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Totality and Universality in Marxist Feminism

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Introduction

The history of feminism, like other broad-based social movements, is marked by a dynamic of unity and separation in which organization around a common political identity—such as “woman”—invariably gives way to contestations of that identity, through its expansion, internal differentiation, or rejection.¹ Within emancipatory forms of struggle, such wagers of unity are often formulated negatively, projecting a shared narrative of subjugation for specific social groups. But if the ultimate horizon of struggle is the non-reproduction of those identities that confine us, a future in which their politicization is unnecessary, the problem emerges of how feminists might organize collectively, without valorizing or consolidating those same identities.

The problem of identities, and their ostensibly fragmenting effects, is often articulated in relation to the issue of universality, understood both as the unifying horizon of political desire, as well as the political and ethical norms driving the formation of groups in resistance. This articulation is always a fragile one and can generate antagonisms within groups as well as producing tensions in reaction to external demands and projections. Feminist movements have often been criticized for operating around a “false universality,” either for promising an inclusivity or unity they cannot deliver, or for the attempt to universalize *per se*. The appeal to universality is considered inherently oppressive by some due to its tendency to subsume actual particularity and difference in an ideal unity, which can cloak domination. The distinct way in which these antagonisms play out in part depends upon the horizons of the political forms. The

¹ Jules Joanne Gleeson points out that the current transfeminist movement also exhibits all these tendencies, spanning a spectrum from liberal inclusion to gender abolition. See Gleeson, “Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politics,” *Viewpoint*, July 19, 2017, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/07/19/transition-and-abolition-notes-on-marxism-and-trans-politics/>.

critique of universalism departs from philosophical universalism/s per se, especially those emanating from eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy and its Kantian legacies, which continue to be interrogated over their links to the history of colonialism, racism, and the constitution of gender and sexual normativity in modernity. “Political universality” is often considered the keystone of a liberal feminist “rights-based” approach, concerned primarily with social inclusion, recognition, and the equal admission to participation in economic circuits and representative politics. The bourgeois public sphere is the model for this conception of the social whole, and the political universal is accessed through a formal—and, ideally, also substantive—equality of rights. The keystone for critiques of this rights-based framework is Hannah Arendt’s description of displaced or “stateless” persons after World War II, as those who lacked “the right to have rights.” For Arendt, the “stateless” were denied access to the means of recognition that were issued by the nation state or international agencies, leaving them to exercise the only legal instrument in their possession as refugees, their “human rights.” Yet these rights remained abstract, specifically because they lacked any means of being enforced. Such a tenuous status continues to define the legislative, contractual framework, the basic architecture of liberal universalism which serves to underpin formal political demands.

Like Marxist standpoints in general, Marxist and materialist feminisms have been consistently skeptical of the liberal universal of formal equality before the law and of a feminist politics which demarcates its horizon as the fight for recognition and inclusion. Instead it has framed its problematic at the scale of capitalist value relations as a whole and the reproduction of gender within a “social totality.” As Kevin Floyd explains, Marxist “totality thinking” aims to critique capital’s fragmentation of social life and to understand the multiple mediations that

articulate different horizons of social reality. In the words of Floyd, “The Marxian critique of capital then endeavors to comprehend what this ontological and epistemological atomization makes it impossible to apprehend: capital as the systemic, global source of this enforced social dispersal.”² As an ongoing process of the articulation of mediations, a social totality is thus not to be understood as an undifferentiated system, but as internally fractured and contradictory. So, while universality, and its attendant moral precepts, is held to operate in the realm of “pure politics,” disregarding the forces and processes of a social organization overdetermined by capital and emphasizing the contingent articulations of social conflict, the concept of social totality aims to be more systematic, but in a way which avoids analyses that are mechanical.

Despite the explanatory potential of the category of social totality, it is precisely this emphasis within Marxism upon thinking a totality of social relations that has produced deep skepticism towards Marxist feminism, especially in its more orthodox formulations. The word “totality” has a dual connotation: an additive, numerical whole on the one hand and finality and completion on the other. This image of “totalizing” systems has accrued extremely negative political connotations, being associated with the modern tendency of total management of societies, conceptualized as a unified and coherent whole constructed of subject-citizens, a tendency seen to have culminated in the mass movements of the twentieth century, mass industry, and “total” war. And it has also accrued negative theoretical connotations, wherein Marxist thinking itself is often discussed as though actually responsible for, rather than a critique of, totalization. As Amy De’Ath has written, in relation to capitalism, “a familiar feminist criticism of Marxist feminism’s ‘totalizing’ tendencies [is] a complaint which tends to rhetorically position a historical materialist Marxist-feminism as if it were the cause, rather than

² Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2009), 6.

the critique, of capitalism's totalizing movement.”³ This is the wider context in which the theoretical framework of totality in left politics gave way to a large-scale rejection of totality-thinking within social movements oriented more explicitly to gender, race and sexuality. The term acquired a distinct meaning in the consolidation of the neoliberal order in the 1970s–80s, strengthened through the conflation of “totality” and “totalitarianism” in some postmodernist work—and the subsequent retreat and relegation of unifying frameworks, which determined the shape of politics to come.

The tendency toward more totalizing frameworks has produced deep skepticism toward the capacity of Marxist feminism to meaningfully articulate issues of race and sexuality, with some of its historical manifestations in the 1960s and 1970s having been criticized for producing their own version of a bad universalism. This became an issue for many movements fighting racism and sexism, which were often accused of “splitting” the class for the sake of “identity” issues. While some Marxist and socialist feminists toed the line, effectively subsuming gender under the supposedly more pressing and “unifying” concern of class, in other cases a particularized notion of “woman”—white, middle-class, cis-gendered—was itself universalized. Both of these tendencies reached their logical culmination in the “dual-systems debate.” The proposition at the core of this debate—that patriarchy and capitalism are two distinct social systems—not only aggravated existing antagonisms within the feminist movement, it also helped to facilitate the theoretical tendency to position race and sexuality as supplementary issues of “identity politics.” And this idea lingers in many variants of left politics, especially in those keen to avoid universalizing or totalizing parameters in their critical analyses and organizing strategies.

³ Amy De'Ath, “Gender and Social Reproduction,” *SAGE Handbook of Critical Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE, 2018), 1540.

Kevin Floyd has suggested that it was precisely this historical Marxian tendency to subordinate questions of sexuality to supposedly more “total” concerns, representing sexuality and its politics as inherently localized and particularized, which largely framed and conditioned queer thought as it emerged in the 1990s.⁴ And a similar story could perhaps be told of the emergence of specific forms of radical, black, and materialist feminism in the 1970s, some of which coalesced into more explicit theoretical positions in the 1990s. An example would be the Combahee River Collective, which emerged in response to the subsumption of the concerns of women of color under a class-focused socialist-feminist movement. Turning away from an exclusive focus on class, toward a materialist analysis of the specifically gendered and racialized body, the Combahee River Collective revealed the universalism of the socialist-feminist movement to have been a de facto white agenda. However, for Floyd, the appearance of sexuality *as* localized and particularized within a capitalist world is precisely the issue that needs challenging. That there has been a tendency in Marxist thought to deprioritize questions of sexuality does not require queer theory to abandon attempts to articulate sexuality within a mediated social whole. For Floyd, it requires a “convergence,” which will enrich both queer theory and Marxism. The marginalization of “identity politics” not only renders the dynamic of their ongoing reproduction difficult to grasp, it also turns capital into an abstract, thus fetishized, totality, echoing what Marx calls an “imagined concrete” or a “chaotic conception of the whole.” Rather than seeing these interconnected particulars as constitutive of, and systematically produced by, capital, both “capital” and “identity” are instead produced as fetishized forms, whose interrelation becomes difficult to articulate. This not only produces a misrepresentation of the operations of gender, race, sexuality (and so on), but also of the character of capital itself.

⁴ Floyd, *Reification*, 5.

And it is in part this insufficient form of totality thinking that gave way to the need for a more all-encompassing perspective of the interaction of a whole range of different forms of oppression.

Despite historical problems with the ways in which the concept of totality has been used, for Floyd, critical “totality thinking” can be used to define a set of structural logics which render social relationships both unifying and contradictory. In light of this, our article will pose a few questions: (1) does a concept of totality, as the articulation of a structural logic, remain necessary for a feminist theory and struggle that aims to understand and to navigate the inherent tensions and fracturing of identity-based political struggle? (2) If so, what formulation of the notion of totality is adequate to this aim? (3) In relation to this, does mediation through the totality offer a different picture of the tension between universalism and difference, one which prevents them lapsing into fetishizations? Could it assist in the understanding and navigation of unity and fracturing within movements? We will begin by looking at some recent attempts to reintroduce a framework of totality in such a way that avoids the fetishized trappings of earlier uses. One such attempt can be seen in the desire to formulate a more materialist version of intersectional thinking.

The Challenge of Intersectionality

Intersectional and Marxist frameworks are often taken to be irreconcilable opposites. However, this may be due more to the programmatic rejection within intersectional thinking of totalizing modes of thought, as opposed to its rejection of materialism per se, as some critiques suggest. For this reason we can envision a potential compatibility between the two modes of theorizing. Intersectional responses to second-wave feminism criticized its tendency to universalize the position of the white, middle-class, heterosexual “woman,” to be

supplemented—at best—with issues of race, class, and sexuality. It demonstrated that individual experience is in fact composed of several intersecting systems and structures of oppression. In doing so, intersectional theory destabilized existing formulations of identity, with the aim of revealing the conflict-ridden terrain of experience, rather than trying to resolve those conflicts into a too-broadly shared essence or universal “we.” Forms of intersectional thinking existed long before its formalization into a theoretical framework by the legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. It is possible to point to the contributions of earlier revolutionary theorists and activists such as Angela Davis, for whom “women, race, and class” were neither politically nor analytically separate as positions or politics as well as those of the black women activists on the peripheries of communist party organizations in the first part of the twentieth century.⁵ Examples would include Louise Thompson Patterson, whose organizing with African-American domestic workers generated the concept of “triple exploitation” to refer to gender, racial, and class status in Depression-era United States or Claudia Jones in the UK.⁶ However, while the work of these activists acknowledged several vectors of oppression and exploitation, developing an account of the social relations of capitalism as always already racial and patriarchal in practice, we might distinguish them from those who adhere more specifically to an intersectional analysis. It is Crenshaw’s formulation of intersectionality that has come to

⁵ The inseparability of “women, race, and class” is reflected in the title of Angela Davis’s essay collection from 1981. Her decades-long activism in the prison abolition movement also testifies to an intersectional understanding of incarceration as it affects communities both on the inside and outside of prison walls. (Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* [New York: Vintage, 2011].)

⁶ Louise Thompson Patterson, “Toward a Brighter Dawn (1936),” *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 31, 2015, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/toward-a-brighter-dawn-1936/>. See also, in the same issue, Esther Cooper Jackson, [The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism \(1940\)](https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/the-negro-woman-domestic-worker-in-relation-to-trade-unionism-1940/), <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/the-negro-woman-domestic-worker-in-relation-to-trade-unionism-1940/>, and 1950 texts by Mary Inman and Marvel Cooke. For Claudia Jones, see Carole Boyce-Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and a second book by Boyce-Davies on Jones in 2011 (*Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment* [Oxfordshire: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2011].)

define it specifically as a discrete framework, and which has subsequently become the subject of much theoretical debate.

To illustrate her understanding of intersectionality, Crenshaw refers to the 1976 legal case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, in which black women were denied access to jobs that were open to both white women and black men. As the legal system was only equipped to consider discrimination along lines of either race or gender, it was unable to recognize the specificity of the discrimination faced by black women. For Crenshaw, this case revealed the inherent reduction of the legal framework, which could only consider discrimination along a single axis. Crenshaw's analysis shows that the bourgeois legal subject is in reality constituted through a set of socially and institutionally ascribed "structural intersections"—composed of abstractions such as "race" and "gender"—which bind us together, but which manifest differentially in lived experience. The legal framework was unable to capture the fact that gender often takes a racialized form, and race a gendered form. As a result, Crenshaw's analysis would appear to warn us that seemingly progressive anti-discrimination laws should be treated with suspicion: they tend to obscure more complex forms of discrimination, exacerbating and legitimizing them. While Crenshaw's development of intersectionality is clearly, to some extent, shaped and limited by the legal framework from which it emerges, it remains a powerful critical theory. Her analysis captures the "false universality" of the liberal subject who is equal before the law and of the discrete categories of identity it reifies in practice. And as Crenshaw saw the legislative as productive of the horizon for actual radical struggle, she was also warning against uncritical forms of organizing around those reified identity categories. Ultimately, Crenshaw is not only interested in legal representation and recognition, but in the way that intersecting oppressions are consolidated throughout social life—in the workplace, in political groups, and in

personal relations. Her metaphor for the articulation of intersecting oppressions pointed beyond the legal to account for multiple grounds of identity in considering “how the social world is constructed.”⁷ So, while Crenshaw’s work points toward greater visibility for the experiential complexities produced by multiple oppressions, it also implicitly calls for the reinvigoration of radical social struggles in and against the reproduction of those oppressions, at least in the sense of a critical disidentification from the reductive identity categories that claim to represent us.

Re-Materializing Intersectionality

Despite the materialist potential inherent within the critical legal element of intersectional theory, a number of Marxist feminists, while insisting that feminism should be intersectional, have criticized the lack of “systemic” or “totality” thinking in much intersectional analyses. While “intersectionality” for Crenshaw was never meant to be “some new, totalizing theory of identity,”⁸ but rather a critical tool for revealing the blind spots produced by a one-dimensional politics of recognition, a more materialist intersectional approach seems crucial. The phenomenological practice of describing the appearance of identities *as discrete* through our encounters with institutionalized processes of identity formation is a meaningful starting point for a materialist critique. And Crenshaw’s intersectional model already points beyond, as we noted, the confines of the legal horizon. However, as Johanna Brenner has argued, some intersectional analyses fail to go any further than a description of experience, leaving capitalist power relations, and thus potential resistance to them, un- or under-theorized.⁹ The radical potential of the intersectional model might thus be said to lay in the situating of the actual

⁷ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color”, *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1244-5

⁹ Johanna Brenner, “Intersections, Locations, and Capitalist Class Relations: Intersectionality from a Marxist perspective,” in *Women and the Politics of Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000): 293–324.

production and reproduction of those identity formations within a broader terrain of capitalist social relations.

David McNally notes that subsequent intersectional theory has struggled to escape the shadow of its inherent “ontological atomism” and its attendant spatial metaphor.¹⁰ For him, formulations such as Patricia Hill Collins’ “interlocking” systems of oppressions, that comprise a “matrix of domination”, which constitutes a “single, historically created system,” or Sherene Razack’s clarification that these interlocking systems are co-dependent, fall into this spatial and atomistic metaphor. Many other Marxist and materialist feminists have argued that the concept of “intersections” firstly presupposes the existence of coherent and autonomous—yet, nevertheless, somehow comparable—locations of identity, and, secondly, implies the external, and thus contingent, nature of their coincidence. For example, Sue Ferguson claims that while intersectionality describes how specified social locations give shape to individual experience and identity, it cannot show how such locations interact as part of a dynamic set of social relations in which processes, ideas, and institutions reproduce and challenge these intersecting identities.¹⁰ When conceptualized as what Tithi Bhattacharya calls an “aggregative reality,” intersectional theory is, for McNally, premised upon a “static metaphysics” in which ontologically separate axes of difference are mapped onto a neutral social space.¹¹ But such an atomistic picture cannot explain why these axes would interact in the first place: what is the force that brings them together? Or, as Bhattacharya puts it, what is the *logic* of their intersection?¹² For McNally, as

¹⁰ David McNally, “Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 96.

¹⁰ Sue Ferguson, “Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race and Embodied Labour,” *Race, Gender & Class* 15, nos. 1/2 (2008), 42–57.

¹¹ Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,” *Social Reproduction Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 17, and McNally, “Intersections,” 98.

¹² Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” 17.

for others, it is the “dynamic” organicism of capitalism that needs articulating, if we are to dialectically overcome the ontological atomism, which in part could be seen to result from an attempt to complexify discrete abstractions of identity given by the law.¹³

This is not simply a theoretical issue. Since the 1990s, intersectional thinking and organizing has become common sense for any coalitional politics that prioritizes the mutual determinations of gender, race, sexuality, ability, age, migration status, among other forms of identity. And this common sense is also reflected within the academy’s approach to emancipatory politics, where intersectional theory—especially that of Crenshaw—is often taken to provide a fully comprehensive description of social relations, one that remains additive and rejects the “totalizing” tendency of Marxist and materialist feminisms seen as oppressive and obsolete. However, this disavowal of the need for any more totalizing horizon to mediate particular struggles can hold the potential for collapsing struggle down into individualized, “rights-based” issues, admittedly of a now more variegated nature. However, since the 2008 global financial crisis, here has been a resurgence of Marxist feminism, which thinks beyond the assumed division between socioeconomic analysis and identity critique.

Social Reproduction Theory and/as Totality

Recent developments of what has become known as “social reproduction feminism” aim to construct a more materialist intersectional theory, one that anchors gendering and racializing processes within a thinking of “totality,” or, at the very least, its reproduction. While variation exists between thinkers, social reproduction feminism takes labor—and its stratification, division

¹³ McNally, “Intersections,” 97.

and “multiplication”—to be the keystone of this totality.¹⁴ As Bhattacharya has recently explained, “[t]he fundamental insight of social reproduction theory is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole.”¹⁵ In light of this, Ferguson has been developing the concept of an “integrative ontology of labor” as the kind of non-idealistic, yet systematic, notion of totality that feminism should be working with.¹⁶ She describes this integrative ontology in the following terms: “At the heart of social reproduction feminism is the conception of labor as broadly productive—creative not just of economic values, but of society (and thus of life) itself.”¹⁷ Here labor means that human activity which creates “all the things, practices, people, relations and ideas constituting the wider social totality.”¹⁸ For Ferguson, the social reproduction framework can also begin to link this totality to lived experience through analyses of embodied subjects in “socio-historically, geographically specific locations,” thus addressing Himani Bannerji’s call for the structuralist bias in Marxist feminism to be overcome by the incorporation of the experiential.¹⁹ This expansive framework promises a more global and integrative picture of the diverse concrete positions and experiences of—especially but not only—women to be theorized, one which avoids the pitfalls of an “additive” intersectional model as well as the functionalist tendencies often imputed to Marxist feminism.

¹⁴ See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁶ Sue Ferguson, “Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms: Toward an Integrative Ontology,” *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (2016), 38-60.

¹⁷ Ferguson, “Intersectionality,” 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53, and Himani Bannerji, “But Who Speaks for Us? Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms”, in H. Bannerji, L. Carty & K. Delhi (Eds.), *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site of Feminist Struggles*, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1991). [This is the argument throughout the text. Do you need a specific page reference?]

For Meg Luxton, social reproduction theory articulates how the “production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process.”²⁰ However, it is primarily the complex and messy form this integration takes—how it is produced and reproduced—that needs articulation. Due to the sheer expansiveness of the concepts involved—such as “life”—this is not at all a straightforward process. As the concept of “the social” is already—perhaps inherently—prone to radical indeterminacy, so is what counts as its reproduction. At the same time, linking social reproduction to an account of “totality” also faces pitfalls. As Rob Lucas argues, while the everyday understanding of totality simply designates the “all,” or “whole” of something, this can often lead to overly vague formulations, which can stretch the definition of the term beyond utility.²¹ “Capitalism” is perhaps the most susceptible to this conceptual slippage, often utilized to designate not merely a mode of production, but literally everything there is. This capacity for slippage and endless extension is further encouraged within theories that assume—consciously or subconsciously—some notion of the “total subsumption” of life under capital. If the global triumph of capital over its previous antagonists in the last few decades has generalized capital’s domination to all spheres of social life, it confronts us as the sole basis of our very reproduction, making the link of social reproduction to the totality somewhat tautological. For the framework to be meaningful, what is included within this “all” needs specifying, not simply as a list of overlapping aspects, but as the unity of *distinct, but interdependent*, moments. The totality is not a pre-given object existing separately over or above it. The analysis of the various determinations at play needs to be undertaken with the aim of breaking down an abstract and vague conception of a whole, reproducing it in the process as

²⁰ Meg Luxton, “Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction,” in *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neoliberalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 36.

²¹ Rob Lucas, “Feeding the Infant,” *What is to be Done Under Real Subsumption*, (Mute, forthcoming in 2019).

internally differentiated, that is, “concrete.”²² It is this equating of concretion with internal differentiation that renders Marx’s critical method amenable to thinking totality as the “unity of the diverse.”

It is specifically the attempt to register such concreteness that gives feminist social reproduction theory so much potential. As Bhattacharya describes, social reproduction feminism is best thought of as a “methodology” for exploring labor and labor-power under capitalism, one which favors “process.”²³ Despite this, it is worth considering the critical and political consequences of the tendency of some social reproduction theory to bracket questions around global value chains, finance, and politics, in order to centralize this “integrative ontology of labor.” Although intended as synthetic, such an expansive notion of labor can itself be left significantly underdetermined. The “integrative ontology” seems to include all labor that reproduces the conditions for that labor—that is, as labor-power that is brought to market—and not just labor that is value producing. And it extends even further than this, to all activities that maintain and reproduce life in any social formation. Social relations, in all their heterogeneity, are critically encompassed through the category of labor, rather than through an articulated, mediated social whole. So, while the expansive notion of labor appears to answer the need for a unitary theory—recently rearticulated by Lise Vogel, Cinzia Arruzza and others—to overcome the dualisms of previous Marxist-feminist programs, it risks erasing important distinctions and lines of causality, subsuming a range of activities, forces and gendered and racialized dynamics to the category of “labor.”

We might consider the need that arises here to draw analytic distinctions between activities that might merely appear reproductive (of life) in their concrete characteristics—

²² Lucas, “Feeding.”

²³ Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” 4.

domestic chores, care work—and those that are socially validated by the wage, thus reproducing capital. Without such distinctions, the use of socially reproductive labor as a key analytic-cum-political category courts the same danger that Marxist feminist critique once spotted in the “workerist” politics of the factory—the moralized affirmation of labor, here lent urgency by the fact that the labor of reproduction is universally devalued. Such devalued labor is then subject to a call for recognition, be this of an ethical, economic, or political nature. Thus, the consequences of blurring the activities that reproduce life with the activities that reproduce “capitalist life” can be ambiguous, but in a way that is familiar for feminist politics, and indeed any emancipatory politics that departs from membership in a stigmatized or marginalized group. As already noted in previous sections, this is the ambiguity of the politics of visibility, of both the need for, and inadequacy of, representation. Reproduction is thus determined to comprise specific gendered activities, whose devaluation can be redressed in terms of their “social value.” Yet at the same time these activities are located in circuits of abstract value, whether or not they receive a monetary wage. Once the recognition of the social value of socially reproductive work becomes a political goal, it can be applied to the gendering of the labor as well as the labor itself, thus risking the affirmation of feminized people in the traditionally gendered terms of caregivers. In this way, the negativity of the reproduction of life in capitalist society is occluded, along with the transformative potential of this negativity, and reproduction takes on an independent, positive value. We would thus suggest that social reproduction and the reproduction of capital should not be collapsed into an ontology of labor. An analysis of value relations (finance etc.) is key in order to avoid producing an affirmative account of gendered labor.

Thus the question is whether the integrative ontology of labor perspective offers the resources necessary for analyzing the relationship between social reproduction and the

reproduction of capital as a “value in motion.” While such an ontology has the advantage of elasticity, it ultimately falls short as an analysis of gender, race, or capital in a landscape of social reproduction determined by a number of value relations, not collapsible into labor. This ontology risks blurring the distinctions between labor “as such” and labor within the (gendered, racialized, normative, violent) capitalist mode of (re)production itself; thus between life and labor, the social and the financial, and ultimately, between capital and life. All social forms get integrated in an ontology of labor which, as Kevin Floyd has noted, when writing about self-valorization in autonomist Marxism, cannot ultimately be distinguished from an ontology of capital.²⁴ We can say that social reproduction feminism attempts a more complex and also “concrete” totality, through a materialist intersectional thinking which accounts for the *logic* of the intersection as articulated through different historical dynamics of the logic of capital, rather than as separate, distinct systems which collide haphazardly, such as race and class. Yet by proposing that this logic is the “worldmaking” ontology of labor rather than the spectrum of value relations, some social reproduction theory seems to limit its explanatory power and political salience.

As an additional question, we might ask whether an analysis dedicated to figuring the capitalist mode of production as a world produced by “labor” might be a normative fantasy in an era of mass un- and under-employment and highly monitored, and often abandoned, surplus populations, with the lived negativity of value relations (lived in many ways through race and gender) coming to the fore. To insist upon this point is to underline how social reproduction opens up into “non-reproduction” and the *totality* of capitalist accumulation, and the forms of structural hyper-violence and extraction it dictates. An integrative ontology of labor does not capture well a historical moment in which the necessity of abolition is posed by the proliferation

²⁴ Kevin Floyd, “Automatic Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life,” *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (June 2016) 61-86.

of “wageless” and “surplus” life rather than a maldistribution of surplus value. Under these conditions it becomes very clear that neither race nor gender can be adequately explained as a rank in the labor market. In Chris Chen’s analysis, for example, race is posited as an “ascriptive process,” a form of structural coercion.²⁵ We need to look at how gender and race (at minimum) pose an “outside” to the capitalist value relation that enable it to function. By “outside,” we mean the kind of historical and phenomenological aspects of capitalist social life which seem to be left out of an “orthodox” Marxist picture of the reproduction of that life, those aspects which seem not to be directly mediated by the wage relation and yet shape it at every level. Without taking into account how “outsides” and “insides” are produced at this level of analysis, there is a risk of reproducing a class politics which defaults to a white identity politics. An interrogation into the violent apparatus of value in capitalist social relations, and the violence of their reproduction, might require looking beyond the category of labor to financial, state, and libidinal economies. Here is where the perspective of “totality” can be helpful.

Negative Totality and Insurgent Universality

It is precisely this “outside” to which we turn now in the process of developing a concept of totality that takes into account value relations as stratified social relations. This could be conceived as a “negative totality” that would situate the logics of gender, race, and normativity within the form of value. This would be to situate social reproduction within capitalist social relations as an antagonistic and dominating form of social unity from the perspective of its overcoming, and not of its maintenance or “reproduction.” We will go on to articulate this concept with some recently proposed revisions to the political concept of universality as ways to

²⁵ Chris Chen, “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Anti-Racism,” *Endnotes* 3 (September 2013), <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/chris-chen-the-limit-point-of-capitalist-equality>.

reframe what we have identified as the weaknesses in the rich and influential work being done under the headings of intersectionality as well as social reproduction theory.

In “The Logic of Gender,” Endnotes avoids posing a bad formulation of totality, both through the insistence that “[t]here must be an exterior to value (and labor), in order for value (and labor) to exist” and through the rejection of the dualistic thinking of autonomist and commons-based theories, which too simplistically affirm the idea of an “exterior” to capital.²⁶ The perspective of totality additionally allows us to approach gender and race as constitutive internal outsides to value relations. The system ecologist Jason Moore, for example, describes at length how an uncommodified “outside” is crucial for capitalist growth as it keeps its costs down—if everything was thoroughly commodified, capital would “eat itself.”²⁷ Rather than centralize all types of value- and non-value-producing activities as “labor,” he highlights the importance of free appropriation as a core dynamic of accumulation, of the indispensability of free or cheap inputs to capitalist valorization, of keeping some things off the value map, both financially and socially. Such an analysis, shaped by historiography, geography, and ecology in its approach to critical political economy, offers a formulation of totality which avoids one of the foremost criticisms that have been levied against the concept—that it is too “deterministic,” expunging all sense of agency and contingency. This criticism, following that of Althusser, initially targeted the Lukácsian notion of “expressive totality,” before his own work became the target of similar charges of formalism and foreclosure. Such notions of totality posit an overall systematic horizon in which reality is an effect of structures that can be comprehensively mapped and are autonomous of personal or collective agency. A negative totality, however, is the attempt

²⁶ Endnotes, “The Logic of Gender” *Endnotes* 3 (September 2013) <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender>.

²⁷ As Rosa Luxemburg already indicated more than 100 years ago in *The Accumulation of Capital*. See also Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).

to see how different structures are contingently articulated in a moving historical process (itself fractured by disjunctive and contradictory temporality).

As Chris O’Kane has recently noted, “not only would such a notion of negative social totality point to the negativity of the capitalist social form, and the internal reciprocal domains of the economy and the state; but also the realms of nature, subjectivity, and civil society integral to the perpetuation of capitalist social totality.”²⁸ Such a formulation undoubtedly departs from Marx’s methodological note in the 1857 “Introduction” to the *Grundrisse* about arriving at a rich and concretely determined totality composed of multiple realities and relations only as the result, and not as the presupposition, of a dialectical method of inquiry.²⁹ This is of course not a straightforward matter, since it is precisely an immediate relation to a multiple and complex whole which must first be boiled down into “simple abstractions” (such as “population”) before the process of reconstructing it through observation, research, and political analysis can commence. This emphasis on totality as a result, an articulation, rather than an assumption or presumption, renders it a speculative concept, which both allows for contingency and lends an intellectual and normative framework to what would otherwise be a simple “conjunction” or “intersection” of more or less de-contextualized particulars. Here the “negativity” in O’Kane’s notion of the social totality can be related to Hegel’s idea of negativity, which is to say, the lack of finality of any state of affairs in thought or praxis as they are mediated and transformed from one state to another, and the “negativity” of contradictory social relations which naturalize themselves as static and unchanging. Yet this question of negativity needs to be taken up again,

²⁸ Chris O’Kane, “The Path of Negative Totality: From The Critique of Political Economy to a New Reading of the Critical Theory of The Negative Totality of Capitalist Society” (<https://jjay.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/contentgroups/economics/chrisokaneTotality.pdf>), 33.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 2005), 100.

not simply as a characteristic of the capitalist totality but as an aspect of the relation between totality and universality, as we will see below.

Likewise, for Kevin Floyd “totality” is specifically an epistemological category, one which needs to be rethought as speculative and critical, rather than simply assumed.³⁰ Because for Floyd the greatest producers of difference, atomization, and reification are the social relations of capital, no radical materialist politics can afford to dispense with a “rigorously negative practice” of totality thinking, one opposed to the kind of positive imposition of totality of which Marxism has long been accused.³¹ Floyd reformulates the role of totality thinking as a regulative political category, which operates at the level of epistemological transformation. Starting from our discrete positions and experiences, such a negative practice would retain a firm theoretical and political commitment to unify all those moments of social life which have been atomized by capitalist relations. For Floyd, this process has to be ongoing and is ultimately imperfectible, but it is through such a commitment that we can avoid an overly static and stultifying understand of social life.

So far, we have pointed to the need to revisit the category of ‘totality’, as well as providing an outline of how this may be achieved. It remains to do the same for the other synthetic concept at issue in this essay, “universality.” As we saw at the beginning, “totality” and “universality” have traditionally been opposed as respectively constituting a materialist and an idealist conception of a social whole. There are various ways of outlining the reductive implications of such an opposition, but here we will confine ourselves to citing some recent discussions of the problem of universality in emancipatory politics as developed by political philosophers such as Massimiliano Tomba and Cinzia Arruzza. In Tomba’s recent analysis of

³⁰ Floyd, *Reification*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

“insurgent universality,” he refers to the French 1793 Declaration of Rights as the outcome of revolutionary struggles of women, sans-culottes, and enslaved subjects in the French colonies, notably in Saint Domingue.³² Whereas the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man presumes an “abstract citizen,” granted rights from above, the 1793 one is re-drafted “from below,” with its radicalization of the freedoms of speech, assembly, and right of insurrection against oppression.³³ Within but against the formal or “political” freedom of the bourgeois revolution, those excluded or occluded from the Rights of Man claimed their social and economic rights from a system that ratified the principles of popular sovereignty while dispensing with their participation from the beginning. In this way the universality of the figure of “Man” is eroded and negated by a more encompassing universality, one committed to dismantling the naturalized hierarchies of sex and race, public and private that the legal nation state upheld in continuity with the absolute monarchy.

Aruzza picks up on this framework, proposing a “political insurgent universality” as a ground for contemporary feminist politics.³⁴ This is a dynamic ground which jettisons any presumption, however strategic, of a unity of shared interests for the human species or for feminized genders, but rather on the “real universality” of capital as the historically actual ground for social reproduction everywhere.³⁵ It is only such a “real universality” that can contest capital at the scale of its reproduction, not a focus on the local or the specific. Aruzza counterposes this political-strategic, always contested concept of universality, to “political universalism,” which is seen to create a false binary between universalism and difference as two

³² Massimiliano Tomba, “1793: The Neglected Legacy of Insurgent Universality,” *History of the Present* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 109–136.

³³ Tomba, “1793,” 125.

³⁴ Cinzia Aruzza, “Capitalism and the Conflict over Universality: A Feminist Perspective,” *Philosophy Today* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 847–861

³⁵ Aruzza, “Capitalism,” 849.

reified, vague categories, useless both for theory and for the practical work of organizing.³⁶ Arruzza additionally refers to the basis of real universality as not just the actuality and pervasiveness of capitalist social relations but as capital's "totalization effect."³⁷ Here she is careful to distinguish her argument from sociological analyses of the homogeneity attendant on "globalization" or a notion of the objectivity of common interests among a global population increasingly doomed to the status of "surplus" by the accumulation and reproduction of a capitalism oriented more by speculation and extraction than production. Setting out the dangers of ontological and functionalist arguments, she concludes by advocating "constraints" on social reproduction and subjectivation as the key element of the totalizing logic she identifies as clarifying the stakes of feminist universalism, going beyond the additive structure of intersectionality:

One way to avoid these impasses in the conceptualization of capitalist totality is to understand capitalism's totalizing effect in terms of constraints, and not in terms of functions. In other words, capitalist accumulation produces, or contributes to the production of, varying forms of social hierarchy and oppressions, including heterosexist oppression.... While various forms of oppression interact with each other or even grow together and cannot be phenomenally thought of without one another, capitalist accumulation poses necessitating constraints that determine to a large extent all other forms of social relations. The fact that the constraints posed by capitalist accumulation are pervasive and have the capacity of coloring all other social relations is one of

³⁶ Ibid., 851.

³⁷ Ibid., 853.

the grounds for speaking of the capitalist world as a contradictory and articulated moving totality.³⁸

This brings us back to the earlier-cited formulation of “negative totality.” Here the “capitalist world” is figured as a “contradictory” and “moving” totality, which is experienced by its subjects increasingly as a series of constraints rather than possibilities. This is an experience that can potentially be translated into an insurgent universality as the political articulation of the various forms and scales of constraint that the reproduction of the capitalist social whole entails.³⁹ Here we could return briefly to the Hegelian inflection of the relationship between totality and universality as a mediation between the “objective” and the “subjective” that develops through forms of dialectical negativity. Jamila Mascot, in her recent reconstruction of the categories of “abstraction” in Hegel’s work, notes that “the intimate connection between formalism, universality, and abstraction can be deduced, *via negativa*, from Hegel’s understanding of the concrete as opposed to the formal universal.”⁴⁰ In other words, universality can be composed of concrete rather than abstract (or formal, “ideal”) mediations of speculative thought that hypothesizes something other than the status quo and the actual (political) praxis capable of enacting transformation. It is realized as the product of emancipatory struggles, as well as a premise that animates those struggles. The universal is, again, a result and not a presupposition. This is a conception that can be seen to inform a number of other current analyses of the political utility of universality emerging on the Marxian left, such as that enunciated by Asad Haider, for

³⁸ Ibid., 854–855

³⁹ An example of a capitalist constraint that resonates across different scales of a capitalist totality and takes oppressive forms that are striated by social norms, traditional or developing, and which act as a brake on a mundane form of life which can be politically articulated into universality would be a gendered or racialized disadvantage in relation to land rights which is exacerbated during an enclosure or dispossession process (the constraint being how private property is exacerbated by gender and race) or the gendered and racialized disparities in the experience of illegalized migration.

⁴⁰ Jamila M.H. Mascot, “Hegel and the Advent of Modernity: A Social Ontology of Abstraction,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (February 2018): 33.

whom universality emerges through the principle of solidarity with alterity. This is founded on the alterity of any political subject to themselves, rather than the policed unity of “identity” or the relationship between Self and Other that subtends liberal, rights-based conceptions that can only reproduce colonial relations of victimhood and humanitarian intervention.⁴¹

Conclusion

Both intersectionality and social reproduction feminism arose in response to a perceived lack of accounting for social locations of “extra-economic” oppression and domination in capitalist modernity by Marxism. While the two perspectives often run together in contemporary theoretical and activist practice, the difference is still that intersectional views dispense with an address to a ‘totality’ of capital as determining of social life, while social reproduction feminism puts itself forward as a “unitary theory” claiming to account for the contradictions of capitalist social life through an ontology of labor, wherever and however it may be encountered. Some views from within the paradigm, such as Arruzza’s, make a stronger claim: that there can be a dimension of universality that pervades those struggles which unfold on the terrain of social reproduction, a universality “from below” that is presupposed by the emancipatory orientation of struggles against differentiated forms of violence and exploitation. Concomitantly, the prioritization of specific identities immanent to the intersectionality paradigm can be shown to prematurely dismiss the reference to a logic of totality as “totalizing.” Acknowledging that the capital relation is the social horizon of the production and maintenance of these identities doesn’t mean that it is not a contradictory or constitutively incomplete one. What it does mean is the

⁴¹ “Universality does not exist in the abstract, as a prescriptive principle which is mechanically applied to indifferent circumstances. It is created and recreated in the act of insurgency, which does not demand emancipation solely for those who share my identity but for everyone; it says that no one will be enslaved. It equally refuses to freeze the oppressed in a status of victimhood that requires protection from above; it insists that emancipation is self-emancipation.” Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (New York: Verso Books, 2018), 113.

negativity of that totality is perceived through its systematic shaping of everyday existence. Here we can note Floyd's observation that totality is only thinkable from situated perspectives: "The totality of capital, Marx suggests, can be accounted for only through this movement through a range of particular, immanent points of view.... Any pretension to a bird's-eye view is revealed here to be the effect of a failure to account, within the very effort to think totality, for the specific social location of that same effort."⁴²

Feminist movements, including revolutionary, anti-capitalist ones, cannot eradicate all internal antagonism. Regardless of the intentions or insights of its members, antagonism will always develop, both out of the specific material conditions, and the dynamics of the movement itself. The nature of struggle is that it is inherently self-limiting and internally unstable in a way that no amount of organizational magic or good intentions can remedy. In the context of such antagonisms, movements may well still make important gains, so long as a certain momentum can be maintained, but they will ultimately come apart or dissipate in foreseeable ways. And what is more, that moment of dissipation can often itself be generative of radical potential. Despite this, the projection of emancipatory horizons, and of the nature of the unity those horizons allow, can be understood in such a way that can bring such potential antagonisms into focus to greater or lesser extents, allow them space to breathe and sharpen awareness and understanding of them. As Aruzza puts it, diversity "must become our weapon, rather than an obstacle or something that divides us."⁴³ In those situations where the working through of internal antagonisms—or, at least their holding in productive tension—may be possible, the various *internal* relations between distinct forms of oppression, as well as the constant drive for

⁴² Floyd, *Reification*, 13.

⁴³ Aruzza, "From Social Reproduction Feminism to the Women's Strike" *Social Reproduction Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 196.

oppressed identities towards reification, requires ongoing articulation and critique. Such attempts can be seen by the group Sisters Uncut in the UK, whose fight against violence—domestic, sexual, gendered, and state—in the context of austerity has brought them into solidarity with a vast range of movements. In addition to this, the International Women’s Strike is a contemporary movement that has placed at its center a conscious aim to avoid the structural limitations of liberal feminism, and to aim at “political universality”—exemplified by the Women’s March of 2017—through its organizational approach. Having emerged in response to a host of other gender struggles—the Polish strike against abortion, the Argentinian Ni Una Menos strike against male violence, and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women—its strategy has been to develop in and through dialogue with a wide range of already existing networks of grassroots organizations, in an attempt to mediate the production of a dynamically evolving class-based, anti-racist feminism, inclusive of trans women and queer and non-binary people, without subsuming the issues and demands of these organizations under a universal “we.”

Concepts such as Arruzza’s “totality of constraints” and Haider’s solidaristic universality of alterity can help us understand how neither an integrative ontology of labor, nor a subsumptive conflation of capital and life, are necessary to develop the grounds for analytic concreteness and political articulation. This is the articulation between social locations that fosters organised struggle, a mode of struggle capable of dealing with the specificity and systematicity of the “outside” to value represented by gendering, racialisation, and other “devaluations” in the reproduction of the capitalist whole, rather than dismissing these as secondary to a reified “class.” This is not to suggest that the vicissitudes of practical politics diminish the usefulness of any “totalizing paradigm.” Instead, we would propose that taking a

dialectically negative approach allows for social locations to be politically and theoretically read as structural without thereby being made functional or integral, and for difference to be a non-reified social experience that has political significance open to determination and inflection in situated emancipatory struggles. Without some form of practical universality, the whole notion of emancipation makes no sense, and it is the jettisoning of this notion that is responsible for the increasing salience of a “politics of survival,” content to operate on a mainly representational plane. Social reproduction feminism, seen through the lens of materialism, can be seen as an intersectional theory, with an added appeal to a “unifying” analysis of capitalist dynamics, such as the way the form of value is determined by patterns of hierarchical social value experienced as gender, race, sexuality, and ability. But this theoretical appeal to unity all too often takes the form of a labor analysis that has limited purchase as an explanation of the real abstractions of global capital in people’s lives. Any analysis that aspires to a unitary exegesis on political grounds has to acknowledge its incompleteness and the need to be supplemented by the coalitional politics whose emancipatory horizons necessarily bring forms of alterity and contingency into play.

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