggest that attending to these questions can strengthen and help to reinvigorate Marxist-feminist politics today.

Luxton addresses two intertwined aspects of the Marxist-feminist legacy: its political activism and its theoretical advances. And while I hesitate to pry these apart, I am also wary of what seems at times like a tendency to conflate them. Luxton's emphasis on the radical and inclusive political goals and organizational forms is a crucial part of the story that is often forgotten

or neglected. It disrupts what Lise Vogel describes as the linear “triumphalism” of the broader hegemonic feminist narrative—a story that begins with the movement’s supposed misguided and narrow concern with white, middle-class, straight women, which then gives way to a more enlightened stance that includes issues concerning race, colonialism, sexualities, poverty, and disability.² As Luxton argues, in erasing or caricaturing history we silence and deny the voices and efforts of working-class, immigrant, and Indigenous women, among others, that have always been part of this history, at least in Canada. We also fail to grasp the ways in which a positive vision of a socialist alternative that is committed to a fully liberated society can inspire and strengthen the solidarity needed to not only oppose capitalism today, but overturn it.

Marxist feminists did advance precisely such a vision. But their theoretical footing and analysis have often fallen short of that vision, largely because of a preoccupation with the ways in which gender and class are internally related—a theoretical orientation that tended to sideline issues of race, sexuality, and other oppressions. While they eventually acknowledged and began to account for more diverse experiences in their empirical work, Marxist-feminist conceptualizations and explanations often did as much to obscure as they did to reveal the full complexity of social relations. The tradition is marked, in other words, by a disjuncture between the breadth of its political goals and organizational modes on one hand, and the limits of its theoretical apparatus on the other.

Those limits are not insurmountable. I agree with Luxton about the enormous and exciting potential of social-reproduction feminism in working out an integrative and transformative account of society, but see this project very much as a work in progress. I have little doubt that she would agree with that sentiment at some level. Her essay, after all, calls for us to build on the tradition’s accomplishment. But I’m less certain precisely where Luxton finds the framework to be insufficient, in part because she often slides from a brief comment on its analytic contours into a celebration of its vision and politics. In assessing and reclaiming our past, it is important to emphasize that Marxist feminists advanced a vision of an antiracist, antipatriarchal socialism. But if our intention is to use the past to inform

the present, we need to view that past more critically and forcefully acknowledge the limits of what we accomplished—to identify where our theories are incomplete and work with today’s activists and scholars to fill in the gaps. Only then can our theory and analysis catch up to our vision and practice (and in so doing, lead to new practices and theories).³

Marxist-feminist theory is hardly a seamless tradition. Too often, as Luxton rightly emphasizes, it is reduced to one or another more or less narrowly held position, such as dual systems theory. Luxton proposes using the term more broadly, to refer to analyses and activism based on historical-materialist principles that “[theorize and develop] politics that put women’s oppression and liberation, class politics, anti-imperialism, anti-racism and issues of gender identity and sexuality together at the heart of the agenda.”⁴ Such a definition aptly captures that which many Marxist-feminist theorists have striven and sometimes claimed to achieve, but the tradition’s actual achievements are considerably more modest. Even its most compelling theoretical contribution the current of social-reproduction feminism that Luxton helped forge—has, until recently, been relatively silent on the systemic relationship of anything but gender and class.

This is not to say that those working within a social reproduction framework have not attended to other oppressions. There is a growing body of work that explores racialized social reproductive practices and institutions (some of which appears in a collection of essays Luxton co-edits.)⁵ Much of that work, however, comprises rich empirical studies aimed at revealing evidence of interlocking oppressions of social-reproductive practices and institutions. The theoretical work of explaining how and why capitalism’s very existence involves racism, and how and why racism takes the specific form it does under capitalism—that is, the theorization of a systematically racialized patriarchal capitalism—lags behind. I’ve suggested elsewhere that the retreat of radical social and labour movements combined with the scholarly turn to postmodernism led many to abandon the search for such broad socio-material explanations at about the same time that Black feminism’s critique was gaining traction.⁶ Whatever the explanation, the theoretical sidelining of these questions contrasts sharply with the vibrant debates and discussions in the 1970s and 1980s in which Marxist feminists grappled with defining

the internal relationship between capitalism and gender oppression.⁷

Luxton's account downplays the theoretical gaps and lags, emphasizing instead the political commitment in organizational structures and movement campaigns to overcoming all oppressions that typified early Marxist feminism. As important as it is to set the historical record straight about the nature of the organizations, protests, and goals of activists, none of the above necessarily means that Marxist feminists had an adequate or compelling explanation of the ways in which capitalism worked to reproduce and shape multiple oppressions in concert with class exploitation. In fact, that very question animated debates in academia and activist circles, and led to what Enakashi Dua calls "the third wave of anti-racist feminist writing" in the 1990s.⁸ Numerous contributors to this third wave—Dua singles out Himani Bannerji's 1995 book *Thinking Through*, and Daiva Stasiulis's 1990 essay "Theorizing Connections: Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class" as representative—are critical of the political-economic approach out of which social reproduction feminism emerged. They consider that the paradigm is "marred by theoretical limitations which make the interconnections between racism and sexism invisible."⁹

Luxton is not oblivious to this critique. Marxist feminists, she notes helpfully, "struggled to find a theoretical language to contest the power of prevailing assumptions and to reveal the minutiae of subordination."¹⁰ But neither does she pause long to consider it. Having acknowledged it, her narrative quickly shifts to discussing a different struggle: that of women grappling with the sexist ideas and experiences inside socialist organizations. She concludes the section with a further reminder of the inclusive political aspirations of the period: "Working collectively, [Marxist-feminists] struggled to learn how to put into practice their anti-racist commitments, their goals of cross-class collaboration, and their efforts to build links with Indigenous and international and transnational struggles."¹¹ In this passage, the quest for a theoretical language merits only a passing mention.

Earlier in the text, Luxton offers a brief but more considered discussion. She notes that British and Canadian Marxist feminists incorporated a critique of racialization only after being challenged by antiracist feminists. Their focus on class and gender reflects place- and time-bound "norms and practices

relating to . . . inequality.” Although such “uneven developments” in Marxist feminism can “invite productive exchanges,” she warns that “they can also reinforce misunderstandings and political differences, undermining solidarity among activists from different places.”¹² It would be helpful—and would go some way in distancing this latter comment from the old Marxist Left saw that feminism is a distraction from the real (e.g., class) struggle—were Luxton to specify how the antiracist critique was “productive.” Similarly, her explanation that the geographic, social, and historical location of political activism produces the “unevenness” of analysis in the first place requires elaboration and clarification. It begs an important question: are there not (at least) two localities in a white settler, colonial Canada—that of white privilege and that of its opposite? If the orientation of Marxist-feminist theorizing to gender but not race is partially explained by our locality in white settler, colonial Canada, do we not need to be extra vigilant and radically rethink the concepts and logics of our theories (as well as our practices)?

To be clear, the problem, as I see it, is not that Luxton discounts racism. Her article argues strenuously for an antiracist, socialist feminism, and her commitment to a politics of solidarity and a fully liberated society is not in doubt. Rather, in my judgment, she too quickly collapses the theoretical and political levels at which Marxist feminism operates—a position that perhaps leaves her open to misinterpretation. Nonetheless, I believe Luxton correctly pins her hopes on the integrative potential of a social-reproduction feminist theory and politics. Its most powerful insight is that the process of capitalist accumulation requires human labour power but does not produce it. As there is no mechanism in the direct labour/capital relation to ensure labour’s daily and generational renewal, it finds ways to organize historically specific embodied subjects—differently gendered and racialized subjects—in and through hierarchically and oppressively structured institutions and practices, such as private households, welfare states, slavery, and global labour markets.

Social-reproduction feminists have theorized the specific gender dynamics of that relation, suggesting that the sociomaterial mechanism in and through which capitalism creates the possibility for, and shapes, women’s oppression

today has to do with the intersection of the biological/historical differentiation of women and men on one hand with capital's impulse to privatize (re)production of labour power on the other. This supplies a sociomaterial grounding from which to explain how and why capitalism is unlikely to sweep away patriarchal relations, and instead regularly reshapes them. But Marxist feminists have yet to develop an equally sophisticated and compelling case for the ways in which the social is a complex and contradictory unity of various oppressive and exploitative logics, practices, and institutions. Some have suggested that racial relations can be partially understood in terms of the geopolitical spatial relations of capitalism; still others offer promising ideas about affect, "second skins," and social reproduction as a way of explaining capitalist sexualities.¹³ Setting the record straight on Marxist-feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s is helpful as these preliminary attempts to renew and complexify it are taken up by a new generation of scholars who also see, and question, the potential of the social reproduction paradigm.¹⁴

Telling stories about the past intended to guide the future is a risky business—not least because so many hands stir the pot of Left history. Yet the anticapitalist Left desperately needs such stories. We need to know how people came together to win struggles, what forces inside their organizations and beyond led to defeat, as well as which ideas helped to clarify and strengthen political action, and what ideas divided and disempowered us. We need these stories not so we can dogmatically hold up a singular model and claim it as the key to the future; quite the opposite. We need to understand the richness, diversity, and open-endedness of history and theory. The point is not to apply the past in some mechanical way to the present, but to engage with it in ways that disrupt easy solutions and presumptions, inspire resistance, and fuel the creativity and boldness required to imagine a different, inclusive, socialist future. While my comments here are critical of what I see as a troublesome conflation of theory and politics, Luxton's account is a welcome antidote to the forgetting and distortions that happen in a period of neoliberal assault and radical retreat. Crucially, it invites us into a broader imaginary—one that holds out the possibility and necessity of engaging with Marxist feminism as a way of moving the anticapitalist Left towards an integrative, transformative politics.

Notes

1. A. Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2014), see especially pp. 14–23 and pp. 108–115.
2. L. Vogel, “Telling Tales: Historians of Our Own Lives,” in Vogel, *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 104. I am struck by the similarity between Luxton’s present intervention and a 1991 article written by Lise Vogel for the *Journal of Women’s History*. Agreeing to act as discussant at the previous year’s Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Vogel was surprised, dismayed, and confounded at the erasure of antiracism, lesbian rights, and anti-imperialist politics in her panellists’ accounts of their forerunners. Women’s history, she argues, neither essentialized women nor ignored difference when it emerged in the 1970s.
3. Despite being in general agreement with Luxton’s account about the Marxist-feminist vision, I will point out that Marxist-feminist practice was not universally inclusive. The theoretical shortcomings meant that, in my admittedly limited experience from the mid- to late-1980s onwards, activists tended to rely on assertion and/or a sort of voluntarist approach to building solidarity—a practice that could and sometimes did alienate those organizing to combat racism, violence against women, and homophobia in our communities. This was partially why, for instance, the socialist-feminist-run International Women’s Day Committee became a highly fractious space in the late 1980s.
4. M. Luxton, “Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism: Reclaiming our History, Reanimating our Politics,” *Studies in Political Economy* 94 (2014), p. 144.
5. K. Bezanson and M. Luxton, (eds.), *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2006).
6. S. Ferguson, “Building on the Strengths of the Socialist Feminist Tradition,” *Critical Sociology* 25 (1999), pp. 1–15. See also S. Ferguson and D. McNally, “Capital, Labour-Power, and Gender-Relations: Introduction to the *Historical Materialism* Edition of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*,” in L. Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. xvii–xl. Vogel sees the rise of cultural feminism as partially responsible, suggesting it “validated women’s lives and gave women agency...[while] it simultaneously shifted scholarly focus away from structural questions of social organization and power” (“Telling Tales,” p. 107).
7. For a small sample of work that advanced and critiqued social reproduction’s analytic language and conceptual apparatus, see B. Fox, (ed.), *Hidden in the Household: Women’s Domestic Labour under Capitalism* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1980); L. Sargent, (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); P. Armstrong and H. Armstrong, *Theorizing Women’s Work* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990).
8. E. Dua, “Introduction: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought: Scratching the Surface of Racism,” in E. Dua and A. Robertson, (eds.), *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1999), p. 18.
9. E. Dua, “Introduction,” p. 17. See also S. Ferguson, “Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race, and Embodied Labor,” *Race, Gender and Class* 15/1–2 (2008), pp. 42–57.
10. Luxton, “Marxist Feminism and Anti-Capitalism,” p. 150. It was less the “minutiae of subordination” than the structural relationships of race, gender, and class that Marxist feminists had difficulty articulating. If we understand experience as always mediated by the social, however, the two are clearly related (see H. Bannerji, “But Who Speaks for Us? Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms,” in H. Bannerji, L. Carty, and K. Delhi, (eds.), *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 67–108).
11. Luxton, “Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism,” p. 152. Not all Marxist feminists endorsed cross-class collaboration (see Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, [1983]).

12. Luxton, "Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism," p. 145.
13. On racism, see I. Bakker and R. Silvey, "Introduction: Social Reproduction and Global Transformations—from the Everyday to the Global," in I. Bakker and R. Silvey, (eds.), *Beyond States and Markets: The Challenges of Social Reproduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Ferguson, "Canadian Contributions." On sexualities, see R. Hennessey, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), A. Sears, "Queer Anti-Capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation?" *Science and Society* 69/1 (2005), pp. 92–112, K. Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), and R. Hennessey, *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
14. The 2014 Toronto Historical Materialism conference included a number of excellent papers by graduate students whose work will undoubtedly reshape the social-reproduction feminist paradigm in coming years (see conference program, available at <<http://hmtoronto.org/>>).