Adapting the Marxist Feminist Eye

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In the early 1980s, Marxist and socialist feminists such as Iris Marion Young, Alison Jaggar, and Heidi Hartmann were busily theorizing about the causes of gendered oppression under capitalism and debating measures to disrupt the unequal relations of social exchange, such as paying wages for housework and institutionalizing parental leaves and pay equity.[1] Despite some of the formidable improvements in policy that can be traced back to their vision, these radical scholars have largely faded into the wallpaper of Second Wave feminism and are seldom read today. Similarly, Lussier and Backer show that we have forgotten educational scholars of the same generation who were researching the reproduction of capitalism and patriarchy through schooling. Their paper argues for the ongoing relevance of such contributions, especially those of Madeleine Arnot, Rosemary Deem, and Linda Valli.

I applaud the authors' careful resuscitation of some buried educational work that combines feminist and Marxist critiques. Having never heard of these authors myself, I have no trouble accepting Lussier and Backer's contention that their contributions have been neglected by many contemporary scholars. Moreover, this paper reinforces the general observation that feminism has long been burdened by severance from its own history, while mainstream Marxism and other non-feminist causes suffer less imposed amnesia. The failure to respectfully transmit work by and about women has deprived us of centuries of feminist consciousness, leaving feminists at square one over and over again.[2]

I want to use this commentary to explore how the feminism and Marxism of thirty to forty years ago would need to be updated to provide more salient analyses of contemporary educational phenomena. While the essential insight of Marxist feminism – namely, the fact that class oppression and gender oppression are co-constituted – remains intact, both economic realities and cultural

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attitudes toward gender have changed in ways that Arnot, Deem, and Valli's work, taken at face value, may be unable to account for. I will briefly describe how the oppression of women in Western society is now glossed over with the veneer of postfeminism, which requires a more nimble kind of critique than the feminism of the 1980s affords. Then I will suggest that the workings of international corporate capitalism in the digital age are oppressive in ways that may be different from the forms of oppression that concerned earlier Marxist feminists and require different responses. Features of these contemporary manifestations of gender- and class-based oppression could mean that the Marxist feminist eye Lussier and Backer seek to recover from the 1970s and 1980s is more useful as inspiration than as model for philosophers of education today.

How has sexism operated in schools to serve the needs of both capitalism and patriarchy? How should we educate so that girls may be liberated from rigid gender expectations and their attendant material inequities? I believe the answers to these questions have changed fairly precipitously in the last few decades. Lussier and Backer cite Madeleine Arnot's work from 1983 and 1984, which extended Bernstein and Althusser's theories of ideology and codes to expose the transmission of sexism in schools:

> Arnot picks up this project by looking at the schooling of girls in the 1980s and the school's emphasis on docility and domesticity. Living under the forces of both patriarchy and capitalism, education served as means of hailing females into their expected 'femaleness', which both an education for exploitative relations (woman as docile *worker*) and an education for oppressive gender relations (*woman* as docile worker).

While most feminists today would agree that education still conditions regressive gender expectations and grooms children of all genders to fulfill socially sanctioned roles, the actual sexism in schools is both more subtle and much more stealth than the realities to which Arnot was reacting. On the one hand, most schools no longer consciously indoctrinate girls into traditional virtues such as domesticity and docility. Furthermore, girls are outperforming boys on educational assessments and entering college and professional degrees at a

higher rate than their male peers, including some coveted disciplines such as medicine. On the other hand, in part thanks to these improvements, girls are inundated with uncomplicated messages of their complete equality, rendering feminism an apparently obsolete idea. This widely accepted attitude toward feminism as a *fait accompli*, often called "postfeminism," plays out in schools and across youth culture. Postfeminism appropriates many symbols of feminism to minimize ongoing gender inequality and reduce the capacity for critical consciousness-raising. Feminist educational scholars such as Jessica Ringrose and Shauna Pomerantz have described how today's girls are told they "run the world" and "can do anything" – constructing a narrative of invincibility – even as their school lives continue to be characterized by gender policing, punitive double-standards, and sexual objectification.[3] Under the spell of postfeminism, girls distance themselves from feminist explanations for such phenomena, all of which are further appropriated by neoliberalism through the rhetoric of sexual empowerment.

So if education today hails "females into their expected 'femaleness'" and prepares them for exploitative labor as women, it does so indirectly, by purporting to offer genuine equality in education and the economy while normalizing and depoliticizing the relations of sexual social exchange that sustain these institutions. Feminist consciousness may be at its lowest in decades (judging by the low rates of young women who identify with the "F-word"), yet, paradoxically, some feminist concerns are more appreciated in the mainstream than they have been since the 1960s. The #MeToo movement offers a glimpse of what Marxist feminism can do in the present, while judiciously skirting the ideological terms that provoke so much resistance. As many people are now learning for the first time, the ubiquitous sexual harassment and exploitation of women not only binds women of all socioeconomic (as well as racial, etc.) backgrounds as a *class*, but also, more specifically, and not accidentally, limits and structures their opportunities for economic independence. The fact that so much sexual harassment takes place in work environments, or that sexual favors remain, as in the nauseating stories of Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, prerequisite to women's employment, illustrates the co-constructed systems of

gender and class oppression. Whereas women of a certain class were previously discouraged from entering the workforce and instead funneled into unpaid domestic labor, women's equal participation in the workforce today remains haunted by the "sexual contract."[4] The unspoken pre-condition of sexual availability affects all female-bodied and female-presenting workers, from the poorest cleaners and restaurant workers to the most glamourous film stars. Even after the successes of Second Wave feminism, then, women's economic security and independence remain bound up with vulnerability to sexist oppression. This insight is prefigured by earlier Marxist feminists, but it shows how neither improved cultural awareness of sexualized violence, nor improved economic and legal equality between the sexes, breaks the double-oppression of women as *women* and as *workers*. Educational and political strategies need to be updated in light of these advances and their obvious limits.

Lussier and Backer mention neoliberalism as the dominant paradigm in contemporary educational policy and especially its individualizing effects. While the critiques of neoliberalism in educational theory are plentiful, recovering a Marxist feminist eye for the 21st century may provide an impetus to look at wider changes in global capitalism and the gendered regimes they create. Inequalities in income distribution, deregulation, and the consolidation of global capital in ever more powerful corporations have all increased rapidly since the 1980s. The globalized capitalist economy may perpetuate gendered exploitation in different ways from the factories of industrial Europe in the 19th century or the post-War manufacturing boom of the 20th century. Marxist feminists today focus not only on the gendered division of labor in the West, but also on transnational exploitation from which Western women benefit.[5]

Resistance also looks different today. Capitalism has done more to co-opt democracy, but grassroots movements have found new ways to organize. What should be the feminist educational agenda in the age of Twitter and Occupy? Megan Boler's original research has shown that invisible gendered labor, as well as women's adept use of social media, were behind much of the success of the Occupy movement and may provide a model for democratic, horizontal organizing against capitalism in the digital era.[6]

Indeed, the effects of technological advances on the labor market and the gendered division of labor in the 21st century themselves demand very specific critical analyses and educational responses. Valli, as summarized by Lussier and Backer, quaintly worried about the "increased rate of automation in adoption of computers in offices in the 1970s." In our era of runaway artificial intelligence, it is estimated that a huge number of jobs – both blue-collar and white-collar – will be ceded to computers who can accomplish them more accurately and more efficiently. The digital revolution in the labor economy is undoubtedly having gendered effects. Already, we see how the much lamented evisceration of the male-dominated manufacturing sector in the last twenty years has catalyzed masculine anger, arguably setting off a rise in xenophobia and racist rhetoric. It is predicted that some of the only jobs that will outlive automation in the 21st century are in fact the ones traditionally coded as feminine, since human care work is the least susceptible to artificial replication: we will always need nurses, childcare workers, social workers, and teachers. Marxist feminist thought can help us navigate the educational challenges that accompany possible revaluations of labor roles. Should we continue to encourage more girls to enter STEM, especially if the rationale is purely economic? Can this be a moment for reclaiming, and finally valuing, care work and traditional feminine labor? Is it too risky to encourage girls to embrace social roles with so much sexist baggage, even as the economic demand for them increases? Is it time to revisit paid housework?

I submit that the recovered Marxist feminist sources described by Lussier and Backer may be helpful mostly as a catalyst to take these questions seriously. The specific modes of analysis and resistance we adopt will need to reflect changing cultural and economic realities, as well as the insights of Third Wave and intersectional feminism, as the authors point out. Yet Marxist feminism cannot be properly subsumed under anti-oppression politics, as its focus remains the specific forms of oppression instantiated by the collusion of patriarchy and capitalism, the specificity of which can be overshadowed by other parts of the social justice agenda. It is valuable to be reminded that, whereas we now rush to identify the collusion between patriarchy and racism,

colonialism, ableism, and other forms of oppression that differentiate women, as well as gender minorities, women remain marked as a *non*-arbitrary class in the division of labor and distribution of resources. If recovering the Marxist Feminist eye can turn our attention to this fact and generate educational alternatives appropriate for our time and place, it is well worth the effort.

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1 Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction (Third Edition)* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2009), 106-125.
2 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
3 See Shauna Pomerantz, Rebecca Raby, and Andrea Stefanik, "Girls Run the World? Caught between Sexism and Postfeminism in School," *Gender & Society* 27, no. 2 (2013): 185-207; Jessica Ringrose, *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling* (London: Routledge, 2013).
4 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
5 Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 124-125.
6 Megan Boler and Christina Nitsou, "Women Activists of Occupy Wall Street: Consciousness-Raising and Connective Action in Hybrid Social Movements," *Cyberactivism on the Participatroy Web,* ed. Martha McCaughey (New York: Routledge, 2014), 232-256; Megan Boler, Averie Macdonald, Christina Nitsou, and Anne Harris, "Connective Labor and Social Media: Women's Roles in the 'Leaderless' Occupy Movement," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 20, no. 4 (2014): 438-460.