

**Susan Ferguson**, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, London: Pluto Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780745338712 (paper); ISBN: 9780745338729 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786804280 (ebook)

Susan Ferguson's *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* is a critical book for this historical moment. As we witness the growing frustration of healthcare professionals and the disproportionate mortality of Black, Indigenous, and low-income people as a result of COVID-19, alongside the uprising across the United States and elsewhere in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, to name only a few, it seems necessary, if not crucial, to build solidarity across these linked struggles to achieve radical change. Through a meticulous review of more than two centuries' worth of feminist theorizing about women's (unpaid) labour, and the relationship of women to waged labour, *Women and Work* proposes a "way forward for those of us interested in building a broad-based, pluralist socialist movement" that starts with social reproduction feminism, and a focus on the processes and activities of *life-making* (p. 2). Indeed, as Ferguson writes, capitalism "*exists only by consistently thwarting the flourishing of human life on which it nonetheless depends*"(p. 112). As the fight for better healthcare access propelled by the COVID-19 crisis and the Black Lives Matter movement so clearly demonstrate, racial capitalism is keenly premised on the thwarting of Black, Brown and Indigenous life. *Women and Work*, therefore, is not only about women, nor is it only about "women's work": it is about the ways that socialist feminist questions about the historical relationship between women and life-making processes have uncovered not only a powerful potential to *refuse* such work, but a dynamic site for (re)organizing life-making in a way that puts life before capitalist accumulation (p.134).

The historical and theoretical breadth of *Women and Work* is hard to overstate. Ferguson reviews three broad trajectories under the banner of socialist feminist thinking about women and work, which she identifies as equality feminism, critical equality feminism, and social reproduction feminism, beginning with pre-capitalist European feminists including Christine de Pizan and ending with the 21<sup>st</sup> century "Marxian social reproduction school" and *Feminism for*

*the 99%: A Manifesto* (see Arruzza et al. 2019). While those familiar with the field might see this review as “outdated” or redundant – Ferguson quips that “those familiar with socialist feminism’s history will sigh, no doubt, about revisiting the Domestic Labour Debate” – the differences between various socialist feminist strands of thinking have important theoretical and *political* implications for current iterations of social reproduction feminism (p.58). In the best case, Ferguson’s deeply-informed analysis of these differences offers a tool to surpass many of the theoretical tensions that have plagued the socialist feminist tradition. In Part I, Ferguson’s account centers women’s unpaid household labour, and the relationship between women and waged labour. Early socialist feminism shared a number of important assumptions about women’s household labour with liberal (or what Ferguson calls “equality”) feminists, including their belief in the “liberating possibilities” of women’s waged work, and a “moral critique” of women’s household labour as “isolating and unrecompensed” and, therefore, a burden on women that prevented them from fulfilling their true “productive” potential (p.58). These moralistic arguments, and the push for women to enter the paid labour force, would influence later strands of socialist feminism, or what Ferguson identifies as “critical equality feminism”. Though critical equality feminism put forward arguments about the contribution of household labour to the *entire* capitalist system, the early markings of a political-economic critique, proponents continued to argue that women’s oppression was a result of the “nature” of women’s unpaid household labour, or the type of work being done. In other words, critical equality feminists would continue to foreground a “one-sided” analysis of the gender division of labour as a “women’s” problem, and not a problem of its *organization* under capitalism as unpaid labour (p.103).

Social reproduction feminism in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century would begin to develop the other “side” of this argument, pulling from earlier utopian socialist political-economic analyses, such as those of Anna Wheeler and William Thompson, that were not fully integrated into the dominant critical equality feminism framework. These analyses conceptualized women’s unpaid household labour, and women’s oppression more broadly, as a constitutive component of capitalism. Therefore, political struggles against capitalism were also struggles against social

oppressions, specifically gender. Though social reproduction feminists would later argue over whether or not women's unpaid household labour could be considered "productive" labour in the more "technical, Marxist sense" – the so-called Domestic Labour Debate – they picked up from Wheeler's and Thompson's arguments, agreeing on the "structural relationship" of women's unpaid household labour to waged labour more broadly (p.88, 95). They did not, however, completely relinquish earlier equality and critical equality feminists' focus on the gender division of labour, or the nature of women's household labour as one of the primary reasons for women's oppression. The theoretical question thus changed, from a focus on whether it was men *or* capital that benefited from women's oppression, to an analysis of how "capital *and men* both benefit" (p.97).

Deftly weaving through more than five decades' worth of socialist feminist analyses – starting with American Communist Party feminist Mary Inman, Sheila Rowbotham, and the Wages for Housework campaign – Ferguson argues that the incredible theoretical progress these social reproduction feminists made aside, they were *still* unable to develop a "coherent, nonreductionist ... [and] inclusive feminist political perspective" of women's (unpaid) work and its relation to the capitalist system (p.59). The Wages for Housework campaign, for example, tacked women's oppression directly onto women's unpaid household labour and, in doing so, flattened a number of critical differences of race, class, colonial status, and more. Putting "too much determinative weight on unpaid housework" as the primary site of *all* women's oppression left this strain of social reproduction feminism "open to charges that they advanced either a dual systems or class reductionist outlook", similar to critical equality feminism (p. 112).

Unsurprisingly, social reproduction feminism came under direct fire from anti-racism and Black feminists, such as Angela Davis, and anti-imperialism scholars, such as Chandra Mohanty, for perpetuating a "universalized white Western" woman's experience that only "reflected a partial reality ... rooted in the social conditions of the bourgeoisie and middle classes" (Davis, quoted on p.103). Though social reproduction feminists at this time were able to highlight the ways that capital depends on what Ferguson calls "extra-economic (or *socio-political*) forms of power", in this case gender, to "meet its unquenchable thirst for profit", they were unwilling to

incorporate Black feminist critiques that challenged social feminists' focus on gender and capitalism as *the* primary axis of women's oppression:

Actually *existing* capitalism (as opposed to a theoretical model existing only in our imaginations) developed through a *reliance* upon those social oppressions that divide and subjugate bodies according to "race", gender, sexuality, and more. (p.115)

Black feminists drew specific attention to the ways that Black women's labour was consistently devalued under capitalism, and that simply entering the waged labour force does not guarantee their equality as workers (p.90). Thus, while picking up on earlier equality and critical equality feminist struggles to get women into the paid labour force on equal footing as men, Black feminists simultaneously expanded socialist feminist understandings of "women's work" by paying attention to the ways that certain types of paid and unpaid work were devalued under capitalism (p.80). This expanded notion of "women's work", and the focus on race and gender as critical determinants of what is valued as "productive" work are, according to Ferguson, what make Black feminist contributions a central component of social reproduction feminism.

In arguably one of the most important chapters of the book (Chapter 7), Ferguson begins to answer the theoretical issues that were central to 1970s social reproduction scholars through a reading of Lise Vogel's (1983) *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* alongside the Combahee River Collective's formal statement on the "interlocking oppressions" facing Black women (p.110). This side-by-side analysis confirms Ferguson's commitment to Black feminist thought: she centers the legacy of Black feminist insights in relation to current iterations of social reproduction feminism. Vogel's insights into the contradictory relationship between labour "productive of capitalist value" and *reproductive* labour – broadly defined as "all ... [work] to (re)produce the lives of workers", both paid and unpaid – redirects the theoretical focus of social reproduction feminism to the processes of "life-making", and the continued devaluation of life-making at the hands of capital (p.111). But it is the insights of Black feminism that give weight to the ways that social oppressions, including race, "*organize* the institutions and practices of

life-making in ways that are constantly articulated to – but not necessarily beholden to – capital’s need for workers” (p.116). Race, and other systems of social oppression, is thus constitutive of, and constituted by capital’s “tendency to *reduce life to labour power*”, to abstract labour power from the body. Dismantling systemic racism is, therefore, a critical site of struggle against the continued devaluation of life-making for social reproduction feminism.

By focusing on the constraints of life-making under capitalism, social reproduction feminism can begin to locate “how *all* workers [paid or unpaid, formal or informal] can and do resist capitalism’s relentless degradation” (p.129). Further, by locating this potential for resistance among *all* workers, social reproduction feminism acknowledges that even though “it is simply not possible to refuse work’s domination of life”, workers *can* challenge capitalism “*despite* their everyday existence as capitalist subjects” (p.129). Herein lies an important theoretical distinction between two distinct variations of socialist feminism today, namely, between the autonomist Marxist feminist and what Ferguson calls the “Marxian social reproduction school”. Unlike the autonomists, the Marxian social reproduction school understands “unpaid social reproductive work as capitalistically ‘*unproductive*’”, and emphasizes the “distinction between life and labour power” (p.125). This has important political implications – specifically, the ways that both schools “define [the] refusal [of social reproductive labour] differently” (p. 122). Because, according to the autonomist tradition, all work is productive of capitalist value, the “possibilities for resistance [exist] beyond or outside capitalist relations”; this conceptualization, according to Ferguson, “forfeits [the] fertile political ground ... of mass movements [built] *across* productive and reproductive sectors” that are “forging new ways of life-making while also confronting capital on its own terrain” (p.130). Whether it be nationwide calls to defund the police, or emergency room nurses, predominantly women of color, striking over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) as they treat COVID-19 patients, these workers “can and do resist capitalism’s degradation of life”, and have already begun to “organize with others to improve control over the conditions of work and life” (p.129, 135). Linking these struggles helps us to recognize this work as material, real-time alternatives to capitalism, instead of understanding such movements, including strikes, as only the *means* for achieving such an

alternative space (p.130). Solidarity is thus, as Ferguson notes, both the “means *and* end” (p.138).

*Women and Work* is a critical read for anyone invested in the current revival of social reproduction feminism. Ferguson’s extensive historical and theoretical review of socialist feminism is not only accessible, but it also brings readers into the heart of some of the most challenging questions facing social reproduction feminism today. Rather than simply mapping the field, Ferguson draws out the theoretical tensions within socialist feminism more broadly as they bear on debates today, emphasizing that this return “is not so much a sign of their [socialist feminists’] failure to find an answer as it is society’s failure to solve the problem of work” (p.9). To that end, *Women and Work* demonstrates how social reproduction feminism not only responds to these theoretical gaps, but is also the most powerful way forward for those of us hoping to “create a world that prioritizes need over profit, that dislodges labour for capital with labour for life” (p.139).

## References

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