

---

Volume 22  
Issue 2 *The Post Pandemic University,  
Possibilities, Practices and Pedagogies: And  
New Writings in Feminist and Women's  
Studies—Winning and Short-listed Entries from  
the 2020 Feminist Studies Association's (FSA)  
Annual Student Essay Competition*

---

Article 4

March 2021

## Social Reproduction Theory: On regulating reproduction, understanding oppression and as a lens on forced sterilisation

Lydia Glover  
*University of Sussex*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Glover, Lydia (2021). Social Reproduction Theory: On regulating reproduction, understanding oppression and as a lens on forced sterilisation. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(2), 34-48.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss2/4>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## **Social Reproduction Theory: On regulating reproduction, understanding oppression and as a lens on forced sterilisation**

By Lydia Glover<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper considers Marxist feminism's two main schools of thought – 'dual systems theory' and 'social reproduction theory' - and brings those theoretical perspectives into dialogue with a topic that is often neglected in feminist discussions of reproductive rights: forced sterilisation. The two material examples explored here are the historical forced sterilisation of Black (cisgender) women in the USA and the current coercive sterilisation of transgender men and women in the USA.

Looking first to the theoretical understandings of oppression, social reproduction theory will be distinguished from the dual systems approach. The dual systems reading of Marx understands gender and class to be two distinct political struggles and will be shown to be both economically reductionist and incompatible with intersectional feminist understandings of oppression. In contrast, social reproduction theory's understanding of patriarchal oppression as something that is 'concretely interconnected' (Ferguson, n.d.) to class exploitation under capitalism gives the latter branch of Marxist feminism more promise as a basis for understanding the practices of forced sterilisation. That said, the author will urge social reproduction feminists to move towards an intersectional reading of social reproduction theory (see Bohrer, 2018; Ferguson, 2016), as well as address the significant inadequacies of social reproduction theory's understanding of gender (see Lugones 2007; 2008), if this approach to Marxist feminism is able to serve as an accurate lens on the oppression of *all people* victim to forced sterilisation.

Applying social reproduction theory in its revised form, an examination of the federally funded sterilisations in 1970s America will be understood as a tactic of the neoliberal state to systematically devalue Black women's social worth, allowing for the continued exploitation of their reproductive capacities. The current coercive sterilisation of transgender individuals in the US, as a prerequisite for changing gender markers on legal documents, will then be recognised as a tool by the capitalist state to violently impose the strict biological categories of men and women upon trans folk. Ultimately, it is hoped that by positioning forced sterilisation as a Marxist feminist issue, we are brought closer to an understanding of how to eradicate the practice.

*Keywords:* social reproduction theory, forced sterilisation, reproduction, oppression,

---

<sup>1</sup> Lydia Glover has an LLB in Law from the University of Bristol and completed an MA in Gender Studies at the University of Sussex in 2020. Most recently, she has been working as a researcher for the young people's mental health charity Youth Access and is set to begin a new role in the third sector this spring, tackling health inequality for the vulnerably housed in central Brighton. Contact: lydiaglover.2011@my.bristol.ac.uk

## Introduction

Many hundreds of thousands of people have been victim to forced sterilisation (World Health Organisation, 2014: 2). The prevalence of such a brutal practice makes clear that the right to reproduce is not automatically afforded to all. In this essay, I rely upon Marxist feminism's 'social reproduction theory' in order to explore the ways in which state regulation of human reproduction is justified under capitalism.

In terms of structure, I begin by defining some key terminology, before moving onto a discussion of Marxist feminism, where social reproduction theory will be distinguished from the 'dual systems' approach and its associated flaws. Following this, I establish the key tenets of social reproduction theory and its understanding of women's oppression under capitalism. Overall, social reproduction theory will be seen to present a cogent interpretation of Marx that offers an in-depth examination of the relationship between social reproduction and capitalist accumulation. I will also cover the recent promising movement in the Marxist feminist field towards intersectional feminism (see Bohrer, 2018; Ferguson, 2016; on intersectionality see Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1986). Despite these numerous positive attributes, social reproduction feminism's commitment to understanding 'women's' oppression will be shown to be acutely problematic. In taking inspiration from Lugones's work (2007; 2008) on the modern/colonial gender system, I will argue that it *is* possible for social reproduction theory to depart from its hegemonic definitions of gender. As the true test of a social theory resides in the effectiveness of its application (Young, 1981: 62), social reproduction theory will then be used as lens on two material examples of forced sterilisation: the historical forced sterilisation of Black (cisgender) women in the USA and the current coercive sterilisation of transgender men and women in the USA<sup>2</sup>.

Ultimately, it will be shown that in its revised form, social reproduction theory offers a robust materialist explanation of oppression, that can be used as a lens on the practice of forced sterilisation. As such, I compel Marxist feminists to champion the revised version of social reproduction theory as 'a coherent theoretical underpinning to an anti-capitalist coalition politics' (Ferguson, 1999: 1). It is hoped that by identifying forced sterilisation as a Marxist feminist issue, we are brought closer to an understanding of how to eradicate the practice. Indeed, only when individuals are in control of *if and when* they reproduce, can the maintenance of capitalist social power begin to be challenged.

### *Defining key terminology*

Before delving into the discussion on social reproduction theory, it is important that I define some key terminology that I will use in this essay. The term 'sterilisation' describes the medical operation that provides an individual with permanent contraceptive protection. A sterilisation operation either involves blocking or sealing the fallopian tubes (NHS, 2018a), or cutting or sealing the tubes that carry sperm (NHS, 2018b). For intersex individuals, sterilisation may involve the removal of sex glands (gonads) altogether (see Intersex Society of North America, 2008). I take 'forced sterilisation' to be an umbrella term that covers any sterilisation which was performed on an individual without their 'full, free and informed consent' (World Health

---

<sup>2</sup> I have focused on instances of forced sterilisation in the USA largely to coincide with the fact that a significant body of literature on social reproduction theory, on which I rely upon throughout, originates from North America. I do acknowledge that the arguments made in this essay are limited by the temporal and geographical specificity of my claims. Subscribing as I do to Haritaworn's (2008: 2) call for academic researchers to 'define [their] speaking position', I also feel it relevant to state here that I am a non-sterilised white cisgender woman and thus am an 'outsider' (see Bhopal, 2010) to the groups I have chosen to discuss.

Organisation, 2014: 1). I will also use the term ‘coercive’ sterilisation to more accurately illustrate the covert nature by which governments seek to enforce sterilisations.

The term ‘social reproduction’ is understood to mean the ‘daily and generational production of people’s lives’ (Ferguson: 1999: 4) and the myriad social, historical, and biological labours (Brenner & Laslett, 1991: 314) associated with this production. In order to keep my discussion of social reproduction specific to the topic of forced sterilisation, arguments made throughout this essay focus on the ‘biological reproduction of people’ (Hopkins, 2017: 131). I now turn my attention to the discussion of Marxist feminist theory.

## **PART ONE: Marxist Feminism and ‘Dual Systems’ Theory**

In order to provide context to the Marxist feminist theories discussed in this essay, I will now set out the emergence of Marxist feminism itself<sup>3</sup>. Finding its roots in the women’s liberation movement of the second-wave, Marxist feminism sought to locate women’s subordination within the structural workings of society (Vogel, 1995: 1-4). The starting point for Marxist feminists was that, by focusing on class oppression, Marx’s theory did not adequately ‘take gender into account’ (Spivak, 1992: 4) and thus failed to properly explain the specific type of oppression as experienced by women (Young, 1981: 50). Marxist feminists sought to address this shortcoming by exploring the relationship between women and the capitalist mode of production. Although the emancipatory goal was shared amongst Marxist feminists, differing schools of thought soon emerged, which favoured different explanations of what constituted the material basis of women’s oppression. Social reproduction theory and dual systems theory emerged from this. Below, I turn first to the dual systems approach under Marxist feminism in order to distinguish it from social reproduction theory. This analysis will highlight dual systems theory’s flawed understanding of oppression and thus bolster my later argument that social reproduction theory shows more promise as a feminist interpretation of Marx.

### *Establishing Dual Systems Theory*

The dual systems perspective views capitalism and patriarchy as two separate - but often connected - systems of oppression that exist alongside one another. Women’s oppression is said to derive ‘from their situation within an autonomous [patriarchal] system of sex divisions of labor and male supremacy’ (Vogel, 1983: 128). Class oppression, on the other hand, is said to derive from the position of the working class within the capitalist system. This interpretation of oppression under Marx is often justified by reference to Engels’s work *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* where he states that the production of the means of existence within the capitalist system can be *separated from* the reproduction of the worker within the (patriarchal) family (Engels, 1884: 4; my emphasis). This separation of capitalism and patriarchy was often understood in practice as a division between men’s position as waged labourers in the public sphere of capitalist production, and women’s position as unpaid labourers in the private sphere of reproduction (see Murillo & D’Atri, 2018).

This gendered division of labour was recognised by many early Marxist feminists as the material basis of women’s oppression (Ferguson, 2020: 113) and proved influential in feminist

---

<sup>3</sup> So as to place Marxist feminist theory within its historical context, in this section, I adopt the term ‘woman’, as many Marxist feminists have, to refer only to the ‘sociological category of people who were assigned to live as females at birth and who were expected... to bear and raise children.’ (Lewis, 2016: 102) This choice was not made uncritically, and I will later highlight the limitations of this approach.

movements such as ‘wages for housework’ (see Federici, 1975; Dalla Costa, 1972). The dual systems reading of Marx and Engels generally prevailed over social reproduction theory in early Marxist feminism (Vogel: 1983: 129) and, as ‘unpaid domestic labour has continued to be a crucial site of feminist inquiry’ (Teepie Hopkins, 2017: 131), many still consider the approach relevant to feminist discussions today (see Global Women’s Strike, n.d.; James, 2020). Despite this, the dual systems understanding of Marx is not without critique.

### *The flaws of Dual Systems Theory*

The main shortcoming of this dual systems theory is its limited understanding of oppression. In application, this produces two main problems. Firstly, by understanding patriarchy and capitalism as separate systems entailing distinct political struggles, dual systems theory is not only incapable of explicating experiences of struggle that span *both* systems (Young, 1981: 62-63), it is also ill-equipped to explain those human experiences with *additional* marginalising dimensions. As Crenshaw (1991: 1244) explains, people’s lived experience of oppression cannot be captured wholly by looking at the class or gender dimensions of those experiences separately; marginalising identities *intersect* with one another to create multiple sites of oppression (on black women see Hill Collins, 2000: 251-272; on poor women of colour see Mohanty, 2002: 510-511; on trans people see Johnson, 2015). Understandably, this focus on sex and class oppression to the exclusion of other oppressions (Vogel, 1995: 63), has left dual systems theory open to criticism by intersectional feminists. The ‘wages for housework’ movement specifically came under scrutiny by Black feminists due to its failure to account for race oppression and Black women’s experience of unpaid labour (see Davis, 1991: 237).

The second drawback of the dual systems approach is its tendency towards an economically reductionist reading of Marx. In defining gender is an ‘extra-economic inequality’ (Meiksins Wood, 1995: 267, see also 2009) that exists *outside* of capitalist oppression, the capitalist economy is presented as devoid from all oppressive identities besides class. This reading limits dual system theory’s understanding of oppression because it misrepresents exploitation under capitalism as purely economic in nature. This is problematic not only because it fetishises the economy in a way that runs counter Marx’s intentions (see Marx, 1887: Fetishism of Commodities), but because it also misrepresents what ‘capitalism’ is in reality; a ‘historical and human organisation’ (Ferguson, 1999: 5). As material examples of forced sterilisation will show, it is not possible to separate the impact of class exploitation from the experience of other intersecting oppressions.

In summation, the origins of these discussed weaknesses of this approach lie in dual systems theory’s *central claim* that oppression exists within two separate systems. As such, I argue that any attempts to address these flaws will *always* prove fruitless. It is on this basis that I deem dual systems theory to be inherently flawed and not worth exploring further under Marxist feminism. Instead, I will dedicate my efforts below to refining the much more promising school of social reproduction theory.

## **PART TWO: Social Reproduction Theory**

Moving away from the discussion of dual systems, I will now establish the key tenets of social reproduction theory and its understanding of women’s oppression under capitalism. Unlike dual systems feminists, social reproduction feminists have sought to explain the patriarchal oppression of women as something that is ‘concretely interconnected’ (Ferguson, n.d.) to class exploitation under capitalism. In other words, patriarchy and capitalism - along with other oppressive forces - are part of *one integrated* social system. By regarding capitalism as a structure

that exists only in reference to the ‘social whole’ (McNally, 2015: 136), social reproduction theorists argue that capitalism is not just perpetuated through the human labour that produces goods and services for capitalists gain, but its continuation is also dependent on the human labour that produces *life itself* (Luxton, 2006: 36, my emphasis).

### *Establishing Social Reproduction Theory*

This interpretation of capitalism is justified by reference to Marx’s claim that the perpetuation of the capitalist order fundamentally relies on the reproduction of human life (Marx, 1887: 404; see also Marx et al, 1970: 48). Although recognising the importance of reproduction, frustratingly, Marx did not theorise beyond this assertion, instead choosing to portray human reproduction as a natural biological act that is *instinctually* fulfilled by the labourer (Marx, 1887: 404; my emphasis). Social reproduction theory seeks to rectify this oversight by building upon Marx’s concept of reproduction (*ibid*: Chapter 23) to include an analysis of ‘the social relations of human reproduction’ (Ferguson, 1999: 5). Social reproduction theorists are justified in their interpretation of Marx here; by striving to better understand social reproduction under Marx’s work, social reproduction theorists uphold Marx’s own demand to observe the fundamental nature of material life in ‘all its significance and all its implications’ (Marx et al, 1970: 49). Moreover, in developing Marxism in order to explain the material conditions of women’s oppression, social reproduction feminists also utilise Marxism paradigmatically as a ‘*method of analysis*’ (Bhattacharya, 2017a: 20; my emphasis), thus upholding Marx’s commitment to the historical materialist method. As it is widely recognised that Marx’s work was left unfinished at the time of his death (Dave, 2017), it is also not unrealistic to state that ‘social reproduction would have been covered in later volumes of Capital had Marx lived longer’ (Lewis, 2016: 144).

By placing social reproduction at the centre of Marxist feminist theory, the next task for social reproduction feminists is to explore the relationship between human reproductive labour and the capitalist system in order to uncover the location of women's oppression under capitalism<sup>4</sup>. This theoretical understanding will now be set out. In practical terms, the focus on social reproduction reveals that capitalists are dependent on (cis) women and their biological capabilities of pregnancy and childbirth (Ferguson & McNally, 2013: xxix) in order to satisfy their endless need for new workers. It follows then that capitalism is also reliant on these women - as the ‘reproducer’ of the worker - to achieve its ultimate goal of producing goods and services for capitalist’s gain. These two facets of capitalism exist in tension with one another because the relationship between women’s reproduction and capitalist accumulation is described as ‘necessary but contradictory’ (Ferguson, 2020: 113). The relationship is deemed *necessary* because, for capitalists, human labour power is ‘an *essential* condition of value production which [capitalists] *do not produce themselves*’ (Ferguson, n.d.; my emphasis). This observation underscores Marx’s understanding of human labour as a ‘special commodity’ that cannot be found or bought on the market (Marx, 1887: 119). The relationship between reproduction and capitalism is regarded as *contradictory* because ‘capitalists must – in order to remain competitive – create conditions whereby meeting human needs is *subordinated to accumulation*’ (Ferguson, n.d.; my emphasis).

As the bottom line for capitalists is the need to make profit, these women’s indispensable capability to reproduce workers must be consistently subordinated to the need for capital accumulation. Capitalism does not want to pay for the reproduction on which it relies (Ferguson et

---

<sup>4</sup> Much of the social reproduction canon talks to ‘women’s’ oppression in a way that is only applicable to cisgender women capable of gestational reproduction. This understanding of oppression is later highlighted as a limitation - albeit, not an insurmountable limitation - of social reproduction theory.

al, 2016: 30) and so will instead seek to 'keep the costs of reproduction of labour in step with production so that profits will not be reduced' (Picchio, 1992: 121). It is within this necessary but contradictory relationship between reproduction and capitalist accumulation that social reproduction feminists locate women's oppression (see Ferguson, n.d.). As Vogel states, women's oppression is 'rooted in their *differential position* with respect to *generational replacement* processes' (Vogel, 1983: 129); it is women's capabilities for pregnancy and childbirth that make them vulnerable to capitalism's manipulation *in a way that men are not*. The result being that, as workers, women experience a specific kind of exploitation within the capitalist system.

Social reproduction theory's understanding of women's oppression is further bolstered by its consideration of the role of the neoliberal state. In striving to overcome the 'obstacle to accumulation' (*ibid*: 156) that social reproduction poses, capitalists are reliant on the neoliberal state to act as a "mediator" (Bezanson, 2006: 23, my quotation, see also Picchio, 1992). Here, the term "mediator" is not used in a neutral sense because, like the capitalist, the neoliberal state also seeks to gain from this volatile relationship between social reproduction and capitalist accumulation. In striving to tip the balance in favour of capitalist gain, the neoliberal state can be said to implement a two-part offensive strategy: firstly, the performance of women's social reproductive labours must be cheapened by a systematic devaluation and degradation of their social worth (Ferguson et al, 2016: 30); and secondly, the state must begin to 'unilaterally devolve the costs of social reproduction back onto [women in] the working class' (Mohandesi & Teitelman, 2017: 63, see also Picchio, 1992: 121). This analysis provides us with a masterful interpretation of the relationship between social reproduction and the neoliberal state that, when applied in practice, aptly illustrates the offensive strategies used by neoliberal governments post 2008 financial crisis (see Mohandesi & Teitelman, 2017: 62-67; Bhattacharya, 2017b).

### *Building upon Social Reproduction: Intersectionality*

Although it is hoped that this discussion has shown social reproduction feminism to be a promising understanding of Marxist feminism, it can be argued that its understanding of oppression does not adequately distance itself from the shortcomings of dual systems theory. By explaining women's exploitation with reference only to class and sex (albeit connected), social reproduction theory, too, can be criticised for failing to grasp the intersectional reality of oppression (on race see Bannerji, 2005). Unlike dual systems theory however, I posit that social reproduction theory is capable of overcoming this failing. Recent movement in the Marxist feminist field towards intersectional feminism evinces the possibility for an intersectional reading of social reproduction theory (see Bohrer, 2018; Ferguson, 2016). In making visible other identities that women possess, it is possible to better understand their experience of oppression. This is particularly important for the analysis of forced sterilisation because those women most vulnerable to its practice 'often face discrimination and coercion on multiple and intersecting grounds' (World Health Organisation, 2014: 3).

### *Progressing from the Woman question to the Gender question?*

Despite this positive addition to Marxist feminism, the practical applications of intersectionality are limited by social reproduction theory's understanding of gender. As clearly highlighted above, social reproduction theory seeks to explain a 'woman's' experience of oppression under capitalism. This failure to progress from 'the woman question to the gender question' (Lewis, 2016: 102) is problematic for two reasons.

Firstly, social reproduction theory's understanding of 'woman' does not apply to *all* women. Whilst second-wave Marxist feminists 'tended to essentialise and homogenise the women they were discussing' (Bohrer, 2018: 52), such an approach in modern times is unsatisfactory. Limited by its focus on women's biological capacities, the theory relates only to cisgender women who are capable of having children. All other women, as well as those who bare children but are not women, are left unaccounted for. As will be discussed below, trans men and women are vulnerable to coercive sterilisation as a prerequisite to their gender recognition by the state. In its current form, social reproduction theory leaves many questions unanswered as to how transgender people experience oppression under capitalism: What is the position of transgender women in the capitalist order? How is their lived experiences of pronounced marginalisation and discrimination (see Grant et al, 2011: 2-8) understood within the capitalist order? How do trans men who have carried babies experience oppression under capitalism? (see BBC, 2019) All of these questions are left unanswered due to social reproduction theory's flawed understanding of gender. Although some social reproduction theorists have recently begun to incorporate queer and trans subjects into their analysis (Lewis, 2016: 103; see Bhattacharya & Ferguson, n.d.), a lot more work needs to be done here before social reproduction theory can serve as an accurate lens on the oppression of *all people* victim to forced sterilisation.

Secondly, in differentiating between men and women's experiences of capitalism on the grounds of their biological reproductive capabilities, the strict sexual dimorphic categories of men and women are left unchallenged. In doing so, these dimorphic categories, that are manufactured and violently maintained within capitalist societies and *on which capitalist exploitation seeks to thrive* are left unquestioned (Lewis, 2016: 102, my emphasis; see also Lugones 2007; 2008). In basing its central emancipatory argument around this hegemonic account of gender, social reproduction theory seems to stand on rocky ground; can it even be called a Marxist theory if it endorses a formulation of gender that *maintains* the capitalist order? One could go as far to say that this failure to grasp the complex reality of gender undermines social reproduction theory's commitment to anti-capitalist politics *altogether*. Clearly, social reproduction theory must be revised if it is to address these problems. I will now endeavour to show how social reproduction theory can successfully progress from 'the woman question to the gender question' (Lewis, 2016: 102).

### *Lugones's Modern/Colonial Gender System*

In order to address the significant inadequacies of social reproduction theory's understanding of gender, I will argue here that embracing Lugones's (2007; 2008) work on the subject will allow for a departure from hegemonic definitions of gender. As a result, it is possible for social reproduction theory to commit to a deeper understanding of gender that is not only trans\* inclusive but also unmistakably anti-capitalist (on trans\* see Tompkins, 2014). Lugones's understanding of the modern/colonial gender system is conceived out of a historical analysis of colonial capitalism in America and the interaction between two opposing systems of gender. The modern/colonial gender system can be understood as a system with two corresponding parts: the 'light side' of the system - the Eurocentred biologically dimorphic understanding of gender under capitalism - and the 'dark side' - the Native American construction of gender that was not understood primarily in biological terms (see Lugones, 2007: 201-207). As Lugones insightfully lays out, in order to create the patriarchal colonial state, Western colonisers violently enforced the 'light side' of the gender system upon Native American peoples (see *ibid*, 2007: 201-207). In concluding that this long established modern/colonial gender system still maintains the capitalist

system today, Lugones argues that we must 'call each other to reject [the modern colonial gender system] in its various guises' (*ibid*, 2008: 16).

It is consequently argued that social reproduction feminists must wholly engage with Lugones' thesis and begin to develop an understanding of both the 'light' and the 'dark' systems of gender. Without this enriched understanding of gender, Marxist feminists will continue to present the socially constructed categories of male and female as biological facts (Lugones, 2007: 194; also see Greenberg, 2002) thus upholding the 'light side' of the colonial/modern gender system. In doing so, whether knowingly or not, Marxist feminists collaborate with the capitalist system's systematic racialised gender violence (Lugones, 2008: 17). I argue that Marxist feminists should instead, engage with the 'dark side' of gender and seek to develop a theory of oppression under capitalism that can account for concepts such as intersexuality, homosexuality and gender fluidity; a venture down this new path would prove fruitful for social reproduction theory and only further its understanding of oppression.

### **PART THREE: Social Reproduction Theory as a lens on forced sterilisation**

In this section I seek demonstrate the material effectiveness of social reproduction theory by applying it to two key examples of forced sterilisation: the historical forced sterilisation of Black (cisgender) women in the USA and the current coercive sterilisation of transgender men and women in the USA as a prerequisite for gender recognition. Although I felt it necessary to limit my discussion to these two examples in order to allow for a more in-depth analysis, I hope that this essay will also draw attention to global scale of this problem and the numerous other instances of forced sterilisation that are happening around the world <sup>5</sup>. This focus on material examples will not only allow for social reproduction theory to be 'judged according to its practical implications' (Young, 1981: 62) as all theories should be, but it will also reinforce my commitment to the historical materialism method.

#### *Forced sterilisation: the historical experiences of Black women in the USA*

In this chapter I will focus on the federally funded sterilisations in the 1970s and their impacts on Black working class women. In using social reproduction theory as a lens on this example it will be shown that social reproduction theory provides a cogent account of Black women's experience of oppression under capitalism.

Looking to social reproduction theory, then, it is true to state that capitalism has relied excessively upon Black women to reproduce the worker. Indeed, as American history shows, '[i]t wasn't the Declaration of Independence... that gave birth to America. It was the Black vagina that laid the golden egg, or rather, the chattel slave.' (Crenshaw, 2007) Reverberations of colonial regulation of Black women's childbearing have continued into modern day (Roberts, 2019) and the federally funded sterilisations in the 1970s marked an effort of the state to regulate the reproduction of poor women, particular those reliant on welfare support. The experience of oppression here was not just limited to class and sex; race was also a relevant factor in this experience of oppression because Black women (along with Native American and Mexican women) were much more likely to undergo these sterilisations than White women (Bocquillon, 2018: 2).

By using social reproduction theory as a lens, it is possible for forced sterilisation to be seen as a tactic of the neoliberal state to systematically devalue Black women's social worth. In making

---

<sup>5</sup> For examples in India see Doane, 2014; Biswas, 2014; in Czech Republic see European Roma Rights Centre, 2016; in Europe see European Disability Forum, 2017; in Japan see The Associated Press, 2019.

sterilisation available to poor women, the state sought to perpetuate the sexist racist degradation that Black women faced in society. At that time, it was believed that poor mothers had a moral obligation to restrict the size of their families so as not to create a drain on the tax system (Gordon, 1976: 158). Working class Black mothers would be marginalised on this basis and often fall victim to the stereotype of the ‘black welfare queen’ (Mohandesi & Teitelman, 2017: 64) and may possibly be labelled as a ‘dangerous reproducer’ (Roberts, 2019: 10m). Under social reproduction theory, capitalists and the neoliberal state sought to benefit from this dynamic. By offering sterilisation as a ‘solution’ to the problems of poor women, women themselves were seen as responsible for the cost of reproduction to society. This provides a clear example of the states’ offensive strategy to ‘unilaterally devolve the costs of social reproduction back onto [women in] the working class’ (Mohandesi & Teitelman, 2017: 63; see also Picchio, 1992: 121). Furthermore, by actively proposing that poor (Black) women should *not* reproduce, these state funded sterilisations were successful in creating the perception that the maintenance of the capitalist system *did not rely on* those women’s reproductive capabilities. In degrading Black women’s social worth as producers, the sterilisation programme allowed for the continued subordination of Black women’s reproduction to the accumulation of profit.

As this analysis has shown, it is possible to explain the historical forced sterilisation practices of Black women in America by reference to social reproduction theory. Intersectionality plays a key role in locating the oppression experienced here; indeed, without the analysis of oppression at the intersection of race class and gender (and motherhood), the experiences of Black women who are forcibly sterilised would be under-theorised and poorly explained.

#### *Coercive sterilisation: the current experiences of transgender men and women in the USA*

As highlighted by its limited understanding of gender oppression, Marxist feminism ‘has only recently begun to incorporate trans subjects into its analysis.’ (Lewis, 2016: 104) As a result, the oppression under capitalism as experienced by transgender people is very much under-theorised by social reproduction feminism. The current sterilisation experiences of transgender people explored here relates to the topic of gender reassignment surgery. It will be argued that this example of coercive sterilisation facilitates the maintenance of the capitalist order by violently enforcing sexually dimorphic categories onto trans people. In manufacturing this sexual division and harming those who do not conform, capitalism can also continue to exploit the reproductive capabilities of cis women, which ultimately facilitates the accumulation of profit.

In the United States, if a trans person wishes to change their gender markers on their legal documents, they are potentially required to undergo medical procedures that likely result in sterilisation (Allen, 2019). There are currently 16 states that require ‘proof of sex reassignment surgery in order to change gender marker’ on a person’s birth certificate (Movement Advanced Project, 2020a). This can be understood as a coercive practice because a person should not *have* to undergo medical procedures and sterilisation in order to gain legal recognition for their gender identity (The Yogyakarta Principles, n.d.). Surgery should be a personal choice.

In looking to the functions of the modern/colonial gender system, the state-imposed requirement for a trans person to change their reproductive organs in order to ‘match’ their gender is an overt example of how the sexually dimorphic categories are manufactured in capitalist society (Lewis, 2016: 102). In uncovering the dynamic of the gender system here, it is clear to see that these laws are not there to *serve* trans people in their journey toward gender confirmation but to *impose* upon them a concept of gender that upholds the ‘light side’ of the modern/colonial gender system. Viewing this through the social reproduction theory lens, the violent preservation of the

strict categories of men and women can be seen as a tool by the neoliberal state to facilitate the capitalist social order. This coercive sterilisation practice must be seen as a medical and legal 'apparatus' intended to prop up the heterosexist, cis-gendered norms on which capitalism relies (Bhattacharya & Ferguson, n.d., on heteronormativity see Rich, 1980; Lugones, 2007). 'Trans bodies represent the potential for undermining this order' (Bhattacharya & Ferguson, n.d.) and the state must prevent the materialisation of the threat. The threat being the existence of the 'dark side' of the gender system.

To add another layer to this experience of trans people, it must be recognised that 'almost all transition related care is paid for out of pocket, without any insurance reimbursement' (Grant et al, 2001: 26). Currently there are 10 states in America in which State Medicaid policy *explicitly excludes* transgender health coverage (Movement Advanced Project, 2020b, my emphasis). Why is it then that the state is unwilling to pay for the coercive sterilisation of transgender people, as established, that serves it? It is argued that coercive sterilisation is just *one of several* methods employed by the state in which it attempts to thwart the 'threat' that trans bodies pose to the social order. The state is happy to maintain lower levels of coercive sterilisation because it is 'those who are *already most marginalized* are at [most likely to be] unable to satisfy this surgical sterility requirement.' (Lowik, 2018: 436) Social marginalisation serves the neoliberal state in the same way that coercive sterilisation does, but without the need to incur any costs. Indeed, it is well documented that trans people experience high levels of harassment and violence when they present identity documents that are incongruent with their current gender identity (Grant et al, 2011: 153, see also Movement Advanced Project, 2020a).

To conclude this analysis, it can be said that social reproduction theory, as read along with the modern/colonial gender system, presents a plausible account of trans people's experience of oppression under capitalism. It is hoped that social reproduction theorists continue to develop this area of academia in order to show their commitment to a deeper understanding of gender that is not only trans\* inclusive, but also unmistakably anti-capitalist.

## Conclusion

In evaluating the Marxist feminist method and striving to critically apply it to material practices of forced sterilisation, it has been shown that social reproduction theory - in its revised form - offers a robust materialist explanation of the oppression. Such a formulation should be championed by Marxist feminists and fully utilised as a tool in anti-capitalist emancipatory politics. Overall, it is maintained that contributions to Marxist feminism made by social reproduction theorists have deepened our understanding of social reproduction 'in ways never achieved either by Marx or by the socialist tradition (Vogel, 1983: 134). In boldly seeking to apply Marx to new ground, social reproduction theory has not departed from Marx's understanding of the social but has instead *wholly embraced* it. Ultimately, this analysis has shown that although the Marxist 'tool' will inevitably need to be 'sharpened and honed to fit new, emerging social realities' (Bhattacharya, 2017a: 19), Marxism is just as important now to our understanding of the social as it ever was.

## References

- Allen, S. (2019) 'It's Not Just Japan. Many U.S. States Require Transgender People Get Sterilized', *Dailybeast*, 22 March, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/its-not-just-japan-many-us-states-require-transgender-people-get-sterilized>> [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- Bannerji, H. (2005) Building from Marx: Reflections on class and race, *Social Justice*, 32 (2005), pp. 144-160.
- BBC (2019) 'Trans and pregnant: How one man gave birth to his own baby', *BBC News*, 8 Sep, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-49596060/trans-and-pregnant-how-one-man-gave-birth-to-his-own-baby>> [Last accessed 16/01/20].
- Bezanson, K. (2006) 'Struggles over Social Reproduction in a Neo-liberal Era' in *Gender, the State, and Social Reproduction: Household Insecurity in Neo-Liberal Times*. University of Toronto Press.
- Bhattacharya, T. (2017a) 'Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory' in Bhattacharya, T. & Vogel, L. (eds.) *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentering oppression*. London: Pluto Press, 1 - 20.
- Bhattacharya, T. (2017b) 'Playing Oppression Against Class: The Neoliberal Legacy in the Age of Trump', *Verso*, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3099-playing-oppression-against-class-the-neoliberal-legacy-in-the-age-of-trump>> [Last accessed 17/01/20]
- Bhattacharya, T. & Ferguson, S. (no date) 'Deepening our Understanding of Social Reproduction Theory', *Pluto Press*, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/deepening-our-understanding-of-social-reproduction-theory/>> [Last accessed 16/01/20].
- Bhopal, K. (2010) 'Gender, identity and experience: Researching marginalised groups'. *Women's Studies International Forum*. [Online] 33 (3), 188–195.
- Biswas, S. (2014) 'India's dark history of sterilisation', *BBC News*, 14 Nov, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-30040790>> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- Bocquillon, S. P. (2018) 'Sterilization in the United States: The Dark Side of Contraception', *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine*, [online], Available at: <<http://journals.openedition.org/rrca/1169>> [Last accessed 16/01/20].
- Bohrer, A. (2018) Intersectionality and Marxism: A Critical Historiography. *Historical Materialism*. [Online] 26 (2), 46–74.
- Brenner, J. & Laslett, B. (1991) GENDER, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION, AND WOMEN'S SELF-ORGANIZATION: Considering the U.S. Welfare State. *Gender & Society*. [Online] 5 (3), 311–333.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of colour', in *Stanford Law Review* 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Crenshaw, K. (2007) 'Kimberlé Crenshaw's Poem 'Respect,' Written and Delivered at V-Day at the Apollo', *African American Policy Forum Archive*, 24 Feb, [online]. Available at: <<https://aapfarchive.wordpress.com/2007/02/24/respect/>> [Last accessed 16/01/20].
- Crenshaw, K. (2019). [Host] *Ep 6- What Slavery Engendered: An Intersectional Look at 1619 on 'Intersectionality Matters!'* [Podcast] 14/11/19. Available at: <<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/julia-sharpelevine/intersectionality-matters-2/e/65284225>> [Last accessed 8/1/20]

- Dalla Costa, M. (1972) 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press. 19 - 54.
- Dave (2017) 22. *Marx's Textbook Ep.1: An Introduction to the Critique of Capitalism & of Economics* on 'Living the Dream' [Podcast]. 30/08/17. Available at: <<https://livingthedream.podbean.com/e/marx%e2%80%99s-textbook-ep1-an-introduction-to-the-critique-of-capitalism-of-economics/>> [Last accessed 11/01/20].
- Davis, A. Y. (1991) *Women, race & class*. Repr. London: Women's Press.
- Doane, D. (2014) 'Is India's sterilisation programme barbaric and anti-women?' *The Guardian*, 12 Nov, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/nov/12/indias-sterilisation-drive-is-barbaric-and-disproportionately-targeted-at-women>> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- Engels, F. (1884) *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, [online] Zurich. Available at: <[https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin\\_family.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin_family.pdf)> [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- European Disability Forum (2017) 'ENDING FORCED STERILISATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES', *European Disability Forum*, 5 Dec, [online]. Available at: <<http://www.edf-feph.org/newsroom/news/ending-forced-sterilisation-women-and-girls-disabilities>> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- European Roma Rights Centre (2016) *COERCIVE AND CRUEL A REPORT BY THE EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTRE: Sterilisation and its Consequences for Romani Women in the Czech Republic (1966-2016)*. England and Czech Republic: European Roma Rights Centre, [online]. Available at: <[http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload\\_en/file/coercive-and-cruel-28-november-2016.pdf](http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/coercive-and-cruel-28-november-2016.pdf)> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- Federici, S. (1975) *Wages Against Housework*, Power of Women Collective / Falling Wall Press.
- Ferguson, S. (no date) 'Social Reproduction: What's the big idea?' *Pluto Press*, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson/>> [Last accessed 16/01/20].
- Ferguson, S. (1999) Building on the Strengths of the Socialist Feminist Tradition. *Critical Sociology*. [Online] 25 (1), 1–15.
- Ferguson, S. (2016) Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms. *Historical Materialism*. [Online] 24 (2), 38–60.
- Ferguson, S. (2020) *Women and work: feminism, labour, and social reproduction*. [online]. Available at: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?> [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- Ferguson, S., LeBaron, G., Dimitrakaki, A., and Farris, S. R. (2016). Introduction. *Historical Materialism* 24, 2, 25-37, Available From: [brill<https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341469>](https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-12341469) [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- Ferguson, S. & McNally, D. (2013) 'Capital, Labour-Power, and Gender-Relations: Introduction to the Historical Materialism Edition of Marxism and the Oppression of Women' Lise Vogel (Ed.), *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, Brill, Leiden (2013)
- Global Women's Strike (no date) *About us*, [online], Available at: <https://globalwomenstrike.net/about-us/> [Last accessed 20/01/21].
- Gordon, L. (1976) *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America*. New York: Penguin Books.

- Grant, J. M., Mottet, L. A., Justin Tanis, J. D., et al. (2011) *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. [Washington, DC: The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Center for Transgender Equality. [online] Available at: [https://endtransdiscrimination.org/PDFs/NTDS\\_Report.pdf](https://endtransdiscrimination.org/PDFs/NTDS_Report.pdf) [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- Greenberg, J. A. (2002) 'Definitional dilemmas: Male or female? Black or white? The law's failure to recognize intersexuals and multiracials.' in *Gender nonconformity, race, and sexuality: Charting the connections*, ed. Toni Lester. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Haritaworn, J. (2008) 'Shifting Positionalities: Empirical Reflections on a Queer/Trans of Colour Methodology', in *Sociological Research Online* 13(1), at <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/1/13.html>. [Last accessed 14/01/21].
- Hill Collins, P. (1986) 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought', in *Social Problems* 33: S14
- Hill Collins, P. (2000) *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge.
- Hopkins, C. T. (2017) 'Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal' in Bhattacharya, T. & Vogel, L. (eds.) *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentering oppression*. London: Pluto Press, 131 -147.
- Intersex Society of North America (2008) *Frequently Asked Questions*, [online]. Available at: <https://isna.org/faq/> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- James, S. (2020) 'I founded the Wages for Housework campaign in 1972 – and women are still working for free', *Independent*, 8 March, [online]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/international-womens-day-wages-housework-care-selma-james-a9385351.html> [Last accessed: 20/01/21].
- Johnson, A. H. (2015) 'Beyond Inclusion: Thinking Toward a Transfeminist Methodology', in Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Texler Segal (eds.) *Advances in Gender Research*. 21 - 41.
- Lewis, H. (2016) *The politics of everybody: feminism, queer theory and Marxism at the intersection*. London: Zed Books.
- Lowik, A. J. (2018) Reproducing Eugenics, Reproducing while Trans: The State Sterilization of Trans People. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*. [Online] 14 (5), 425–445.
- Lugones, M. (2007) 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System'. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 186-209.
- Lugones, M. (2008) 'The coloniality of gender'. *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, Spring, 1 - 17.
- Luxton, M. (2006) 'Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction' in Bezanson, K & Luxton, M. (eds.) *SOCIAL REPRODUCTION*. 11-44.
- Marx, K. (1887) *Capital A Critique of Political Economy Volume I Book One: The Process of Production of Capital*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf> [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- Marx, K. et al. (1970) *The German ideology*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- McNally, D. (2015) The dialectics of unity and difference in the constitution of wage-labour: On internal relations and working-class formation. *Capital & Class*. [Online] 39 (1), 131–146.

- Meiksins Wood, E. (1995) *Democracy against capitalism: renewing historical materialism*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Meiksins Wood, E. (2009) 'How Does Race Relate to Class? A Debate'. [online] Available at: <[http://advancethestruggle.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/how\\_does\\_race\\_relate\\_to\\_class-2.pdf](http://advancethestruggle.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/how_does_race_relate_to_class-2.pdf)> [Last accessed 17/01/20].
- Mohandesi, S. & Teitelman, E. (2017) 'Without Reserves', in Bhattacharya, T. & Vogel, L. (eds.) *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentering oppression*. London: Pluto Press, 37 - 67.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2002) '“Under Western Eyes” Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles'. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(2), 499–535.
- Movement Advanced Project (2020a) 'IDENTITY DOCUMENT LAWS AND POLICIES', *Movement Advanced Project*, 15 Jan, [online]. Available at: <[http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/identity\\_document\\_laws](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/identity_document_laws)> [Last accessed: 17/01/20].
- Movement Advanced Project (2020b) 'HEALTHCARE LAWS AND POLICIES', *Movement Advanced Project*, 15 Jan, [online]. Available at: <[http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/healthcare\\_laws\\_and\\_policies/medicaid](http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/healthcare_laws_and_policies/medicaid)> [Last accessed: 17/01/20].
- Murillo, C. & D'Atri, A. (2018) 'Producing and Reproducing: Capitalism's Dual Oppression of Women', *Left Voice*, 11 Sept. Available at: <<https://www.leftvoice.org/on-reproductive-labor-wage-slavery-and-the-new-working-class>> [Last accessed 11/01/20].
- NHS (2018a) *Female Sterilisation - Your conception guide*, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/contraception/female-sterilisation/>> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- NHS (2018b) *Vasectomy (male sterilisation) - Your contraception guide*, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/contraception/vasectomy-male-sterilisation/>> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- Picchio, A. (1992) *Social reproduction: the political economy of the labour market*.
- Rich, A. (1980) 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, [special issue] Women: Sex and Sexuality, 5(4), 631-660.
- Roberts, D. (2019) [Guest] *Ep 6- What Slavery Engendered: An Intersectional Look at 1619* on 'Intersectionality Matters!' [Podcast] 14/11/19. Available at: <<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/julia-sharpelevine/intersectionality-matters-2/e/65284225>> [Last accessed 8/01/20]
- Spivak, G. C. (1992) *Thinking academic freedom in gendered post-coloniality*. TB Davie Memorial Lecture 32. Cape Town: Univ.
- Teeple Hopkins, C. (2017) 'Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal' in Bhattacharya, T. & Vogel, L. (eds.) *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentering oppression*. London: Pluto Press, 131 - 147.
- The Associated Press (2019) 'Japan's Supreme Court upholds transgender sterilization requirement'. *NBC News*, 25 Jan, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/japan-s-supreme-court-upholds-transgender-sterilization-requirement-n962721>> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- The Yogyakarta Principles (no date) 'Principle 3: The Right to recognition before the law', *The Yogyakarta Principles*, [online], Available at: <<https://yogyakartaprinciples.org/principle-3/>> [Last accessed 17/01/20].

- Tompkins, A. (2014) 'Asterisk'. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. [online] 1 (1–2), 26–27.
- Vogel, L. (1983) *Marxism and the oppression of women: toward a unitary theory*. London: Pluto Press.
- Vogel, L. (1995) *Woman questions: essays for a materialist feminism*. London: Pluto Press.
- World Health Organisation (2014) *Eliminating forced, coercive and otherwise involuntary sterilization: An interagency statement OHCHR, UN Women, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO*. World Health Organisation, [online]. Available at: <[https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/201405\\_sterilization\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/201405_sterilization_en.pdf)> [Last accessed 14/01/20].
- Young, I. (1981) 'Beyond the unhappy marriage: a critique of the dual systems theory', in Sargent, L. (ed). *Women and Revolution*. USA: South End Press, 43 - 69.