

Life-making Through Socialist Feminism

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In her recent book, Freida Afary makes a compelling case for socialist feminism as an urgent response to twenty-first century crises. Her “new approach” attends to recent historical and theoretical developments (authoritarian capitalism for one), key concepts (among them social reproduction, alienation, intersectionality, and queer), as well as political and theoretical practices that share affinities with socialist feminism (notably, #Me Too, Black Lives Matter, and Queer Theory). This timeliness and scope make *Socialist Feminism* a striking intervention. Another noteworthy feature is Afary’s strong case for Marxist humanism as an under-examined archive of socialist feminist history. She presents it as a theoretical approach that can amplify socialist feminism’s philosophical, political, and Marxian foundations and contemporary effectiveness. I do not know of any other book that does all of this.

Attention to socialism in public discourse, even among those most involved in Left social movements, often lacks informed knowledge of its history and feminist contributions. When this history does surface, it is often fragmented into single-issue lines of thought and action. Afary’s book interrupts this fragmentation and understands it as one of the consequences of capitalism.

Although anchored somewhat in the United States, the book offers an expansive account of international feminist scholarship and activism. The bibliographies for each chapter alone capture this breadth and are an impressive and invaluable resource in their own right. In addition, the book demonstrates socialist feminism’s pertinence to broad-reaching twenty-first century events. Afary’s argument for socialist feminism attends to the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the relentless and lethal devaluation of Black lives, and recent global developments in reproductive technology. In each case, her analysis is keenly attuned to the critical resistance accompanying these developments and the possibility of a better future.

Afary begins her book with a brief turn to autobiography. Her narrative of the contradictions she lived as a young immigrant to the United States arriving in the wake of the Iranian Revolution discloses her political formation from ground zero of global capitalism. She encountered in Chicago the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya on the Iranian Revolution and women’s involvement in it, on the relation of Middle Eastern struggles to American Black liberation movements, and their contributions to emancipatory philosophy. Introduced to Marxist humanism, she converted that experience into a deep understanding of exploitation and domination. From her account of this history, we learn about the formation of a socialist feminist standpoint.

The book’s contributions are so many that I will only list some of them here before addressing a few in detail. Afary’s case for returning to alienation and needs by way of Marxist humanism is surely one. She pursues that path through the work of Dunayevskaya and Audre Lorde, a pairing in itself exceptional. Like Lorde (and I would add Alexandra Kollontai), Dunayevskaya has been much overlooked by feminists. Afary reads her Marxist humanist attention to human potential and needs as in tune with Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic, both of which capitalist relations foreclose. In this respect, she situates both Lorde and Dunayevskaya as contributing *philosophically* to socialist

feminism. Among the book's other unusual contributions is Afary's dialectical and global approach to reading that underlies the book's structure, the extensive empirical data she offers on every topic, and the instructions for movement building that she takes from the Arab Spring and Occupy.

Finally yet importantly, there is the book's accompanying study guide. Available online for free, the Workbook provides readers with Key Terms and Concepts for each chapter as well as Discussion Questions and Ideas for Activities. These materials enable readers to grasp the intimate connections between theory and action. As such, they are a valuable pedagogic resource for readers from multiple sectors. I certainly plan to use the *Workbook* in my university classroom, and I can imagine it being an excellent resource for community-based reading groups.

Among the book's seven chapters, the one on Social Reproduction is one of the strongest. It speaks to a longstanding contribution of socialist feminism: the recognition that the basis of women's oppression under capitalism is the devaluation of our reproductive labor. Afary offers a genealogy of that feminist analysis, beginning with the early contribution to the domestic labor debates from the Canadian feminist, chemist, and computer science professor, Margaret Benston. She sorts out distinctions among ensuing feminist approaches that understand domestic labor as contributing directly, indirectly, or not at all to the accumulation of surplus value. She skilfully walks the reader through some of these foundational conceptions of social reproduction and their bearing on the key Marxian terms "value," "surplus value," and "alienated labor." Her clear explanations elegantly parse out varied inflections in these debates and why it matters that we understand the relation of domestic labor to the accumulation of profit. Her attention to some of the developments in reproductive technology and their implications regarding the relation between the family and capital accumulation are especially noteworthy.

Increasingly in the twenty-first century, feminist attention to reproduction arises from awareness of the Earth's growing inability to reproduce the conditions that support life. The signs are everywhere. While nature appears occasionally in Afary's book, however, this imperilled reproduction of life does not receive much treatment. Yet I wonder whether socialist feminism can be restricted to social life. Shouldn't socialist feminist attention to reproduction also take into account the destruction of nature, of which humans are a part? Susan Ferguson gives us vocabulary to make this conceptual shift, I think, when she attends to capitalism's devaluation of "life-making." [1] I find that term—"life-making"—to be apt. It supersedes the severing of the human from the "natural" world, a form of alienation that is another of the casualties of capitalism. Attention to "life-making" also can amplify how we understand the process and scope of capital accumulation. It is indeed hostility to life that devalues reproductive domestic labor and the reproductive capacities of human and non-human bodies. Theresa Brennan addressed this dialectic in *Globalization and its Terrors* where her concept of "deregulation" captures the effects of the extraction of value across life forms and its prerequisite alienation. [2] A growing number of Marxist theorists who attend to the current planetary crisis of global warming have underscored these transcorporeal metabolic relations, but they often do not connect them to social reproduction in the form of domestic labor. Jason W. Moore may be one exception. In short, we need more ample terms for the requirements of the *reproduction of life*, terms that do not reiterate the social-nature split. Afary's book suggests that the humanist Marxist theoretical frame—despite its focus on the human—may be a useful analytic bridge to such a less-partial understanding. It might direct the concept of value to capitalism's reliance on unmet needs, to a conception of reproduction that spans human and non-human life, and a continual history and possibility of resisting the alienating, deregulating tendencies of capitalism.

Although the book gives little attention to ideology in the discussion of the relations of life-making, there is room to develop that feature of social reproduction as well. Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" essay was fundamentally concerned with the question of capitalist reproduction and pointed to the family, school, church, and media as institutions through which

dominant ways of knowing are reproduced. [3] He addressed the formation of social subjects as central to that task. As we develop clarity on the dialectical relation between social and natural reproduction, there is more to think through here. As Afary recognizes, the process of reproducing life under capitalism takes place through the institutions and cultural discourses that reproduce naturalized racial and gendered subjects whose devaluation becomes valuable to capital. Consideration of the formation of social subjects as a component of social reproduction can enable a better understanding of the intersectional relations of race and gender, white supremacy, and patriarchy as institutionally reproduced cultural discourses. They are weapons of domination that condition and enable the capitalist class relation of exploitation and thus indirectly contribute to the accumulation of profit. Practices that legitimize patriarchal domination and white supremacy are also questioned and resisted. Here Afary's new socialist feminist approach is especially strong as she references multiple social movements in which that resistance and the aspirations of socialist feminism are alive and advancing.

Scholars and students will find this timely book extremely useful. As Afary well knows from her own experience as a public librarian who has run community-based study groups, readers outside academia also will turn to this book for an updated perspective on socialist feminism. It is especially invaluable now when the terms "socialism" and "feminism" circulate across the English-speaking world as both threat and promise.

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P.S.

New Politics

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Footnotes

[1] Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (Pluto Press, 2019).

[2] Teresa Brennan. *Globalization and its Terrors* (Routledge, 2002).

[3] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Monthly Review, 1971), 85-126.