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FROM MARXIST FEMINISM TO QUEER MATERIALIST THEORY:
CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER AS SOCIAL FORM

Abstract:

This article contributes to the renewed inquiry into the relationship between Marxism and feminism by addressing a core omission in traditional Marxist theory: the analysis of the social forms through which individuals are reproduced, alongside goods and services. Building on Marxist feminist critiques and Marx and Engels's early insights, it develops a novel materialist queer theory. First, it rethinks the gender-capital *relation* via revisiting the 1970s Marxist feminist notion of the "extended mode of production". Second, it conceptualizes gender as a social form, drawing on Gayle Rubin's sex/gender system and queer critiques of heterosexuality by Judith Butler and Teresa De Lauretis. Third, integrating Foucault's analysis of the *dispositif* of sexuality, it demonstrates the historical necessity of gender as the form of production of individuals in capitalist societies.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Marx, Materialism, Queer Theory

1. In Search of the Twofold Character of the Reproduction of Material Life

As is well known, Marx's analysis is confined to the examination of the economic structures that organize the process of production of goods and services. Consequently, his analysis elucidates uniquely the manner in which class separation, and thus class domination and exploitation, are reproduced and naturalized within capitalist societies. Nevertheless, this analysis is not exhaustive. A *materialist study of social forms* encompasses also the processes of reproduction of material life in its most basic sense, as well as the social forms through which this reproduction is organized.

Here, drawing on interpretations from the Neue Marx-Lektüre [*New Marx Reading*] tradition, we maintain that the core innovation of Marxian materialism – first inaugurated in the *Theses on Feuerbach* – lies in the concept of the social form. Accordingly, Marxian materialism should be understood as a theory of social forms: a perspective capable of grasping structures of domination and exploitation, which are neither natural necessities nor mere contingencies, but rather historically specific social forms of material reproduction. These forms, as historically specific ways of organizing certain relations (of exchange, production, etc.), constitute the «*non-normative dimension of the social*»¹.

As materialist, socialist, and Marxist feminist currents² have demonstrated since the 1970s, the processes of reproduction of material life include the generative reproduction of human life and the gender relations associated with it. In other words, the reproduction of capitalist societies as a whole encompasses the reproduction of labor-power and

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¹ Meißner (2010). For a brief historical-theoretical overview of the Neue Marx-Lektüre see Stefanoni (2019). On the concept of social form and the connected method of form-analysis, see Kittsteiner (1977), Blanke, Jürgens, Kastendiek (1978), Elbe (2010). For a reading of the distinctive innovation of Marxian materialism as a theory of social forms – as opposed to traditional Marxism centered on the theory of revolution – see Aloe (2024).

² The terms "socialist feminists", "materialist feminists", and "Marxist feminists" will be used interchangeably to refer to a shared commitment to understanding women's oppression as rooted in the socio-material relations inherent to capitalism, rather than as a mere consequence of biases, attitudes, and worldviews.

population, or “social reproduction”, *stricto sensu*³.

Interest in this particular aspect of social materiality was, indeed, initiated by Marx and Engels. In *The German Ideology*, they notoriously wrote, «men, who daily re-create their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*»⁴. Even more famous is Engel’s expansion of this idea in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* where he wrote a passage that «became for a time, perhaps the most widely cited quotation in socialist-feminist scholarship»⁵,

According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is again of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the implements required for this; on the other, *the production of human beings* themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and of a definite country live are determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour, on the one hand, and of the family, on the other⁶.

It is important to highlight that the distinction between two “types of production” and, consequently, between people and things is an analytical distinction that Engels draws from capitalist organization, which materially separates wage labor (production of goods and services in the commodity form) from the family sphere (production of individuals and consumption), as we will illustrate below. Engels, however, projects this distinction trans-historically onto all types of social formations, as is evident, as he continues, «by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other»⁷.

The passages quoted above, in conjunction with Marx’s incidental remarks on the destruction of the family with the advent of capitalism in the first volume of *Capital*⁸, represent the classic sites of Marx and Engels’ manifest engagement with the issue of generative production and gender relations. Indeed, this topic is at the heart of the Marxist project of analyzing social forms as early as 1845. In the fourth thesis on Feuerbach, in which the method of form-analysis and the new materialist program is set forth⁹, Marx’s

³ The term labor-power refers to the ability of individuals to perform labor. «Labour-power exists only as the ability to work of a particular person, the labourer. But labourers grow old and die, and society’s stock of labour-power cannot then be replenished without the birth of potential new labourers. Thus [...] it is necessary for labour-power to be reproduced that the labourer himself is reproduced» (Himmelweit, Mohun, 1977, p. 16).

The term “social reproduction” is a technical expression in recent Marxist feminist debate, defined as «the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily basis and inter-generationally. It involves various kinds of socially necessary work – mental, physical, and emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined means for maintaining and reproducing population. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed» (Brenner, Laslett, 1991, p. 314). It is useful to retain and add the term “*stricto sensu*” to avoid conflating this feminist notion of “social reproduction” with Althusser’s concept of the social reproduction of society as a whole. See Althusser (2014).

⁴ Marx, Engels (1976), pp. 42-43.

⁵ Butler (1997), p. 271.

⁶ Engels (1990), pp. 131-132 [emphasis added].

⁷ Ivi, p. 132.

⁸ See Marx (1990), pp. 517-518.

⁹ The link between the fourth thesis and the analysis of social forms, understood in the sense of the Marxian project of the critique of political economy, was initially identified by Bakchaus. Backhaus traces an insightful parallel between Feuerbach’s theoretical move in the field of religion and Smith and Ricardo’s theoretical move in the field of economic theory. In the former, the apparent independence and substantiality of God is reduced to the unified essence of the human. Similarly, in the latter, the apparent independence and substantiality of value is reduced to the unified principle of human labor. At this point, however, «the chief thing still remains to be done». The objective is to make the opposite movement of a reconstruction of the necessity of these independent forms and their objective semblance from the historically specific conditions of socialization of

case study is the family. He writes,

Feuerbach starts off from the fact of religious self-estrangement [*Selbstentfremdung*], of the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world, and a secular [*weltliche*] one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work, the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must itself be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionised. *Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must itself be annihilated [vernichtet] theoretically and practically*¹⁰.

Despite these insights, Marx never fully developed the fourth thesis with reference to the family, and he frequently biologized the processes of generative reproduction, framing procreation as a natural relationship. Engels, for his part, also abandoned the dyad model of social materiality, giving primacy to the “production of means of subsistence”, to which the production of human beings was deemed subordinate. This oversight represents a lacuna of Marx’s theory, highlighted first by socialist materialist feminism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Beginning precisely with the debates of those years, in what follows we aim to fill this lacuna by taking seriously and extending¹¹ the program sketched by Marx in the fourth thesis. In contrast to culturalist analyses that reduce the social form of gender domination to abstract, ahistorical matrices, it is essential to reconstruct both its necessity and its apparent naturalness by starting from the historically specific conditions of socialization of individuals within capitalist contexts – that is, from the social process by which individuals are produced and bound together into populations. Our study is, thus, working in the direction of “annihilating the earthly family theoretically”.

A lively debate around the concept of domestic labor emerged following the publication of Margaret Benston’s seminal article, *The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation*, in 1969. Although the idea of the household as a site of women’s oppression and the term, “domestic labor”, were already circulating in previous feminisms¹², this text was the first to originally thematize the category of domestic labor as work that was necessary to the reproduction of labor-power, and thus to capitalist society as a whole. As Susan Ferguson and David McNally observed in 2013, «Quite simply: without domestic labour, workers cannot reproduce themselves; and without workers, capital cannot be reproduced. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this single move»¹³.

Since that time, standard Marxism has been accused of failing to adequately address the issue of domestic labor. This is due to the fact that Marxism posits the primacy of the relations under which wage labor is performed, overlooking, or “invisibilizing”, domestic labor. While materialist feminists converged on this charge of invisibilization, their debate generated two interrelated questions: «Does domestic labour produce (surplus-)value? and, Does domestic labour constitute a mode of production unto itself, distinct from the

labor, from the social form of labor. See Backhaus (1997), p. 52. Reichelt states that Marx’s analysis of value-form in *Capital* is to be understood as fulfilling the program of the fourth thesis on Feuerbach on the level of political economy. See Reichelt (1970), pp. 24, 151; Elbe (2010), pp. 79-80.

¹⁰ Marx (1976), p. 4 [emphasis added].

¹¹ The analysis of the social forms of the production of individuals does not end with those related to gender domination, which is the specific focus of this essay, but also extends to forms of domination and exploitation along the lines of “race” and species. For an initial exploration in this direction, see Aloe, Stefanoni (2021). For a thorough discussion of the *anthropological form* of the production of individuals, that is, with regard to animal domination, see Stefanoni (2025).

¹² See Mitchell (1966).

¹³ Ferguson, McNally (2013), p. XIX.

capitalist mode?»¹⁴. A crucial theoretical result of the debate was the assertion that labor-power is not produced capitalistically and, thus, domestic labor is not a form of value-creating labor¹⁵. Two prominent figures in the debate, Hartmann¹⁶ and Vogel¹⁷, tend to agree on this point, despite holding general positions that are typically regarded as antithetical¹⁸. The theoretical fallacy of equating domestic labor with value-producing labor on the grounds that it generates the labor power that generates surplus value for capital was pervasive. It was championed by operaist feminists who, despite adopting this mistaken notion, recognized and efficiently deployed its potential for political mobilization¹⁹.

In sum, it is irrefutable that in capitalist societies there is at least one kind of production which is not directly organized by the forms of capitalist production, namely the production of labor-power, which coincides with the (re)production of its owner²⁰. Three questions, however, arise from this conclusion. They are: Q1) What is, then, the *form* of this production? Q2) What types of domination are intrinsic to this form? And, Q3) How is this form connected to those of capitalist production?

2. Theorizing the Capital-Gender Relation: The Extended Mode of Production

The domestic labor debate of the 1970s and 1980s, and more recent queer revisions, yielded similar answers, as we will see. Regarding the form of production (Q1), a number of concepts have been proposed, including: “mode of reproduction” (Bridenthal), “domestic mode of production” (Delphy), “mode of production of domestic labor” (Harrison), “the individuals’ mode of production” (Wittig), “sex/gender system” (Rubin), mode of “production of people in the sex/gender sphere” (Hartmann), “domestic labor’s relations of production” (Himmelweit and Mohun), mode of “sexuo-affective production” (Ferguson and Folbre), “technology of gender” (De Lauretis) and “the sexual mode of production” (Butler)²¹. Despite their differences, these concepts all point to the recognition of a *specific form* of the generative reproduction process.

Regarding types of domination (Q2), as we will investigate further in the next sections, these concepts are unanimously related to gender domination, defined variously in terms of “patriarchy”, “sex/gender system”, or “heterosexual matrix”. Although the connection between reproduction and gender relations appears self-evident, it is crucial to acknowledge

¹⁴ Ivi, p. XX.

¹⁵ Marx (1990, p. 274 ff.) does not see, however, an element that distinguishes the commodity of labor-power from any other commodity. In the case of a normal commodity, the value of the means of production employed in its creation contributes to the value of the commodity itself, alongside the new value added by the labor that creates the finished product from these means of production. «This is not the case with the commodity labor-power: its value is determined solely by the value of the means of subsistence that have to be purchased on the market. Reproductive labor carried out in the household (housework, childrearing), primarily by women, does not form a part of the value of labor-power» (Heinrich, 2012, p. 94). Therefore, Marx is wrong in asserting that the determination of the value of labor-power is just like that of the other commodities. He fails to recognize this distinctiveness and, consequently, the centrality of domestic labor and the production of individuals which, in the end, is not produced capitalistically.

¹⁶ See Hartmann (1979).

¹⁷ See Vogel (2013).

¹⁸ In the literature, a classification of Marxist-feminist theories has emerged that distinguishes between Dual (or Triple) System Theory and Unitary Theory. Hartmann would be considered an exemplar of the former school, whereas Vogel is regarded as the pioneering figure of the latter, which is currently exemplified by Social Reproduction Theory; see Arruzza (2014). It may be argued, however, that Hartmann’s Dual Systems Theory is, in fact, a unitary theory of the mode of production in an extended sense. In addition to capitalist forms, the forms of production of individuals should also be taken into account and cannot be reduced to class relations. See below on this point. For a criticism of such a classification between “Dual or Triple System Theory” and “Unitary Theory”, see also Mau (2023), pp. 164-165.

¹⁹ See Dalla Costa, James (1972). The political mobilization is the famous campaign “Wages for Housework”, which developed from 1971 onwards and extended to Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Canada and the United States.

²⁰ This is confirmed also by Heinrich (1999), pp. 260-261.

²¹ Bridenthal (1976); Delphy (1977); Harrison (1973); Wittig (1992); Rubin (1975); Hartmann (1979); Himmelweit, Mohun (1977); Ferguson, Folbre (1981); De Lauretis (1987); Butler (1997).

that, in principle, one might speculate about societies radically reorganizing generational reproduction (insemination, pregnancy, childbirth) in ways profoundly different from the current heterosexual matrix or sex/gender binary system and their correlated forms of domination. The connection with the forms of capitalist production (Q3) is the question that has undoubtedly sparked the most impassioned, theoretical debates. A classic formulation of this question is: Does domestic labor constitute a mode of production unto itself, distinct from the capitalist mode? Strategies to answer this question derive from two basic positions: first, the conceptualization of domestic labor as a distinct mode of production, co-existent with, but separate from the capitalist mode; and second, the *extension* of the concept of the “mode of production” itself to include sexual and gender regulation and generative functions.

Those who advocate the first strategy, such as Benston, Harrison, and Delphy, despite their differences²², emphasize the material autonomy and self-sufficiency of the reproduction of the domestic mode, which they conceptualize as a class system in its own right, remaining, somehow, at a pre-capitalist stage²³. As for the second strategy – adopted for example by Bridenthal, Hartmann, Rubin, Butler – the shared thesis is that the material reproduction of societies encompasses both the production of goods and services and the production of people. Neither aspect alone is materially self-sufficient, or capable of self-reproduction. The production of things requires people, and the production of people requires things. They are part of a single social reality – a unified process of material and social reproduction. Nevertheless, at a formal level, the relations that organize these two aspects differ, each governed by distinct logics that are interrelated but not reducible to one another, thus necessitating an investigation into the *modes* in which these two aspects are organized. Bridenthal speaks of “dialectics” between what she labels production and reproduction²⁴. Hartmann speaks of “partnership”, defined as a coexistence that is not necessarily functional or univocal between what she calls patriarchy and capitalism²⁵. Himmelweit and Mohun speak of interdependency and mutual influence²⁶. Broadening the concept of the mode of production serves to illuminate more precisely the dynamics of the connections amongst the social forms of these relations (Q3), the production of goods and services, and production of labor-power.

Given that social forms are historically specific modes of organizing certain relations, one must start from historical facts. Historically, the differentiation of a purely economic sphere is a constitutive feature of capitalism. It is absent in pre-capitalist societies, which do not distinguish between economic production and regenerative life processes. In pre-capitalist societies, there was a unity of production and generative reproduction within peasant families. In contrast, in capitalist societies, there is a separation between the production of goods and services, which occurs within private capitalist enterprises, and generative (re)production, which occurs within private families²⁷. As evidenced by socialist feminist discourse, in standard Marxism, the field of material (re)production is reduced to the production of goods and services, the social relations of production and the relations intrinsic to the sites of goods production. Thus, within this context, «labor-power is treated as a vital input to production, but nowhere is labor-power taken seriously as an output of production»²⁸. In light of the expanded concept of mode of production, however, it is

²² Benston views it as a residual pre-capitalist mode, Harrison as a client mode, and Delphy as a mode that underlies and sustains the capitalist one.

²³ For a critical examination of these positions, see Himmelweit, Mohun (1977), pp. 21-22. On Delphy, see Arruzza (2014). These conceptualizations do not fully account for the separation between economic production and regenerative processes that are characteristic of capitalism. For this reason, they tend to view the domestic mode of production as a dual entity, encompassing both the production of goods and services within the family and the production of individuals.

²⁴ Bridenthal (1976), p. 5.

²⁵ Hartmann (1979), p.17.

²⁶ Himmelweit, Mohun (1977), p. 21.

²⁷ See Beer (1991).

²⁸ Seccombe (1992), p. 11.

possible to take into account and address the daily and generational production of individuals and labor-power. Then, «for the purpose of illuminating family forms and domestic relations, we need to *invert our perspective*, analysing goods production as a process of labour-power's consumption, while seeing the domestic consumption of food and shelter as a process of labour-power's production»²⁹. Starting from this description, the following diagram may refine these insights and better conceptualize the dynamics of connection between the production of individuals and the production of goods and services³⁰.

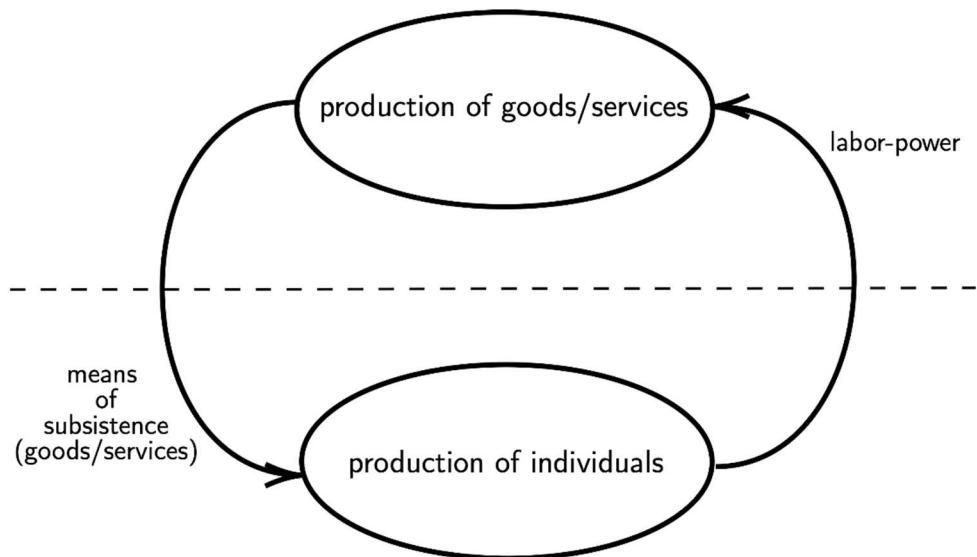


Diagram 1: The diagram offers a qualitative reinterpretation of Marx's well-known schemas of reproduction. The two elliptical shapes represent the social forms that organize these two productions, the dashed line represents their separation.

It is important to note that the focus here is not on defining the specific content of the social form organizing the production of individuals, be it the “sex/gender system”, or “heteronormativity”, or “patriarchy”, etc. (Q2). This is because the separation, represented by the dashed line, has no intrinsic meaning in terms of gender relations. This challenges structuralist arguments claiming that «the categories “women” and “men” are nothing other than the distinction between the spheres of activity»³¹. Such arguments, through a reductionist move, derive gender from the core structure of capitalism. According to this view, individuals are gendered based on their positions within the two different forms of production: those engaged in reproductive tasks are classified as “women”, while those engaged in commodity production are classified as “men”³². However, the relations concerning the production of individuals are not logically deducible from capitalist commodity production³³. Therefore, the content of the specific form can only be identified

²⁹ *Ibidem* [emphasis added].

³⁰ The material developed in this section draws from Aloe, Stefanoni (2023).

³¹ Manning (2015).

³² This line of argument is thoroughly developed in Manning (2015) and Endnotes (2013). A preliminary formulation can already be traced back to the early stages of the domestic labor debate, particularly in Benston: «This is the work [unwaged household labour] which is reserved for women and it is in this fact that we can find the basis for a definition of women» (Benston, 1969, p. 3).

³³ See also, Mau: «Contrary to the implications of Vogel's analysis, [gender] is not a natural, transhistorical fact. And contrary to the claims of Manning and Endnotes, it cannot be derived from the core structure of

through a dedicated analysis of the production of individuals – an analysis we will undertake in the next section. These analyses focus on “what happens”, so to say, within the lower oval and “discover” that this form has to do with the production of gendered individuals and cisgendersexist domination – that is, an overlapping combination of sexism, in the sense of gender domination (domination of men on women); heterosexism, in the sense of domination of non-heterosexual desire and sexual practices; and cissexism, in the sense of domination of non-conforming sexes (trans, non-binary, intersex people).

The arrow on the left represents the flow of means of subsistence, produced by capital as commodities, which stream to private families, providing them with the objective conditions for generative (re)production. The arrow on the right represents the flow of labor-power thus generated, which is sold as a commodity and moves to capitalist enterprises, providing them with the subjective conditions for valorization. The dynamics of the relationship between the form of the production of goods and services, i.e. capital, and the social form organizing the production of individuals are functionally interdependent, in constant mutual interaction and perturbation, exerting indirect influence on each other. They therefore constitute *two interconnected social forms in a structural coupling*, entangled in an interlocking structure of domination.

3. Gender as Social Form: From the Sex-Gender System to Heterosexuality

Up to this point, we have focused on the third question (Q3) and demonstrated the necessity of the coupling between capital and the gender form at the level of the ideal average. As anticipated, it is now time to investigate the specific content of this form – that is, the relations of production of individuals. The brief overview of names and concepts proposed by Marxist feminism hints at gender relations. Our aim now is to develop a theory that would allow us to explain *why* the production of individuals is organized according to gender separation and its associated systems of exploitation and domination, without reverting to transhistorical assumptions or derivative arguments that have proven inadequate.

At the core of this theory – in close continuity with Marxist critiques of the family, the debates among socialist feminists, and the work of those exploring the convergence of Marxism and psychoanalysis in the 1970s and 1980s, yet achieving a deeper analytical reach – is the recognition that the analysis, critique, and transformation of the «ways in which sexuality is socially regulated»³⁴, together with a «mobilizing insight into a socially contingent and socially transformable account of kinship»³⁵, are central to the material functioning of capitalist social formations. These analyses must therefore be understood as essential to the Marxist materialist project, and as such, foundational to the development of what we designate as *materialist queer theory*.

Any project that claims allegiance to Marx and aspires to ground a materialist critical theory of society, yet treats gender and sexual troubles as “merely cultural” (or just as historically necessary consequence of capitalism³⁶), is not only enacting a form of selective amnesia with regard to the original Marxian and Engelsian project of 1845, is not only doomed to a crude form of economism, but – more remarkably – is bound to produce partial analyses. In doing so, it ultimately contributes to the reproduction of capitalist society itself and its destructive modes of subjectivation.

capitalism» (2023, p. 164). This raises the question of whether the capital relation in some way directs the generative relation – that is, whether there is a primacy of the former over the latter. In Aloe, Stefanoni (2021, p. 369), we argued in favor of this primacy. Such question, however, is only meaningful at the level of concrete, not formal, processes. At this concrete level, the production of wealth tends to dominate, for example, by correlating national population decline with situations of economic crisis, unemployment, war, or disease. Certainly, there are situations in which the importance of the needs of reproduction of individuals emerges prominently, becoming utterly visible, for example during the lockdowns in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

³⁴ Butler (1997), p. 271.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 276.

³⁶ See Mau (2023), p. 163.

A necessary starting point for elaborating a materialist queer theory is Rubin's concept of the "sex/gender system", first introduced precisely and explicitly to address the absence of an equivalent in the sexual sphere to the Marxian critique of political economy³⁷. In other words, a theory that would simultaneously critique this system and provide a framework for its positive analysis. As Rubin puts it: «We need to study each society to determine the exact mechanisms by which particular conventions of sexuality are produced and maintained»³⁸. However, as we shall see, Rubin ultimately does not complete this project of analyzing historically and socially specific forms of the sex/gender system. Instead, she remains entangled within the theoretical field of structuralist anthropology, particularly in the Lévi-Straussian problematic of the (ahistorical) origin of culture.

3.1. Rubin's "Traffic in Women" and Sex/Gender System

In her celebrated essays, *The Traffic in Women*, Rubin defines the sex/gender system as the way in which a society (whether pre-capitalist or capitalist) organizes sexuality; that is, «the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality»³⁹ into gender. She argues that this concept is essential for understanding the relations of gender domination.

Regarding capitalist contexts – roughly sketching the dynamic (Q3) that we explored in more depth in the previous section – Rubin observes, on the one hand, that the advantage capital gains through the indirect exploitation of women's domestic labor does not in itself explain the "genesis" of gender domination; on the other hand, she adopts the Engelsian insight that the relations governing the production of individuals and sexuality are distinct from capitalist relations of production.

On these premises, Rubin maintains that the «systematic social apparatus» producing gender possesses a degree of autonomy from the capitalist mode of production and cannot be fully subsumed under its logic⁴⁰. To avoid conceptual confusion, she distances herself both from the view that treats the sex/gender system as a "mode of reproduction" and from that which simply identifies it with "patriarchy." On one side, the sex/gender system cannot be reduced to a "reproductive moment" within the mode of production of goods and services; the formation of gender identity, for instance, represents a specific type of production internal to the sexual system itself. On the other side, patriarchy, in Rubin's view, refers to a historically specific – typically precapitalist – configuration of gender domination. Thus, the extensive use of the term "patriarchy" to refer to the sex/gender system in capitalist contexts risks, without the support of adequate historical analysis, obscuring the specific difference between these contexts and those of other periods⁴¹.

Rubin revisits and updates the Engelsian project, which aimed to identify the historical-

³⁷ With *The Traffic in Women*, Rubin intended to intervene directly and precisely in the Marxist-feminist debates of her time. Explaining the context in which the essay emerged and its objectives, she stated: «I don't think one can fully comprehend early second wave feminism without understanding its intimate yet conflicted relationship to New Left politics and Marxist intellectual frameworks. There is an immense Marxist legacy within feminism, and feminist thought is greatly indebted to Marxism. In a sense, Marxism enabled people to pose a whole set of questions that Marxism could not satisfactorily answer [...]. There were a lot of people working over Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Engels was part of the Marxian canon, and he did talk about women, so his work was granted special status [...] There were a lot of people looking for leverage on the problem of women's oppression, and searching for tools with which one could get different angles of vision on it. "Traffic in Women" was a part of that effort and is an artifact of that set of problems. There were many other articles dealing with similar issues; one of my favorites was "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," by Heidi Hartman» (Rubin, Butler, 1984, pp. 63-64). She also remarks, not without a certain irony: «I think of "Traffic" as a neo-Marxist, proto-pomo exercise» (Rubin, Butler, 1984, p. 66). Here, "pomo" is an informal abbreviation for "postmodern" or "postmodernism" widely used in Anglo-American academic slang in the 1980s and 1990s. This description suggests that *Traffic in Women* can be seen as a seminal moment in the development of a materialist queer theory.

³⁸ Rubin (1975), p. 177.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 159.

⁴⁰ Ivi, pp. 158-166.

⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 167-168.

cultural moment and structure that established gender domination at the dawn of human history. Unlike Engels, who in *The Origin of the Family* drew on Morgan's *Ancient Society*, Rubin situates her analysis within what she calls the «grand statement on the origin and nature of human society»⁴² outlined by Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*⁴³.

Without going too deeply into details, the core argument of Rubin's essay lies in identifying a correspondence between the kinship system – centered on the incest taboo, treated by Lévi-Strauss as an almost universal, decontextualized structure, responsible for the “passage from ape to man”, from the pre-cultural to the cultural – and the Oedipus complex, in which this structure is reaffirmed and concretized with each child's entry into human culture.

One fundamental innovation that Rubin introduces – by challenging the implicit assumption, considered self-evident, of compulsory heterosexuality, a cornerstone of the theoretical framework of structuralist anthropology – concerns the interdiction of homosexuality as the foundation of the incest taboo. Rubin observes:

The incest taboo presupposes a prior, less articulate taboo on homosexuality. A prohibition against *some* heterosexual unions assumes a taboo against *non-heterosexual* unions. Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex. The sexual division of labor is implicated in both aspects of gender – male and female it creates them, and it creates them heterosexual⁴⁴.

Because of the convincing correspondence between Lévi-Strauss and Freud, Rubin draws the conclusion that the sex/gender system in capitalist contexts continues to be organized in the same way as at the origin of culture – thus remaining invariant from the beginning, locked in the problem of pre-cultural foundations. This is because, following Lévi-Strauss – who posited a sharp demarcation between a human being not yet touched by culture (i.e., a “natural” human, still animal, not yet fully human) and a human being acculturated and thus no longer animal – Rubin similarly adopts this perspective, reframing it along the sex/gender axis. This approach informs both her conclusions and the broader theoretical framework underpinning them, including the very definition of the sex/gender system. That definition is, in fact, grounded on a “gendered” reformulation of the nature/culture distinction proposed by Lévi-Strauss – namely, on the assumption of a biological, natural sex, distinct from and antecedent to human culture, which is subsequently reworked and transformed into gender.

3.2. Queering of the Sex/Gender System: Butler and De Lauretis

While Rubin's discovery of the homosexual interdiction as foundational is crucial for subsequent queer elaborations of her insights – particularly in Butler and De Lauretis – the notion of a “sex” preceding gender or a “nature” preceding culture has been convincingly criticized by both thinkers: Butler explicitly in relation to Rubin, and De Lauretis primarily in her engagement with Lévi-Strauss. This critique, in turn, enables the opening of an inquiry into the historically specific modes of organizing the reproduction of individuals, thus allowing for an analysis that captures the specific form such organization assumes within capitalist contexts.

Before proceeding with the critique, it is important to anticipate – as will hopefully become clear – that this is not a «Butlerian idealist [argument] about the impossibility of a “pre-discursive” biological reality»⁴⁵, rather, in the last instance, a materialist argument about the historical necessity of a (binary) biological reality in capitalist social complexes.

Let us follow the steps of this argument.

⁴² Ivi, p. 171.

⁴³ See ivi, pp. 168-171.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 180.

⁴⁵ Mau (2023), p. 159.

The core of the critique – developed both by Butler and De Lauretis, who share a fundamentally similar argument ultimately derived from Althusser – centers on the implicit temporal sequence within Lévi-Strauss' perspective, and consequently Rubin's, according to which there would exist a distinct, antecedent sex, untouched by human order or norm, subsequently reworked into gender. However, the mythical system of women's exchange and the corresponding incest taboo, posited at the origin of culture and society, already presuppose a symbolic division of the sexes and a hierarchy of values⁴⁶. Therefore, the supposed "nature" preceding culture – that is, the pre-cultural, quasi-animal state of human beings inscribed in their biological bodies – proves, in reality, to be a product of the same symbolic and cultural logic it is meant to ground and condition. As Butler notes, «this narrative of gender acquisition requires a certain temporal ordering of events which assumes that the narrator is in some position to "know" both what is before and after the law. [...] but its description of that "before" will always be in the service of the "after"»⁴⁷.

Moreover, as Butler's critique emphasizes, in Rubin's model such "biological sex(uality)" prior to culture is characterized as a «biological polisexuality»⁴⁸. The mythical exchange of women and the incest taboo – understood as the interdiction of homosexuality and thus as the very institution of culture – impose heterosexuality, while repressing this pre-existing polisexuality and superimposing a binary system of gender. Accordingly, «a revolution in kinship», i.e., the collapse of compulsory heterosexuality, would, for Rubin, entail the collapse of the gender system itself⁴⁹. In this schema, the pre-cultural utopian state of polisexuality «"before" the law [...] promises to reemerge "after" the demise or dispersal of that law»⁵⁰.

Thus far, however, the critique remains compatible with a broadly culturalist (or "idealist") argument: namely, that every society is structured by its own law (the homosexual/incest taboo) which, then, produces its particular configurations and varieties of sex and gender. Butler, in fact, poses the question of universality – and then dismiss it without proper answering it – when they note: «But what is to guarantee the universality or necessity of this law? [...] to claim the universal presence of a law in social life is in no way to claim that it exists in every aspect of the social form under consideration; minimally, it means that it exists and operates somewhere in every social form»⁵¹, *including* within capitalist societies⁵².

The question then arises: how can this line of argument move beyond culturalism and open onto a materialist critique?

We need an intermediate step.

As we have seen, Rubin's major theoretical innovation lies in bringing to light the centrality of the taboo against homosexuality – that is, the imposition of heterosexuality – within the sex/gender system. However, the queer critique developed by Butler and De Lauretis shows that «the heterosexual dyad as the holy structure of sexuality»⁵³ is ultimately secured and put to work by the *naturalization of sex*, a «naturalized notion of sex»⁵⁴. Denaturalizing sex, thus, prevents heterosexuality from being conceptualized either as a «biological fact»⁵⁵ nor an externally imposed principle or law – as in Adrienne Rich's

⁴⁶ See De Lauretis (1984), pp. 19, 23.

⁴⁷ Butler (2002), p. 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Rubin (1975), p. 204.

⁵⁰ Butler (2002), p. 96.

⁵¹ Ivi, pp. 96-97.

⁵² «If the mother is the original desire, and that may well be true for a wide range of *late-capitalist household dwellers*, then that is a desire both produced and prohibited within the terms of that cultural context» (ivi, p. 97) [emphasis added]. As this brief remark also shows, Butler remains ambiguous – or at least does not make explicit – whether the heterosexual matrix (see below) should be understood as a universal structure or as a historically determined and specific form of organizing the production of individuals within capitalist societies.

⁵³ Butler (1997), p. 276.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ de Lauretis (1990), p. 128.

formulation of «compulsory heterosexuality»⁵⁶. Instead, *heterosexuality must be understood as the specific form of production of individuals*: the foundation of, in Butler's words, «the specific mode of sexual production and exchange that works to maintain the stability of gender, the heterosexuality of desire, and the naturalization of the family»⁵⁷. In other words, the sex/gender system produces individuals as sexual subjects who necessarily perceive themselves as *either* male *or* female at the level of sex, and as *either* men *or* women at the level of gender. Consequently, the sex/gender system functions as a binary system⁵⁸ because the backbone through which it organizes and reproduces itself – producing gendered sexual subjects – is heterosexuality. Heterosexuality, in this analysis, is not merely a (compulsory) sexual orientation, an institution of “patriarchal power”, but the very matrix through which sexual subjects are produced – what Butler famously terms the “heterosexual matrix”⁵⁹. This matrix, as said, produces naturalized sexed bodies through the asymmetric complementarity of masculine and feminine, and prescribes that these bodies must express a stable and coherent relationship among sex, gender, desire, and sexual practice (masculine and heterosexual in relation to male, feminine and heterosexual in relation to female). At the same time, it produces, as simultaneously sanctioned and abjected, those individuals in which this relation of coherence and continuity fails to materialize. The matrix, thus, «(re)produces and regulates a specific power differential between women and men»⁶⁰, thus, cisheterosexist domination.

3.3. Materializing Gender as Social Form: Foucault's Dispositif of Sexuality

In the previous section, we emphasized the pivotal role played by the naturalized conception of sex in obscuring the identification (and critique) of heterosexuality as social form. We must now complete the process of denaturalizing sex by showing what it is an effect of – what “thing” reproduces it – and thus make the final move necessary to develop what we have defined as a materialist argument about the historical necessity of a (binary) biological reality within capitalist social complexes.

Both Rubin⁶¹ and Butler⁶² – albeit in a somewhat ambiguous and tentative fashion – and more fully De Lauretis⁶³, point toward the direction this argument must take: namely, the necessary historicization of gender as social form, through the work of Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, and the concept he elaborates there of the “*dispositif*”⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Rich (1980).

⁵⁷ Butler (1997), p. 274.

⁵⁸ The expression “sex/gender binary system” does not refer to a binary opposition between sex and gender; rather, it denotes the idea that both sex and gender are binary constructs, e.g., female and male, femininity and masculinity (see Bernini, 2021, p. 3).

⁵⁹ Butler (2002).

⁶⁰ De Lauretis (1989), p. 128. In these last sentences, we are drawing more heavily on Butlerian material; however, the references to De Lauretis, which are interspersed throughout this section, show how her thought leads to conclusions closely aligned with Butler's. For a full development of a properly De Lauretisian trajectory culminating in this definition of heterosexuality, see Aloe, Stefanoni (2025).

⁶¹ Rubin, in retrospectively reflecting on both *Traffic* and her 1984 essay *Thinking Sex*, explains that what she found most useful in Foucault's work – particularly in *The History of Sexuality* – was «his discussion of the emergence of a new relationship between systems of alliance and sexuality, at least in certain Western industrial countries». She then clarifies: «You know, I said earlier that many people seem to have overinterpreted the last few pages of “Thinking Sex”. I was not arguing there that kinship, gender, feminism, or psychoanalysis no longer mattered in any way. Rather, I was arguing that there were systems other than kinship which had assumed some kind of relative autonomy and could not be reduced to kinship, at least in the Lévi-Straussian sense» (Rubin, Butler, 1994, p. 84).

⁶² One might consider this a kind of indication in that direction – although in this case Butler's emphasis seems to be more on power than on a “specific historical configuration” – when they state: «Foucault's critique of the repressive-hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* argues that (a) The structuralist “law” [homosexuality and incest taboos] might be understood as one formation of *power*, a specific historical configuration» (Butler, 2002, p. 96).

⁶³ See De Lauretis (1987), (2008). For a comprehensive discussion of this interpretation, see Aloe, Stefanoni (2025).

⁶⁴ We define a *dispositif* as: the network of institutions and dispersed social practices, authorized by correlated scientific knowledges, with individualizing and totalizing effects (see Foucault, 1980; Aloe, Stefanoni,

[apparatus] of sexuality”.

According to Foucault, the transition to capitalist societies marked a fundamental shift⁶⁵. The *dispositif* of alliance – based on personal and direct domination through kinship and blood ties, «sanguinity»⁶⁶, and embodied in the extended patriarchal family, which oversaw the production of both goods and individuals – was replaced by a new mode of regulation centered on sexuality and the nuclear family. As Foucault explains:

Until the middle of the eighteenth century the [...] family [...] was above all a sort of relational system. It was a bundle of relations of ancestry, descent, collateral relations, cousinhood, primogeniture, and alliances corresponding to schemas for the transmission of kinship and the division and distribution of goods and social status. Sexual prohibitions effectively focused on these kinds of relations. What is now being constituted is a sort of restricted, close-knit, substantial, compact, corporeal, and affective family core: the cell family in place of the relational family; the cell family with its corporeal, affective, and sexual space entirely saturated by direct parent-child relationships⁶⁷.

This nuclear family, by *instilling in individuals a binary “sexual nature” or “natural sex”*, emerged in capitalist contexts as a specialized organ for the production of individuals as sexual subjects, distinct from the production of goods and services as commodities.

This transformation entailed a dual separation: the production of goods was detached from the production of individuals, and the latter became specialized in producing individuals as sexual subjects. This shift marked the transition from a system of direct personal domination (with the male head of household exercising direct authority over both the production of goods and the production of individuals through the patriarchal legal frameworks in family and marriage law) to one of impersonal, indirect domination. In the newly separated economic dimension, this domination took the form of «the silent compulsion of economic relations»⁶⁸, as Marx describes in *Capital*. In the dimension of production of individuals, it operated through new mechanisms of subjection. In our reading, Foucault describes this new configuration of the latter dimension of production as the *dispositif* of sexuality, wherein individuals’ conduct is structured by a new sex/gender system governed by the imperative binary of heterosexuality: male or female, man or woman. As he emphasizes, «sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct»⁶⁹, shaped in these ways and not in others according to the sex/gender binary system. This structure of domination became fully consolidated in the 19th century, closely intertwined with the rise of nation-states as the political form of capitalist societies. As Foucault writes:

Certainly, one of the reasons it was desirable to replace the loose, polymorphous, and complex apparatus [*dispositif*] of the large relational family with the limited, intense, and constant apparatus [*dispositif*] of the parental surveillance of children was the discovery of a political and economic interest in the child’s survival. [...] The State demands from parents, and the new forms or relations of production require, that the costs entailed by the very existence of the family, by the parents and recently born children, are not squandered by the early death of children⁷⁰.

These emerging nation-states promoted and organized measures for population control

2018, pp. 43-48).

⁶⁵ Foucault (2003), pp. 248-249.

⁶⁶ Foucault (1978), p. 147.

⁶⁷ Foucault (2003), p. 248.

⁶⁸ Marx (1990), p. 899. On the specific impersonal quality of domination characteristic of capitalist societies, see Postone (2003), Gerstenberger (2007), Mau (2023).

⁶⁹ Foucault (1978), p. 105.

⁷⁰ Foucault (2003), p. 255.

and regulation through the implementation of what Foucault refers to as “total institutions”⁷¹ – such as prisons, barracks, schools, and hospitals – as well as through state-sponsored mass-medicine programs and public hygiene initiatives aimed at promoting population growth, monitoring fertility, and advancing pronatalist policies⁷².

Within the *dispositif* of sexuality, for women, regardless of class distinctions, generative reproduction becomes the primary objective of sexual relations. Reproduction is positioned as the central axis of female existence, effectively narrowing their entire existential horizon to this role. This leads to what Foucault describes as «a hysterization of women's bodies [...] the Mother, with her negative image of “nervous woman”, constituted the most visible form of this hysterization»⁷³. At the same time, non-heteronormative sexualities and non-conforming gender identities are not only marginalized but also pathologized. They are relegated to the realm of the illicit and subsumed under a medical-psychiatric discourse, which conflates what are now understood as distinct concepts – homosexuality, cross-dressing, and transgenderism – into a single deviant framework that Foucault refers to as «the perverse adult»⁷⁴. This period, thus, marks the decisive medicalization and pathologization of non-reproductive sexualities. Among these, children's sexuality occupies a pivotal position, necessitating its pedagogization by parents, educators, doctors, and psychologists. The most conspicuous manifestation of this process was the intense campaign against masturbation⁷⁵. Heterosexual penetrative sex is, in essence, established as the dominant form of sexual activity, deemed as a marker of mental “sanity” and physical “health”. Medicine and emerging psychiatry are tasked with identifying and addressing the presumed causes of “deviant” behavior⁷⁶.

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⁷¹ Foucault (1978).

⁷² Ivi, pp. 25-29, 116, 126-127, 139-141.

⁷³ Ivi, p. 104. See also ivi, p. 153.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 105.

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 104; Foucault (2003), pp. 250-253.

⁷⁶ Foucault (1978), pp. 118-119; (2003), p. 278.

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