

The inclusion of “sexual services” in social reproduction theory

Catherine Weiss, RMIT University/Université Paris Diderot

Social reproduction theory grew out of the “domestic labour debate” which took place among socialist feminists from the late 1960s. The proponents of this debate understood the activities performed by women within the household as “work” rather than being simply ideological, cultural, or expressive.¹ Women’s unpaid work was politicised and women’s oppression theorised, according to these theorists, in Marxist terms.

Early work in this movement provided important theoretical advances: women’s unpaid household work was conceptualised as productive labour upon which the reproduction of capitalist society depended, and the family was seen as a unit of maintenance and reproduction of labour power. Mariarosa Dalla Costa argued in 1972 that housework produces not just use-values but the commodity of labour power itself, and that housewives are exploited in the strict marxist sense because they produce surplus value.

The domestic labour debate became more and more abstract and complex, and eventually petered out in the late 1970s. After this, some socialist feminists began to gravitate towards “social reproduction theory”, which moved away from a focus on domestic labour *per se* to an analysis of “the daily and generational production and reproduction of labour-power”.² This work remained firmly grounded in marxism, taking the work of Marx and Engels as its starting point.

Lise Vogel’s 1983 book *Marxism and the oppression of women: Toward a unitary theory* is considered a founding text of marxist feminism³ and of social reproduction theory. It remains one of the clearest and most theoretically rigorous examples of this tradition, and as such I will use it as an example.

Marxism and the oppression of women consists of a critical reading of a selection of works by Marx, Engels, and a number of prominent socialist and socialist feminist writers to reveal common characteristics and trends in their arguments. From this reading, Vogel rejects the idea that marxism offers a complete analysis of women’s oppression, but contends that the seeds of a productive theory of women’s oppression can be found in Marx’s writings on social reproduction. She argues that this trend is implicit at times in the work of some other socialist and socialist feminists who wrote on the “woman question”, and that it should be pursued rather than the more dominant “socialist-feminist synthesis”⁴ or dual-systems theory. Dual systems theory argues that class and sex oppression have separate roots.

Vogel argues that socialist feminists understand women’s oppression to consist of social, psychological and ideological aspects arising from a material root, and that marxism has never properly analysed the nature and location of this root. However, she

¹ Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 64.

² Vogel I think

³ Morgane Merteuil, “[Guide de Lecture] Féminisme et Théorie de La Reproduction Sociale,” *Période*, 2017, <http://revueperiode.net/guide-de-lecture-feminisme-et-theorie-de-la-reproduction-sociale/>.

⁴ Vogel p.ix

argues, socialist feminism is constrained by a poor grasp of marxist theory arising in part from the contradictory legacy of socialism on the “woman question”, a vague term used to mean many different things.

Despite her observation that Marx’s work was marred by a consistent naturalism with respect to women, Vogel finds parts of his work useful, and she argues that they provide the foundation for a theory of social reproduction. In her original contribution to social reproduction theory, she refines and develops Marx’s concepts of individual consumption, surplus labour and necessary labour, locating women’s oppression in the needs of the capitalist class to develop strategies to ensure the reproduction of labour power over the long term.

Although Vogel does not address sexuality in her own theory – she only mentions the subject when she is analysing other feminists’ work – her consistent rejection of dual-systems theory approaches helps to understand the way sexuality is introduced into social reproduction theory in cases when authors do address it. Recall that dual-systems approaches formulate sex and class oppression as emerging from different roots. According to such approaches, it is possible to conceive of the oppression of women via their sexuality as not fundamentally or principally linked to the reproduction of capital. In contrast, in social reproduction theory, sexuality is subordinate primarily to the interests of capital. Thus, although Vogel herself does not mention sexuality in her work, she establishes the framework of social reproduction theory in such a way that sexuality must be seen as subordinate to capital.

Silvia Federici’s work is broadly consistent with Vogel’s interpretation of social reproduction theory (though Federici is much more condemnatory of Marx than Vogel – see pp.242-3). In contrast to Vogel’s work, however, Federici’s frequent mentions of sexuality throughout her writing is striking. She defines reproduction as “the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labor are daily reconstituted” (p.25) and she sees sexual activity as part of this, and not necessarily as part of procreation. Like the other activities of reproduction, sexuality has been subordinated to the reproduction of labor power (p.71). For example, she wrote in 1975:

“In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally, and sexually, to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego... It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that... creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible.” (pp.53-54)

For Federici, sexuality under capitalism is portrayed as the compensation, the “other” of work:

“Sexuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process. It is the necessary complement to the routine and regimentation of the workweek. It is a license to ‘go natural,’ to ‘let go,’ so that we can return more refreshed on Monday to our job.” (1975, p.68).

Another social reproduction theorist who includes sexuality in her analysis is Leopoldina Fortunati. Her book *The arcane of reproduction*, first published in Italian in 1981 and in English in 1995, is an attempt to rigorously theorise the nature of “reproductive labour” under capitalism. She sees reproduction under capitalism as made up of two principal “sectors”, which constitute the “backbone of the entire process” (p.17): these are the family and prostitution. Both housework and prostitution are “indirectly waged labor engaged in the reproduction of labor power”. Housework is treated as a “natural force of social labor” (p21), because it is essentialised as something natural and therefore outside of the capitalist sphere of production. Prostitution is treated as an “unnatural force of social labor” (p.21) because it is criminal and therefore also not formally a part of the capitalist sphere of production. Through this exclusion from the capitalist sphere of production, housework and prostitution cost capital nothing, and it is through this that capital can create value. Fortunati’s theory is controversial, and has been frequently criticised by marxists for the way it uses marxist categories.

Fortunati’s detailed treatment of prostitution sets her apart from other social reproduction theorists; Federici, for example, frequently talks about sexual relations within the couple but hardly mentions prostitution at all. Instead, as is typical of such theorists, Federici establishes prostitution as part of reproduction but without theorising it as a distinct institution in itself. Prostituted women and housewives are seen as theoretically equivalent, with prostitution underlying all sexual encounters (Vijayakumar 2015).

For Fortunati, then, social reproduction takes place in the two main sectors of the family and prostitution. The **fundamental labour process** occurring in the family is “the process of production and reproduction of labor power”, and in prostitution is “the specifically sexual reproduction of male labor power”. (p.17) While the sexual reproduction of male labour power also takes place in the family, it is only one of many tasks included in housework, while prostitution is limited to and defined by this task; prostitution supports and complements housework by making up any deficits in the sexual reproduction of male labour power. Capital places prostitution in a secondary position with respect to household reproduction through the mechanism of state repression.

The work of social reproduction theorists such as Vogel, Federici and Fortunati poses many questions and challenges to more mainstream marxist theory, over the nature of what constitutes productive labour, reproductive labour, and value. The inclusion of sexuality in the social reproduction theory of Federici and Fortunati poses challenges even to other social reproduction theorists, questioning their almost exclusive focus on domestic labour and their neglect of other forms of activity that are imposed on women. We can thus ask the question, then, how useful is it to include such “sexual services” alongside domestic labour in social reproduction theory? I will suggest that it is not useful, firstly because it does not accurately present sexual relations between men and women, and secondly because it is not adequately critical in terms of pointing to the potential for criticising and transforming existing social relations between the sexes.

The reasons that it is inaccurate are similar to the usual critiques that feminists make of marxism and marxist feminism in whatever form. Without trying to be exhaustive I will briefly discuss some of the most important of these in the context of sexuality.

As is also the case for other activities performed by women in the household, the approach to sexuality taken by social reproduction theorists does not explain why women in different classes are exploited in very similar ways. Women in relationships with men who are not working class are still obliged to provide the same “sexual services” to men as are women in relationships with working-class men. How then does this benefit capital?

Social reproduction theorists, like marxist feminists more broadly, tend to insist that the work performed by women in the household benefits capital, not men (individually or as a class). Of the authors I have spoken about today, Fortunati is the most vociferous in this regard, arguing repeatedly that the process of exchange operating in housework and prostitution operates between women and capital, and is simply mediated by men. This relationship between women and capital has been mystified (Fortunati pp.21-23 and thereabouts), which is why the primary relationship seems to be that between women and men. For example, she states: “[Reproduction work] is an exchange that *appears* to take place between male workers and women, but in reality takes place between *capital* and women, with the male workers acting as intermediaries.” (p.9, emphasis in original)

What these points together demand, then, is why women’s relationship to class is mediated by their relationships with men. Do women’s activities in the home or in prostitution only contribute to capital if they men they are “reproducing” belong to the working class? Are women only exploited if their activities are directed towards working class men? Are women in relationships with bourgeois men, or prostituted women bought by bourgeois men, not exploited, not oppressed, as women? Given the significant contradictions apparent in the theory of social reproduction, it seems disingenuous to deny that men benefit systematically from women’s “labour” no matter what their economic class and can therefore be considered a class in and of themselves.

More broadly, the approach to sexuality within social reproduction theory seems to lack an understanding of the wide variety of ways in which women are sexually exploited by men of widely varying classes and in widely varying contexts, including non-capitalist contexts. To take just a single example, what tools does social reproduction theory give us to think about the sexual abuse of women evident in female genital mutilation in rural contexts in Indonesia or Egypt, and the similarities of this practice with female genital cosmetic surgery in the Netherlands, Brazil or South Korea?

This inaccuracy leads to the second point that I want to make: that these approaches lack an appropriate *critical* capacity – the capacity to indicate, through analysis, where the paradoxes in the dominant understanding of social arrangements are: where the cracks in the current system appear and where, therefore, there is the potential for change.

Sexuality is fitted into existing categories of social reproduction theory in a highly literal manner. Thus, Vogel, Federici and Fortunati all challenge the lack of visibility of housework in mainstream marxist theory by showing that it is in fact central to capitalist production. But no similar effort is made with “sexual services”: the conception of sexuality is essentially imported untouched from mainstream (patriarchal) constructions of sexuality. To take just one example of how this manifests, in Fortunati’s work no effort is made to explain why only men are reproduced sexually through prostitution and within the family; instead her analysis of the differing positions of men and women with respect to sexuality within these two institutions appears to be entirely descriptive. Her sole comment drawing attention to this difference appears on page 51:

“With regard to the individual wage/consumption nexus of the worker, housework re-enters within the limits strictly necessary for reproduction and those indispensable for the production of labor-power. The consumption of prostitution work also re-enters within these limits (**not because the male worker has greater sexual needs than the female worker, but because he is able to satisfy them to a greater extent than is permitted to a woman**).” (emphasis added)

No explanation is given as to why this is the case.

Federici has a slightly more critical approach to this question than Fortunati. In her 1975 article “On sexuality as work”, she acknowledges that it is “always women who suffer most from the schizophrenic character of sexual relations” (p.89):

“... [B]ecause we... have the responsibility of making the sexual experience pleasurable for the man. This is why women are usually less sexually responsive than men. Sex is work for us, it is duty. The duty to please is so built into our sexuality that we have learned to get pleasure out of giving pleasure, out of getting men excited.” (pp.89-90)

Although Federici’s more recent work (e.g. *Caliban and the Witch*) has greatly expanded her discussion of sexuality, her work that fits more neatly into the framework of social reproduction theory does not go beyond this brief and simplistic analysis.

Despite Vogel’s condemnation of dual-systems approaches to “the woman question”, then, it appears that the single-system approach represented by social reproduction theory is inadequate for understanding sexuality. When sexuality is taken seriously as a force shaping women’s lives, marxist categories prove to be inadequate.

This discussion suggests that social reproduction theory works fairly well when it is used to discuss domestic work which is at least somewhat similar to the work that men do in the public sphere (which is what marxism was designed to address). Even then, as the complexity of debates over how to include social reproduction within a marxist framework demonstrate, the situation is not straightforward. When sexuality is brought into the discussion, as an activity commonly performed by women but which diverges even more from the forms of work commonly performed by men in the public sphere, the argument begins to break down even further. Social reproduction theory, at

least in its classic form, does not provide feminists with the tools required to understand the sexual oppression of women by men.