**The Formal and Real Subsumption of Gender Relations:**

**Challenging the Transhistorical Status of ‘Patriarchy’**

**Abstract:** Attempts to unify Marxist and feminist social critique have been vexed by the fact that ‘patriarchy’ predates the advent of capitalism (its transhistorical status). Feminists within the Marxist, socialist, and materialist traditions have responded to this point by either granting patriarchy a certain autonomy relative to capitalism (the ‘dual/triple systems’ approach), or by suggesting that patriarchal relations have a foundational and necessary status in the history of capitalist development (which we term the ‘origins-subsistence’ approach). This paper offers an alternative account of the relationship between capitalism and the transhistorical status of ‘patriarchy.’ In aid of a ‘unitary theory’ of Marxist Feminism, we argue that the transhistorical status of patriarchy is better understood through an application of Marx’s concepts of formal and real subsumption. A modified version of these concepts can illuminate not only capitalist appropriation of antecedent social and economic forms, but also its capacity to produce new forms of gendered exploitation and oppression.

**Keywords:** Marxist Feminism, formal subsumption, real subsumption, transhistorical, patriarchy, gender, relations of production

**Introduction**

The relationship between feminism and Marxism has been construed in myriad ways, as an ‘unhappy marriage,’ as an ‘dangerous liaison’, and as a ‘unitary theory’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Debates surrounding the possibility of Marxist Feminism, socialist feminism, or materialist feminism are often indexed the historical relation between capitalism and patriarchy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Explicitly or otherwise, these discussions typically hinge on the question of what some refer to as the ‘transhistorical’ status of patriarchy, that is, its status as a systemic form of gender oppression and a gendered/sexual division of labour which predates capitalism and, more generally, persists through multiple social forms and modes of production. This particular fact has been the source of much theoretical discord, not to mention strategic and practical division, and not least of all in the categorisation of various feminist thinkers as ‘dual’ or ‘triple systems’ feminists.

Most recently, this debate resurfaced in the pages of popular leftist magazine *Viewpoint*,with Johanna Oksala, FTC Manning, and Sara Farris responding to Cinzia Arruzza’s recent ‘Remarks on Gender.’ This debate highlights the centrality of the logic/history distinction in the criticism of both capitalism and gender oppression, a distinction which has crucial implications for the historical claims undergirding debates about capitalism and patriarchy.[[3]](#footnote-3) Arruzza, to summarize, ultimately concludes that Marxist Feminism (in the tradition of the ‘unitary theory’ mentioned above) is possible, even if one maintains that gender oppression is not itself intrinsic to the logic of capital accumulation, or if one maintains that the work of social reproduction is not ‘productive’ of surplus-value or of commodities, a distinction we will return to later in this article.[[4]](#footnote-4) Arruzza also concludes that, rather than maintain a hard separation between the logical and historical aspects of capitalism, we can ultimately develop a unitary approach from the fact that there has never been nor could there be a ‘pure’ capitalism to which only the logical claims apply, but only so many historical manifestations.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Arruzza is critisized for maintaining even the most minimal distinction between capitalism’s logic as a social and economic form and patriarchy as a substantive historical, if contingent, tendency of capitalist relations.[[6]](#footnote-6) Most of this criticism, furthermore, stems from the claim that gender relations are not contingent but necessary to capitalism’s logic[[7]](#footnote-7); moreover, new forms of gendered oppression and exploitation have been generated by capitalism, which would seem to trouble the narrative that capitalism merely appropriates violent gender relations from historical antecedent conditions.[[8]](#footnote-8) The substance of this 2015 debate and the critical tensions that arise within it indicate that, while the need for a unitary theory which Arruzza works toward is still pressing, it has not yet been fully satisfied.

Without the pretension that such a need could be met in such a short work, this paper aims to contribute resources which have not yet been excavated in Marx’s own analyses of capitalism, resources which require some adaptation, but which can greatly enhance the sophistication of our debates about the theoretical grounds and exigencies of Marxist Feminism. Thus, to address the seeming historical autonomy of capitalism and gender exploitation/oppression, we turn to a modified version of Marx’s categories of ‘formal subsumption’ and ‘real subsumption,’ to examine capitalism’s fundamentally historically appropriative logic as it functions to integrate older and generate newer social relations of exploitation, expropriation, and domination.

**Approaches to the ‘transhistorical’ status of gendered relations**

As we have already indicated, debates surrounding the relationship between Marxism and feminism are shaped by what we will henceforth call the ‘transhistorical status of patriarchy,’ or the fact that sexism, gender inequality, the gendered division of labour, gendered oppression etc. predate the existence of capitalism. The chronological fact of patriarchy’s longer historical trajectory has motivated many to suggest—with rather high political stakes—the relative autonomy of the two systems (that is, dual/triple systems theories) or, conversely, to insist on the veritable indistinguishability of the two (where gender is a founding category in the historical development of capitalism; an approach we refer to here as the ‘origins-subsistence approach’).

These two approaches to the historical conjunction of capitalism and patriarchy (or, male-dominance, cisheterosexism)—the dual/triple systems approach and the origins-subsistence approach—both take the chronological order of appearance of these systems as their starting point. Even the origins-subsistence approach, which tries to provide an account of the historical continuity between these systems, tends to emphasize the ‘founding’ quality of sex/gender relations in the history of capitalism, rather than investigate capitalism’s historically appropriative logic as a *totalising and subsuming* one. The dual/triple systems approach (which has been the subject of much polemic and often refers to thinkers who do not categorize themselves in such a fashion) begins from a similar starting point: patriarchy is older than capitalism and its existence is therefore autonomous, if ‘entangled’ or ‘imbricated’ with that of capitalist relations. The clearest example of this approach can be found in Heidi Hartmann’s widely read “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” as well as the work of Christine Delphy and much ‘materialist feminism’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Proponents of the dual/triple systems approach also tend to view this chronological fact as having normative, strategic implications which indicate the need for autonomous movements and strategies.[[10]](#footnote-10) This approach, naturally, fails to register how capitalism has appropriated and radically altered forms of gendered labour and domination.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The dual/triple systems approach to the historical relation between patriarchy and capitalism, we maintain, is *the* dominant view of that relation within feminist theory. That is, non-Marxists or anti-Marxist Feminism is the dominant modus operandi of feminist theory in the Euro-Atlantic context. This is often not a clearly stated position, but rather a tacit presupposition of feminist theorising. For many feminists, Marxism and feminism are *de facto* incompatible. These assumptions and their implications are scarcely referred to not because these ideas have disappeared (after all, such debates were at their peak in the 1970s) but because they have become the unmarked default of feminist theorising about capitalism. That being said, a sizeable response to this theoretical disposition has developed steadily alongside it, though with considerably less professional and mainstream clout. The most recent instantiations of social reproduction theory (henceforth SRT or SRT feminism), for example, are a rigorous response to this tendency. However, some of SRT’s early theorists (for example, Silvia Federici and Maria Mies) and other feminists who have focused on gender and capitalism in an a more integrative way (for example, Monique Wittig), have offered accounts of the relation between gender and capitalism in ways that elide capitalism’s appropriative logic, even as they insist on capitalism’s intrinsic ills.[[12]](#footnote-12) These cases exemplify what we call the origins-subsistence approach.[[13]](#footnote-13) This approach is, if not mutually exclusive, in theoretical tension with the dual/triple systems approach and yet still does not quite grasp the ways that capitalism fundamentally transforms historically antecedent gender relations.

The origins-subsistence approach to the patriarchy-capitalism relation foregrounds the ways in which gender, sexuality, and reproduction play a formative role in providing the material and social conditions of possibility for the rise of capitalism as a system. Often, the emphasis is placed on how capitalism could not have developed without the expropriation of women’s labour. Without this process of gendered primitive accumulation, they claim, capitalism could not have attained ascendancy nor effectively engaged in the process of capital accumulation. In this same view, subsequently, gendered relations have been a means of subsistence for capitalist production and reproduction. Thus, the origins-subsistence approach is oriented toward how capitalism came into being and the ways in which it is able to carry out its social and economic functions.

While this approach has inspired a considerable amount of generative and critical historical scholarship on the origins of capitalism, it is our view that this approach—like the dual/triple systems approach which has been so oft-discussed and criticized before it—does not quite grasp *how or why* capital appropriates gendered relations and divisions. Moreover, the causal logic established by this approach is, ultimately, too broad to address the historically specific processes of capitalism’s historical integration. Certainly, the wealth accumulated from the expropriation of women’s labour and the disciplining of sexuality and reproduction did provide a decisive material advantage in the development of capital accumulation. What has not been established is that this expropriation’s status as the condition of possibility for the rise of capitalism amounts to either its categorical primacy or its determinative power. There were many material factors predating the rise of capitalism (for example, the passage cited above where Marx insists that colonial expropriation is one of the conditions of possibility for capitalism’s ascendancy). However, we need to make a distinction between material conditions of possibility which are contingent (that is, may be maintained but may also be transformed) and those which are necessary to capital’s functioning. We must likewise be attentive to the fact that many societies that appropriated women’s labour in a systematic way did not become capitalist.

The argument, in sum, conflates the *immediate* conditions of possibility of capitalism (which is a consequence of capitalism’s arrival in an already existing world, with all that that entails) and the *mediation* of those conditions by capitalism’s appropriative and transformative logic. Thus, proponents of the origins-subsistence approach to the question of transhistorical patriarchy, rely on a kind of genetic fallacy to establish an intrinsic relation between capitalism and patriarchy. While the origins-subsistence approach resists the tendency to think that historical precedence makes ‘patriarchy’ and capitalism autonomous systems, it is perhaps too quick to insist that ‘patriarchy’ is the founding condition of capitalist production or that the continuity between these systems dispenses with the need to make analytical distinctions about capitalism and patriarchy, respectively.

These thinkers offer accounts of how ‘patriarchal’ relations were present at capitalism’s historical inception and how these relations provide the material conditions of possibility for the transformation of the labour process and the consolidation of capitalist power. While this point is, by all empirical standards, accurate, the emphasis that they place on the causal primacy of gendered relations of production and on the logical relation between gender oppression/exploitation and capitalism is somewhat misleading, as it *conflates rather than dialectically grasps* the logical and historical dimensions of capitalism as a system. It is our contention that Marxist Feminists need neither conflate these dimensions nor understand them as strictly ‘indifferent’—the two alternatives posed even in the most recent debates about capitalism’s historical logic. Rather, we need to—in addition to making analytical distinctions about the spheres of production and reproduction—also grasp *capitalism’s logic qua historical appropriation*.

A third approach has been formulated by Marxist Feminists (what Arruzza most recently, alluding to the work of Lise Vogel, has called ‘a unitary theory’). The ‘unitary theory’ approach is relatively self-explanatory in terms of its aims but is practiced in a variety of ways (SRT being the most prominent of these today). Attempts to form a ‘unitary theory’ range from early 20th century Marxist Feminists such as Clara Zetkin to the Marxist Feminism of Lise Vogel, Martha Giménez, and finally the most recent instantiation of Marxist and socialist feminisms exemplified by SRT feminists such as Tithi Bhattacharya, Susan Ferguson, David McNally, and the aforementioned Arruzza.[[14]](#footnote-14) Even this ‘unitary’ approach, however, has within it considerable variation (for example, the earlier instantiations of socialist feminism, for example, often emphasize the potentially liberatory aspects of women engaging in wage labour, a premise rigorously challenged by SRT).

Our own approach is a contribution to this tradition of ‘unitary theory’ which puts the methods and tools of Marxist critique toward feminist ends, maintaining that there are no logical claims to be made about the mutual exclusivity of these projects (this is to say nothing of ‘actually existing’ movements wherein women’s oppression has been sidelined or deferred).[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, as a final note before moving on to some exemplifying how concepts such as formal and real subsumption can be of use to Marxist Feminists, we would like to take a moment to situate our own intervention in relation to SRT feminism. Our own thinking has been deeply shaped by the interventions made by SRT feminists and we find their analyses, moving between both spheres of re/production, insightful and timely. Thus, we understand our own remarks as fundamentally commensurate with the basic insights of SRT.

Our intervention here, however, is in a slightly different register, namely in the sphere of *understanding how capitalism appropriates, suppresses, and transfigures historical forms external to it and by what logic it produces new social forms and categories*. Thus, a subsumed form (given the topic at hand we will focus on the subsumption of *relations of production*) can appear in *either or both* the circuit of commodity production or that of social reproduction. What we offer in this paper is not a predictive model for how to anticipate which forms of exploitation, oppression, and domination will present where and upon which persons. Rather, our goal is to reconsider Marx’s historical categories as they inform our understanding of how capitalism appropriates in general, speaking more directly to the question at the heart of debates about how to best understand the historical relationship between capitalism and what we now call ‘patriarchy’.

**Marx’s conception of formal and real subsumption**

In an appendix to *Capital*, titled ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production,’ Marx sketches the relation of capital to prior economic forms and preexisting aspects of the labour process.[[16]](#footnote-16) Capitalism, as Arruzza herself highlights, was not created in a vacuum and thereby relates to these historical forms in ways that maintain the accumulation process. According to Marx, capitalism integrates these antecedent forms and aspects of the labour process either through formal subsumption or through real subsumption. In its original context in *Capital*, formal subsumption refers to the integration of the labour process and aspects of a pre-capitalist mode of production by subordinating them to the aim of capital accumulation, though without necessarily fundamentally altering the labour process itself.[[17]](#footnote-17) Thus, capital accumulation becomes the aim of those processes, even as the means by which surplus-value is not itself characterized by a quintessentially capitalist form (for example, wage labour). In Marx’s own words, ‘capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it […] it takes over an existing labour process, developed by different and more archaic modes of production’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In contrast, the process of real subsumption marks ‘the development of a specifically capitalist mode of production,’ the transformation of the nature of the labour process itself to conform to capitalism’s own means by which to extract surplus-value, accrue profit, and accumulate capital more generally.[[19]](#footnote-19) In contrast to real subsumption, in conditions of formal subsumption, capital ‘has not yet succeeded in becoming the dominant force, capable of determining the form of society as a whole’.[[20]](#footnote-20) It may, Marx writes, ‘[transform] its money into capital by extorting unpaid labour, surplus labour, from the immediate producer. But it does not intervene in the process of production itself, which proceeds in its traditional fashion, as it always had done’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, real subsumption takes places when the inverse is true, when capitalism has not only hollowed out and inhabited the older forms and processes, as an emergent but not yet dominant force, but when it has also transformed the labour process itself, including generating new relations and new forms of violence.

Not unlike Marx’s account of originary accumulation often translated as ‘primitive accumulation’) in Chapters 26-30, these concepts are often misunderstood to be sequential or stadial in character.[[22]](#footnote-22) However, Marx clearly emphasizes the possibility of their coexistence, including the heterogeneity that this coexistence produces. Both processes, Marx argues, ‘survive and reproduce themselves in transitional sub-forms within the framework of capitalist production’.[[23]](#footnote-23) This point is pivotal for understanding that, like ‘originary accumulation’, neither of these processes describe a fixed point of origin or a completed process, but rather are ongoing and opportunistic in the sense that they can also be employed to avoid localized capitalist crises or contain struggles against capital long after their apparent dissolution. Understanding formal and real subsumption as continual, contemporaneous, and differentiated processes is crucial for not only adapting the concepts to contribute to debates about the historical relation between capitalism and patriarchy, but also to situate oneself in more conventional debates about the concept.

If at first the concepts of formal and real subsumption seem distant from debates about the relation between capitalism and questions of gender or between Marxism and feminism, it is likely because of how these concepts have already been taken up within the Marxist tradition. When Marxists theorists hear these terms, they associate it with authors such as Antonio Negri, Harry Harootunian, or, more recently the literature on ‘cognitive capitalism’ or ‘immaterial labour,’ including work by Christian Fuchs or Jason Read.[[24]](#footnote-24) Indeed, this is the referent of Arruzza’s brief allusion to the concepts.[[25]](#footnote-25) Debates about formal and real subsumption have often focused on whether or in what ways society as a whole (and we ought to question the meaning of ‘society as a whole’ in this context) has been formally or really subsumed to capitalist aims and processes. It is, ultimately, claims about *social totality* which are at stake in these debates.

Debates about formal and real subsumption revolve around the degree to which aspects of the labour process and indeed all aspects of life have been *totalized* or totally integrated into capitalism. Such debates are certainly of use to anyone interested in the historical development of capitalism in general, but for our purposes here—that is, to employ formal and real subsumption in the analysis of how capitalism integrates gender exploitation/oppression—they are not especially helpful.

It is neither surprising nor incorrect that these conventional debates around formal and real subsumption should coalesce around the question of society’s totalisation (or alleged lack thereof). Still, it is more pressing to work toward adapting the concepts to examine capitalism’s relation to patriarchy, male dominance, and the gendered/sexual division of labour. Having said that, one weakness of older debates in, between, and against Marxist and materialist feminisms has been that conversations regarding ‘the woman question’ have neglected the need to theorize multiple oppressions, including those emerging from racialisation. Before moving on, I want to clarify that I have chosen to intervene in debates about *women’s oppression qua women*, which is neither exclusive of nor in opposition to *women’s oppression* *qua racialized or colonized peoples*, primarily because there is a somewhat more compelling (but, ultimately, not decisive) case for the historical autonomy of sex/gender relations than for relations of racialized inequality.[[26]](#footnote-26) The analysis I forward here, though not without proper attention to the specific historical and material conditions one analyzes, could just as well be applied to the integration of differentiated and uneven cultural, religious, and xenophobic hierarchies, the practices of slavery, servitude, and other forms of racialized subordination within and in excess of the labour process, which capitalism has long since commandeered (and pioneered) in the pursuit of accumulation.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Modifying Marx’s conception of formal and real subsumption**

In Marx’s original formulation, the concepts of formal and real subsumption describe different dimensions of capitalism’s integration of pre-capitalist elements of the labour process. Thus, these categories are indexed to specific forms of surplus-value—that is, value which is ‘excess’ in the sense that it exceeds the costs associated with production, especially those associated with the sale and purchase of labour power.[[28]](#footnote-28) In this context, formal subsumption is indexed to what is called ‘absolute surplus-value’ and real subsumption to ‘relative surplus-value’. Relative surplus-value refers to a more constrained situation from which to manipulate labour costs and wages (and thereby surplus-value), including ‘alteration in the labour process of such a kind as to shorten the labour-time socially necessary for the production of a commodity,’ which is derived from increases in productivity.[[29]](#footnote-29) Absolute surplus-value, in contrast, is a modification of the amount of labour time required for the production of surplus-value. Thus, absolute surplus-value typically entails a quantitative increase in labour hours, rather than a qualitative alteration in the labour process to reduce the need for quantitative changes like extensions of the working day (which would be resisted forcefully by an organized labour movement, for example). It is also important to note that, since formal and real subsumption are categories which are technically associated with surplus-value, these categories are related to what is often called the ‘exploitation critique’ of capitalism, which emphasizes capitalism’s exploitative, ethically objectionable labour practices, and their fundamental inhumanity as the primary and necessary result of the process of accumulation.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Having laid out the terms of the original context of these concepts, we want to intervene to modify the use of the concepts to a) exceed the focus on the circuit of commodity production (and thus the production of surplus-value, as a technical category, directly) and b) to expand the concept to include other modifications of the labour process which are qualitative and not easily indexed to either form of surplus-value but nonetheless effective means of expanding and accelerating capital accumulation more generally, in addition to increasing the extraction of profit. These modifications require two theoretical moves, both of which—while not made by Marx himself—are compatible with a consistent reading of historical materialism as a method and with other concepts in his corpus (for example, originary or ‘primitive’ accumulation).

The first modification necessary is to decouple the concepts of formal and real subsumption from the categories of absolute and relative surplus value. No such decoupling is necessarily in order in cases where one is focused primarily or exclusively on wage labour which produces surplus-value. Without delving into the distinction between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ labour which has led so many debates[[31]](#footnote-31) about, for example, domestic or household labour astray, it is necessary to decouple these concepts from the domain of surplus-value because many of the processes which I hope to analyse through the lens of subsumption are not strictly processes of waged labour or of the extraction of surplus-value, surplus value being one specific category—indeed, unique to capitalism in origin—of how the accumulation process occurs. In other words, I take the accumulation of capital to be multifaceted—as we think Marx did—involving not only surplus-value, but other forms of profit as well as indirect but no less systematic processes which reproduce the conditions of possibility of surplus-value. Most importantly, we take the *aim* of production (under capitalism, this is exchange-value or profit) to be the most decisive force in shaping relations as well as forces of production. It is on this score that our intervention draws support from SRT, especially in its contributions to Marxist Feminism.

SRT feminism’s uptake of the distinction between the circuit of commodity production and the circuit of social reproduction as two interdependent circuits in the accumulation of capital is a theoretical insight to which we hold fast.[[32]](#footnote-32) That being said, our own contribution to the recent revival of Marxist Feminism, while assimilating this crucial insight, pertains more to *the tendency of capital toward historical integration* more generally. These integrations (and they are plural) are legible in *both* the circuit of social reproduction *and* the circuit of commodity production. The effects and fluctuations of such historical appropriations and transformations can vary significantly depending on the sphere in which it appears and through which it is analyzed. For example, the gendered division of labour has a distinct appearance in wage labour (that is, real subsumption) from its appearance in the unpaid labour of social reproduction (that is, formal subsumption). Women’s oppression and exploitation in the ‘workplace’ is not one and the same as the expropriation of labour as they produce the worker. The circuit through and into which gendered labour practices are subsumed, presents distinct modes of integration of older (and newly created) gender dynamics which nonetheless form parts in a larger capitalist social totality. Thus, in what follows, the movements between these spheres and the processes of real/formal subsumption are not predetermined nor intended to be predictive. Rather, the model we lay out is intended to clarify the possible terms in which a wide variety of historical configurations might organize themselves as part of the process of accumulation *in general*.

To some, the decoupling of the categories of formal and real subsumption from the specific categories of absolute and relative surplus value may seem to make the concepts less precise. If one’s goal is to discuss ‘free’ (that is, formally and abstractly independent) wage labour than such a critic would be correct, but since our analysis here is not confined to wage labour, it would be misleading to maintain the categories’ relation to specific forms of surplus-value. Furthermore, the reader may ask whether if by forfeiting exclusive emphasis on wage labour we are not thereby eviscerating all that is specific to capital and thus reifying or otherwise generalising about social relations beyond capital’s historical specificity. In other words, some critics take wage labour to be the central category specific to capitalist production and our broadening the scope of logical-historical analysis would, for them, result in a less precise analysis of what makes capitalism capitalist.

However, in contrast to this imagined critic, we do not maintain the primacy or exclusivity of wage labour as a category of capitalist production in general (though it most certainly is the most central if one is analyzing surplus-value and the exploitation which *is* endemic to capitalism). This is largely influenced by our sustained interested in thinking the logical and historical relations between capitalism and colonialism, imperialism, and globalisation, more broadly, an analysis whose focus cannot, if it is to be adequate to the historical and material conditions to which it is devoted, be exclusively focused on such a category—an analysis which also demonstrates the limits of trying to grasp a capitalist social totality (now global in scale) only through a critique of exploitation. Moreover, to maintain the absolute primacy of wage labour is to not only neglect a robust Marxist scholarship on capitalist relations not constituted by wage labour, but also to presuppose that what is unique to capitalism as a historically specific form is equally determinative in all cases, a claim which invites the challenge that this paper, if only in part, attempts to answer.

The second modification that is required is the move away from the tendency to think of subsumption primarily in terms of technologies, tools, and physical attributes of the labour process. As with the categories of surplus-value, such an emphasis might be understandable and necessary under other circumstances, but it does not serve the particular ends to which this analysis is dedicated. This modification is strictly a question of emphasis and does not require any further analytical alteration, so long as one does not subscribe to technological or ‘productive force’ determinism (to say nothing of whether such a tendency makes an ambivalent appearance in Marx’s own work). We remind the reader that the categories of formal and real subsumption are intended to describe the subsumption of heterogeneous aspects of the labour and production process toward capitalist ends (that is, toward the production of exchange-value rather than use-value, toward the end of capital accumulation) and thus are categories which are well suited to considering how any number of these aspects are integrated, reproduced, and transformed by capitalism. As with much of the analytical work conducted by Marx in *Capital* and the accompanying *Economic Manuscripts*, Marx’s own focus on surplus-value and wage labour as categories is largely explicable in terms of his understanding of these works as a ‘rational abstraction’ intended to capture synthetically constructed, ‘pure’ logical categories belonging to capital, an abstraction intended to clarify the logic of capital and whose determinations vary historically.[[33]](#footnote-33) Thus, our own modifications as detailed above do not contradict Marx’s analysis of capital but rather supplement and expand upon it.

It is necessary to take a final preliminary detour, one which leads us to an equally if less often acknowledged theoretical distinction which shapes how we understand women’s oppression, for example, and its historical and ongoing role in capitalism’s relations of production: *the distinction between exploitation and oppression*. Often when feminist theorists (SRT feminists are a notable exception here) take up the question of women’s ‘oppression’ they have a general tendency to *conflate* oppression and exploitation. In the present study, we are focused primarily on the domain of ‘exploitation’ (if one wants to follow the typical contours of this distinction), though such a term does not adequately address that domain. In debates over the function or ‘primacy’ of either exploitation or oppression, the term *expropriation* is conspicuously absent. The distinction is frequently presented as a confrontation between inequality in the workplace versus a wider range and variety of forms of subordination and social inequality ‘at home’ or in civil society.[[34]](#footnote-34) This, however, is not accurate even for the formerly industrial, imperial centers as much of women’s ‘domestic’ labour is still unpaid and thus expropriated. In general, the terms of debates about the historical status of capitalism or patriarchy are often set by one’s underlying conception of the direction and kind of determination, causation, and interaction between these domains.

On this score, we would like to make clear some of the presuppositions of our own contribution. Our view, which we understand as emerging from the basic commitments of historical materialism, *understands conditions of expropriation and exploitation as historically precedent in relation to other forms of social subordination*. In other words, it is our position that oppression is not a general category referring to all manner of hierarchical social difference, the category, instead, refers to those forms of socio-cultural valuation, codification, and political subjugation that have emerged out of conditions of expropriation and exploitation.[[35]](#footnote-35) The account of the formal and real subsumption of gendered relations of production that we forward here reflects this. Rather than exhaustively detail the complex forms and interrelations of gendered social oppression, we have opted to focus on the integration and alteration of those material conditions which give rise, inspire, and otherwise ground that oppression.

**The formal subsumption of gendered relations of production**

To reiterate briefly, formal subsumption is a process of capitalist integration which re-directs productive activity and relations of production toward the end of capital accumulation without radically, qualitatively altering the labour process (in the classic scenario the increase that produces surplus is achieved quantitatively). This means that aspects of production and the labour process are adopted by newly forming and continually transforming capitalist relations, with their new aim being the generation of surplus-value and profit. Thus, the formal subsumption of labour processes and social relations is both present at capitalism’s historical origin points as well as continually being renewed in circumstances where reverting to other social forms becomes a mode of evading capitalist crisis and stagnation. With this general description in mind, we can focus on how *gendered* relations of production have, historically, been taken up and altered by capitalism.[[36]](#footnote-36)

It is well known, though often poorly understood, that gendered relations of production—for example, the sexual/gendered division of labour, the gender valorisation (that is, feminisation) of certain work and tasks—in a strictly chronological sense, *predate* the existence of capitalism as a mode of production. One would be hard pressed to find evidence that capitalism produces gender relations as a matter of origin. To use a well-worn example, even if one takes England as the locus classicus of capitalism’s birth, we would be remiss to ignore the rather hierarchical—if often changing—sex/gender roles which characterized life throughout the Middle Ages and most certainly in the feudal societies of the Late Middle Ages.[[37]](#footnote-37) Implicit even in the claim of some contemporary thinkers who insist on the colonial origins of modern gender, there is ample historical evidence to suggest that, in the colonized world, gendered relations of production also predate the advent of capitalist imperialism, even if such relations were more flexible or subsequently altered by imperial domination (which itself demonstrates the analytical utility of subsumption as a category).[[38]](#footnote-38)

In sum, there seems to be (rightly) little dispute about the preexistence of a gender and, in most cases, the gendered division of labour in either pre-capitalist Europe or pre-colonial non-European societies. With these relations’ cultural variability in mind, we can begin from the starting point that, *prior to capitalism some form of gendered relations mediating the labour process existed in most human societies*;such is the case that exceptions are precisely that. We should recall that, similarly, for Marx, capitalism is not the only class society nor the only antagonistic society; thus, this descriptive point need not cede any legitimacy to claims of a ‘natural’ division of labour or other forms of biological essentialism vis-à-vis gender or sexuality. This is what we take feminist theorists to mean when they refer to the ‘transhistorical’ status of ‘patriarchy’ (the latter term has been questioned by still other feminists).[[39]](#footnote-39) It is on this point that claims about the autonomy of the feminist movement or of the system of ‘patriarchy’ are made. In contrast, let us consider how these relations might be formally subsumed and subordinated to capitalist ends. The form of capitalist integration which Marx presciently called formal subsumption (and which we have modified to feminist ends here) makes clear that the ‘dual systems’ conclusion cannot be seamlessly drawn from chronological fact. Doing so allows us to balance the aim of acknowledging the preexisting status of unequal gender relations (like the gendered division of labor) and also emphasize the selective continuity as well as novelty of capitalism’s appropriation of these relations.

Capitalism appropriates older relations of production and social forms where it encounters them, at first simply claiming the products of those processes for its own ends. Thus, when capitalism integrated gender relations in places like England, it reinforced and bolstered the relative restriction on women’s activity in domestic sphere to create a classed chasm between the public and private spheres of life in bourgeois society. The intensification of moral and political discourse around the ‘sacred hearth’ and women’s natural role in its stewardship would become a pillar of Victorian society. Capitalism’s novel forms of exploitation in the labour process and the reproduction of workers could now be facilitated by the unpaid, gendered labour segregated to the sphere of social reproduction.

In former/neo-colonies, gendered divisions of labour imposed during colonisation were appropriated and utilized toward capitalist ends, once more outsourcing the reproduction of the worker to the sphere of expropriated, unpaid domestic labour. This feminisation of household work and childcare extends in continuity from the colonial imposition of gender norms during capitalism’s formation. In a variety of contexts, we can nonetheless assume that, prior to the formal subsumption of existing gender inequalities into the capitalist labour process and capitalist societal reproduction, the gender division of labour, even with its harms to women and feminized persons, was geared toward the reproduction of life (in Marx’s terms, it produced use-values for their own sake). That is, the system of production *as a whole* was geared to securing human’s needs abstractly, as opposed to production under capital, which—while benefiting some—is ultimately aimed at self-valorisation. This is not to say that pre-capitalist societies were free of contradictions or structural violence, far from it, but rather that they lacked the historically specific contradiction of the valorisation of exchange-value over and against use-value. Even the beneficiaries of capitalist production cannot transgress the imperative of capital accumulation; it has the extra-human quality of not being directed by human needs (neither partial nor complete). Prior to the formal subsumption of gendered divisions of labour, the gendered partitioning of work was intended to provide for the immediate kinship system or local community (including but not limited to European conceptions of ‘the family’), especially the men of these systems. However, the overall aim of reproduction in the domestic sphere was to ensure the continuation of bodily life as its own end, even as it did so under conditions of extreme inequality.

Under capitalism, the telos of production is markedly changed. The ‘product’ of household work is *the worker* whose labour is being sold as a commodity, a unique commodity produced outside the sphere of commodity production. Though household tasks (for example, cooking, cleaning, childcare) remain largely the same in form (technological advancements notwithstanding), the aim of domestic reproduction is not the reproduction of life for its own sake, but for the sake of the production of commodities through the sale of yet another commodity, namely labour power. Even in case of formally subsumed ‘unfree’ or enslaved labourers, the gendered division of labour persisted, sometimes structuring the partitioning of tasks in the fields and homes of slavers as well as in the ‘after hours’ work.[[40]](#footnote-40) In the capitalist labour process—including both exploited and expropriated work—the maintenance of a gendered division of labour in the performance of domestic work took on increased significance, as the overall aim of production shifted from the production of use-values to the production of exchange-values. This resignification of reproductive labour occurs at a macro-scale (that is, at the level of production writ large), but the everyday sensuous experience of the subsumed processes of gendered reproductive work are not themselves fundamentally changed.[[41]](#footnote-41) And all of this before we consider the integration of women (not all at once and not all in equal positions) into the sphere of paid wage-labour, before the gendered division of labour is really subsumed into stratification of the workplace, kinds of work, and the feminisation of not just domestic but specific kinds of commodity production.

On this point, another terminological distinction can be helpful. As indicated above, it is crucial that we not conflate processes of *oppression* with those of *exploitation*. These categories are not synonyms for one another. For example, not all who are exploited (that is, who sell their labour to purchase commodities for their survival) are oppressed, in the technical sense. There are white, heterosexual men who are exploited *qua workers* who do not otherwise qualify as ‘oppressed’ in the sense that their lives are not also constrained by structural prejudices indexed to either race or gender or sexuality. Moreover, there are women and people of color who are not exploited (that is, are members of the ‘capitalist’ class, who do not have to sell their labour to survive) though they otherwise might endure harm caused by structural racism, heteronormativity, and gender oppression.[[42]](#footnote-42) Even when someone is *both* exploited (including having their labour expropriated) *and* oppressed, these distinct dimensions of their experience and structural social location are not strictly reducible to one another, though they may be reciprocally mediating.

This distinction is especially significant in clarifying the more precise terms of our intervention into debates between feminists (including Marxist and socialist feminists) on the question of a ‘transhistorical patriarchy’ in the sense that oppressive relations maybe carried over into the relations of production (and here we assume that they originated in that domain, in a different mode of production or distinct labour process) under capitalism to stratify, discipline, and otherwise contain diverse class struggle. Moreover, oppressive relations create structural inequalities that devalue the oppressed person’s labour, which serves the function of increasing the potential surplus-value of that labour (thus, affecting the rate and conditions of exploitation). Thus, the conditions of exploitation—while they can, at varying points, be the ‘source’ of oppressive relations and structures—are also, in turn, mediated by oppressive relations.[[43]](#footnote-43) It is important to note that in this paper we are focusing on the integration of precedent (and, as discussed in the next section, new) relations of production and thus focusing primarily on relations of exploitation and expropriation, with the caveat that the reciprocal determination of these processes is something that must be accounted for in more localized analyses where this framework might be applied in the future.

The notion that precapitalist forms of gender oppression do not, on their own, constitute a challenge to Marxist theory has some precedent in the Marxist Feminist tradition. Giménez, for example, argues that the transhistorical status of gender inequalities does not jeopardize historical materialism’s capacity to grasp their historical specificities:

The presence of pre-capitalist elements in the culture and ideology of any given social formation is not an indicator of the pervasiveness of gender inequality as a transhistorical phenomenon, nor a simple instance of pre-capitalist ‘survivals.’ Rather, it is evidence of the existence of capitalist material conditions that allow for the effectivity of behaviour guided by such cultural and ideological elements.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Giménez is clear that Marxist Feminism is not restricted to interpreting gender inequality as either autonomous from or reducible to capitalism’s historically specific development. That said, Giménez’s position ties the persistence of gender inequality to ‘cultural and ideological elements,’ whereas our own position insists that gendered *material* relations are subsumed to capitalism’s distinctive telos of production.[[45]](#footnote-45) This difference motivates us to employ the concepts of formal and real subsumption, rather than relying entirely on ‘social reproduction’ (or even Giménez’s ‘capitalist social reproduction’), in order to stress the material character of that which is subsumed.

With this in mind, we claim that the concept of formal subsumption, as it pertains to relations of production, gives us a framework for understanding how capitalism undertakes the appropriation of precedent historical forms and, moreover, how it can maintain multiple economic and social forms and subordinate them to the process of accumulation. The reader may be wondering at this stage, how this argument allays the concern that ‘patriarchy’ or gendered relations of production predate and are therefore autonomous from capitalist processes. It is crucial, thus, to keep in mind that the process of both formal and real subsumption occur as an enactment of yet another feature which is unique to capitalism: its penchant for *totalisation*. If one reads Marx following the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, one quickly discovers a strong case for the methodological primacy of the category of *social totality*, precisely because the tendency to subsume and appropriate heterogenous forms and to both create false equivalences and extreme social and economic stratification is unique to capitalism as historical form of life.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The category of social totality articulates the ways that capitalism’s expansion and integration of all aspects of life, and ultimately, its globalisation are a logical extension of how capitalism functions and reproduces itself. Thus, while the shape and local determinations of a particular set of relations of production or aspect of the labour process may vary depending on whether they have been formally or really subsumed to the ends of accumulation, *all relations and processes which undergo subsumption* (that is, historical integration) *are transformed to function within the capitalist social totality* (both within particular societies and in the macro-scale interactions of the global market). It is for this reason that one cannot simply ‘subtract’ the pre- or proto-capitalist elements from the capitalist ones. In short, the processes of subsumption function similarly to what, in chemistry, is called a *compound*—a substance composed of multiple materials which, *because of the process through which they have been combined, cannot be separated into their distinctive elements again and the substances do not retain their discreet properties as parts of the compound*. In contrast, a *mixture*—which maps on to the dual/triple systems approaches (both explicit and not)—is a composite where each element does retain its distinctive properties and functions and can be excised from the amalgamation. The tendency of capitalism to appropriate and subsume heterogenous forms, relations, and processes serves to form a cohesive (though not rational or coherent, even if it abides by a certain ‘logic’) social whole, all of which is intended to ensure capital’s accumulation and capitalism’s reproduction. Subsumption, formal or real, has the integration of all aspects of the human and natural world as its definitive aim, an aim which alters the very means by which it is achieved.

**The real subsumption of gendered relations of production**

Capitalism’s totalisation—which is not merely tendential but imperative—not only appropriates existing relations of production, but also generates new relations and processes in the pursuit of accumulation. The category of *real subsumption* maps onto this aspect of capitalism’s historical integration. In the classical account of capitalism’s development in Europe, the integration of women into the sphere of wage labour looms large. It is an arena where much exploitative innovation is to be found. As women enter the sphere of wage-labour differential or hierarchical gender categories are appropriated into strategies for disciplining, dividing, and devaluing labour. Gender relations mediate the process through which women engaged in wage labour are paid, tasked, and managed in the workplace (with little to no consideration of reproductive work they will be expected to perform in the home). Workplace sexualisation and sexual harassment, the assignment of gender values with specific tasks and kinds of paid work (for example, the feminisation of care work and sex work), the creation of new working environments that entail novel forms of gender subordination and sexual policing (for example, export processing zones, which disproportionately employ women in the former colonies and across the global south), and in many cases the re-invention of gender norms and ideals of genteel or servile femininity that are constructed as ‘traditional’ even if their origins are, in fact, contemporary, where sexual violence and surveillance play an explicit role in disciplining the labour force.[[47]](#footnote-47)

This revelation—that capitalism would not merely appropriate predating gender relations and hierarchies but innovate for the sake of accumulation—is not especially new. Marx himself, in analyzing technological developments of capitalist industry noted that women (and, in this case, children) would be *more rather than less exploited* by their work in commodity production (contrary to the myth that Marx believes capitalism is inherently ‘progressive’).[[48]](#footnote-48) This revelation has also been at the forefront of anti-capitalist feminist thinking in the 21st century. Indeed, this is where the conventional sense of terms like ‘formal’ and ‘real subsumption’ converge in feminist theory. Numerous studies about the novel aspects of capital’s increasing encroachment on all aspects of life, including subjectivity, have been forwarded by feminists like Kathi Weeks and Nancy Fraser.[[49]](#footnote-49) The prevailing tendency in critical political theory is to clarify new forms of gender oppression and exploitation, often but not always in relations to capitalism. There is little to dispute in the basic tenets of this strain of feminist thinking, *capitalism does produce new forms of gender exploitation and oppression*. If understood in relation to formal subsumption, the category of real subsumption offers us a way to think about how *new forms of gender relations under capitalism are nonetheless an extension of capitalism’s historically appropriative logic*, in the sense that they emerge from attempts to contend with present material and social conditions (including both technological changes, economic crises, and worker resistance). The advantage of analytical categories like formal/real subsumption is that they allow us to track the larger historical continuity in which gender relations develop as well as grasp novel developments in relation to that continuity.

Capitalism has generated new and distinct forms of gendered exploitation in the commodification of sexuality and in the commodification of gender differences. But, as theorists of neoliberalism have pointed out, capitalism has also commodified and otherwise appropriated modes of resistance to gender oppression; this appropriation of feminist theory and strategy (which Fraser aptly captures in *Fortunes of Feminism*) is itself a form of real subsumption, a new configuration of social relations intended to divert interruption of capital’s social reproduction. The self-reflexive and totalising character of capitalism’s appropriation captures not only those conditions and relations which are compatible with it, but even those that seek to oppose it. It has constrained the spheres of gender, queer, trans, and racial liberation through commodification (‘rainbow capitalism’), ensuring that resistance does not exceed or threaten the accumulation imperative. It has managed to reproduce and reinforce the basic assumptions of liberal feminism, which clearly establishes the limit of gender liberation as that which aspires to be ‘included’ or ‘represented’ in the existing mode of exploitation (at best). In short, capitalism appropriates not only historically antecedent gendered relations of production, but also distorts and constrains the conditions under which we resist and attempt to overturn these relations. On the one hand, it commodifies women’s sexuality and their corporeal visage in the mega-profitable sex industry (whose manifestation in the porn industry is unique to capitalism), and on the other, it commodifies and profits from alleged ‘sexual revolution’ and a growing industry for sex-positive products, services, and apps.

The very same society which commodifies women’s ‘sexual freedom’ has also produced misogyny so violent that it has resulted in mass violence.[[50]](#footnote-50) Violence perpetrated by self-proclaimed ‘incels’ where the targets of violence are anonymous and unknown to the perpetrator, but which represent the social world in which women are not beholden (more overtly) to men for sex or for security. Motivated by a nostalgia for sexual and domestic servitude, these acts mark a new instantiation of misogyny, but that novelty is built on capitalist and misogynist logic that predate it. Its expression is novel but its underlying logic and the social relations it seeks to preserve or restore are anything but. The transgression of male-dominance, in this case, takes place not strictly in the workplace and is not perpetrated by a boss, but it is no less a uniquely capitalist occurrence. The commodification of sexuality—and the ‘consumer’ entitlement which accompanies it—is constitutive even of violence not obviously related to work, as it portends these men’s assumptions about sex as a service to men, as a means through which men secure families, families which spare them the strain of carrying out the work of reproducing their own lives in the most mundane sense (that is, performing household tasks like preparing meals, cleaning, laundry, and emotional support).[[51]](#footnote-51) The profound sense of entitlement that accompanies the claim that ‘incels’ have a right to ‘retribution’ stems from not only their own feelings of rejection (which maintain that they have an unfair disadvantage in the competition for sex and love), but also from envy of men who have secured what appear to be accurate expressions of the ideal type of heterosexual monogamy.

The commodification of gender and sexuality (as well as resistance to mainstream norms of both) has also taken on new dimensions under capitalism. From the entrepreneurial tone of apps like OnlyFans—which monetizes and customizes digital sex-work and is directed by content creators themselves (while the site takes a substantial cut)—to the more overtly coerced conditions of the global sex chain, commodification and sexual exploitation have hardly slowed since the feminist ‘sex wars’ or the ‘sexual revolution’. Indeed, trafficking for sexual exploitation is at an all-time high, growing more efficient through the use of digital platforms, and mapping on to patterns of neo-colonial and imperialist global relations. Though sex work is not a new phenomenon, its installation as a socially necessitated institution is entirely unique to capitalism. The commodified sexuality of alienated life has not withered, but with gains in women’s sexual autonomy in the imperial centers, networks of sexual exploitation have created systematic networks of trafficking unprecedented numbers to meet the socially constructed sexual ‘needs’ of men.[[52]](#footnote-52) Inversely, neo-colonial relations that are the hallmark of capitalist globalisation have systematically organized ‘sex tourism’ for predominantly cismen. These novel forms of gendered exploitation, expropriation, and violence emerge as the product of macro-processes of capitalist globalisation, integrating and deepening existing inequalities and transforming them as capital reorganizes not only the international division of labour, but also the means of commodified desire.

Real subsumption is the arena of historical transformation, structured by the accumulation imperative, which can not only form new historical dynamics but also resuscitate and mythically reconstruct older forms of subordination and oppression in the hopes of curbing impacts on profits and quelling struggles against capital. Thus, we should take the novelty of recent developments in capitalist societies not as an indication that older forms of exploitation and oppression have abated but, rather, that they have been transformed once more to suit the ends of capital (often in response to women’s and workers’ demands). The novelty of, for example, the ‘global care chain’ (what might have previously signaled the role of women in the new international division of labour) should be understood within a larger historical continuity of capitalist adaptation and adoption of historical norms and relations. The sphere of unpaid ‘domestic’ labour has become externalized from the homes of women in the global south to compensate for women’s increasing role in public life in the global north. This example communicates another equally important point: *the relations of historical appropriation and transformation are unequal and differential*.

The categories of formal and real subsumption are primarily temporal categories, referring to the processes of capitalist integration in terms of historical chronology, but because they emerge from the broader commitments of historical *materialism*, the categories require that we acknowledge spatial (that is, geographical) differences that constitute these historical trends and changes. Capitalism’s historically appropriative logic, an extension of the ‘infinite’ accumulation imperative, has driven the spatial universalisation of capitalism (that is, globalisation) which has resulted, not in homogeneity (as with creation of labour-power equivalency as a precondition of wage-labour) but intensified stratification and inequality toward a homogenous end: accumulation. Capitalist integration is an uneven and heterogenous process. This means that analyzing specific historical and social conjunctures requires attention to the specific material conditions which motivate the need for historical appropriation and shape how it will be socially and culturally legible. This is an insight which is sometimes lacking when we make assertions about the ‘novelty’ of changes within capitalist societies (especially ‘consumer societies’ or within imperial states). Formal and real subsumption—in their modified senses—can also help us to describe the ways that global relations, as they form a heterogenous but no less total social totality, express the coexistence of multiple historical relations.

We are now in a position to understand how the concepts of formal and real subsumption, their situation in a framework which understands critique as targeting a material social totality, and the non-stadial fashion in which these processes operate, can help us navigate debates about the relationship between Marxism and feminism insofar as they are indexed to the transhistorical status of patriarchy. Above all, an elaboration of these concepts help clarify that *claims to the autonomy of ‘patriarchal’ or gendered relations of production rely on an ahistorical misunderstanding of what capitalism is and how it functions*. The fact that gendered relations of production predate the emergence of uniquely capitalist relations says nothing about the fact that an essential feature of capitalism is the tendency to historically appropriate and subsume older divisions and hierarchies, as well as to generate new ones. If we understand capitalism as a system of totalisation within which all human activity is subordinated to exchange-value rather than human need (that is, use-value), then the mere chronological fact of antecedence does nothing to assert either the absolute primacy or autonomy of gender relations. If we understand Marx’s historical thought, at a methodological level and not just at the level of his analytical rational abstractions, as fundamentally concerned with social relations, then there is little cause to restrict the use of that method to the domain of commodity production and to the relation of wage-labour (as SRT feminism already illustrates). If we take seriously that historical appropriation is endemic to capitalism’s logic, then the distinction between logic and history no longer vexes the relation between feminism and Marxism.

The crucial point is that maintaining the autonomy of ‘patriarchy’ and capitalism is a misunderstanding of both, as it not only fails to recognize the historical differences between pre-/proto-capitalist gendered relations but also obscures the fundamental transformation of these relations when they are subordinate to the aims of capitalism. The claim, more importantly, fails to register the ways that capital does not merely borrow or steal gendered relations of production, but integrates these social forms, hollowing them out to refashion them. Thus, how we interpret the analytical frame of historical materialism and Marx’s historical thought more generally (including which critique of capitalism one emphasizes[[53]](#footnote-53)) has a decisive impact on how we understand the relation between ‘patriarchy’ and capitalism and the need for a unity between feminism and Marxism.[[54]](#footnote-54)

**Conclusion**

The recent debate in the pages of *Viewpoint* between Arruzza and her critics represents the crystallisation of a decades-long conflict among feminist thinkers. Again, it would not be possible to resolve the entirety of this conflict in a single article. Rather, what we have attempted to do is to ameliorate one specific area of the conflict involving ‘transhistorical patriarchy’. We have tried to highlight, using Marx’s conceptual tools and our modification of them, that we must accept neither the claim of a perennial patriarchy unchanged by capitalism nor a capitalism which is entirely indifferent to gender relations of production and oppression. We have argued that the mere fact of historical antecedence is not evidence for the autonomy of struggles or theories (as proponents of triple/dual system approaches claim) and, simultaneously, that the reciprocally mediated character of capitalism and gender domination does not require that we conflate the two (as those who take the origins-subsistence approach seem to). Instead, we have outlined and extrapolated from the concepts of formal and real subsumption to argue that Marxist Feminists have theoretical and historical resources to draw from that undermine many of the claims which stake themselves on the historical autonomy of capitalism and gender exploitation/oppression. Most importantly, what this reframing of the ‘transhistorical’ debates does is show that to *either* presume the autonomy of capitalism and gender *or* to conflate the two *is a misunderstanding of both capitalism and gender relations*.

Even Arruzza’s keen responses to her critics still does not clearly establish capitalism’s mode of historical appropriation. Arruzza rightly points out that “holding that logic and history are identical (that is, denying the distinction between them) is equivalent to denying the dialectical relationship between them”.[[55]](#footnote-55) She thus carefully navigates many of the difficulties that emerge from the logic/history distinction in the relation between capitalism and gender, but also between capitalism and racialized expropriation exploitation, and oppression. However, even her account ultimately eschews the possibility of arriving at an “organising principle” through which to analyze a heterogenous set of social relations, relations which are gendered, racialized, and classed.[[56]](#footnote-56) Arruzza’s desire to avoid “functionalism” also misapprehends the historically unique character of capitalism’s historical appropriation, which does precisely what functionalism describes: subordinates all social relations to ensure that capital is able to reproduce itself, efficiently and with little to no cohesive challenge to it. This does not mean that relations within and between capitalist societies are homogenous, but rather that capitalism’s historically appropriative logic (and here we can see the logic/history distinction working dialectically) manages to subsume heterogenous conditions and relations. If one takes seriously capitalism’s unique propensity for totalisation, then it is this very propensity which can serve as an ‘organising principle,’ one which helps us to understand the relation between gender and capitalism in a way that accounts for the larger continuities in the histories of both capitalism and systemic gender injustice, a way which not only bridges the apparent chasm between Marxism and feminism, but also demonstrates the historical necessity of their unity.

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1. Hartmann 1979, pp. 1-33. Arruzza 2013, pp. 115-24. Vogel 2013, 131-82. The debates about the relation between Marxism and feminism constitutes a rather large literature which cannot be surveyed entirely here. For a historical-theoretical account of the 'Marxist/feminist encounter,' See Barrett, 2014. Also, Arruzza, 2013. This paper does not address the earliest generations of Marxist feminists such as Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, and Rose Luxembourg, for reasons of theoretical scope (namely that contemporary proponents of a 'unitary' Marxist feminism must contend with the 'transhistorical patriarchy' claim which specifically refers to the historical status of what was then called the 'woman question,' which differs from the broader search for foundations for Marxist/socialist feminism and that occurred often in relation to the fraught analysis of Engels in *The Holy Family*. For a historical view of Marx and Engels's influence on early socialist feminism, See Vogel, 2013, pp. 32-39; pp.77-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this paper we focus primarily on gendered relations of production and their relation to gender oppression. Though we are uneasy with the term ‘patriarchy’ (as it refers broadly to an undifferentiated transhistorical system of gender domination, which is precisely what is being challenged here), we employ it for the sake of brevity and because it is the terminology employed in the majority of debates in feminist theory. Thus, we have used the term and clarified or reiterated where it was not an accurate descriptor, in the hopes of making the discourse more precise. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arruzza 2014, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Arruzza 2015, pp. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Arruzza 2015, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Farris 2015, p. 3. Oksala 2015, pp. 2-3. Manning 2015, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, Farris 2015, p. 5. Manning 2015, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, Oksala 2015, pp. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The use of the term ‘materialist feminism’ here is somewhat complex. Though the term may seem synonymous with Marxist Feminism, it often refers to a patently anti-Marxist position. Materialist feminists such as Delphy, for example, have gone to great lengths to demonstrate this: See, Delphy 2016, 58-76. More recent uses of the term ‘materialist feminism’ have obscured this opposition within the women’s movement and feminist theory, in an attempt to create a more harmonious and less politically charged (as the term ‘materialist’ fares better than ‘Marxist’ or ‘socialist’ in the U.S. academy) continuity between different forms of non-ideal feminism, a solidarity constructed in the wake of poststructuralist theory and its prevalence among feminist intellectuals. See, for example, Hennessy and Ingraham 1997, p. 1-16. For a critical examination of the Marxist/materialist feminism divide, See Giménez 2000, pp. 18-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Delphy 2016, pp. 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this paper, we do not offer a comprehensive treatment or critique of the dual/triple systems approaches, as such a critique would require a paper in its own right. However, the critique of the ‘transhistorical patriarchy’ argument does foreground some crucial limitations of that position by virtue of establishing that capitalism’s unique propensity for totalisation makes the argument of patriarchy’s autonomy implausible. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example: Federici, 2004, pp. 7-9; pp.13-17. Mies, 1998, pp. iii-x; pp. 36-38. In the case of Wittig, this takes the form of insisting that women in themselves constitute a class, a claim which is also shared by Delphy. See, Wittig, 1992, p. 34; Delphy, 2016, pp. 25-27; pp. 69-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a recent manifestation of this approach, see Bieler and Morton 2021, pp. 1758-1759. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Zetkin 2015. Vogel 2014. Giménez 2018. Bhattacharya 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. There are numerous criticisms of the attempt to forge a ‘unitary theory’ but we have, as of yet, found them to be insufficiently compelling. Often these criticisms either misread Marx/Marxism or, alternatively, take for granted the seamless continuity between the practice of male chauvinism in parties, unions, and other organisations as following organically from Marxism as a critical tradition and method. This is a continuity whose construction we find, in many ways understandable given some historical interpretations of the former, but nonetheless an untenable conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The concepts of formal and real subsumption also appear in Marx’s *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63* anthologized in the *Marx Engels* *Collected Works* (MECW), Volume 34, p. 104. However, as there are no substantive differences between this account and that which appears as an appendix to *Capital, Vol*. I, we have chosen to rely on the more cogent and concise account given in the latter. Where there are clarificatory remarks or insights in the manuscripts, I cite them in the notes. See, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol 34: Marx 1861-64* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Marx 1996, pp. 93-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Marx 1992, p. 1021. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Marx 1992, p. 1023. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Marx 1992, pp. 873-907. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Marx 1992, p. 1023. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Negri 1992, pp. 91-100; Harootunian 2015, pp. 1-72; Fuchs 2015, pp. 145-262; Read 2003, pp. 103-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Arruzza, 2014, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For further reading on the question of race and the historical origins and development of capitalism, See: Scott 2002; Fraser 2016, pp. 163-78; Dawson 2016, pp. 143-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. One way in which this framework might be brought to bear on debates about race and capitalism would be to intervene where the logic of ‘triple systems’ approaches predominate vis-à-vis capitalism or, alternatively, where something like an ‘origins-subsistence approach (to be discussed in a later section) shape categories such as ‘racial capitalism’ (which, in its basic logic, is akin to ‘capitalist patriarchy’). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See also, Marx 1996, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Marx 1992, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Recently, Rahel Jaeggi has undertaken the crucial task of organising a variety of critiques of capitalism, a taxonomy that has not been well documented within critical theory or within the field of critical political thought more generally. See, Jaeggi 2016, pp. 44-65. Still, this work does not exhaust the list of critiques of capitalism (or, for that matter, even those that appear in Marx). Our own approach—as well as that of Theodor Adorno, István Mészáros, ecological Marxists such as John Bellamy Foster, among others—emphasizes the critique of the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value as the telos of capitalist production. See Foster 2010, pp. 39-59; Mészáros 2011, pp. 180-231; Adorno 2006, pp.50-1. This is not merely a matter of theoretical niceties but has a crucial impact on how one understands capitalism and, thus, its relation to other social and economic forms. We have periodically highlighted where the stakes of a particular critique are apparent in feminist debates in the notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See, Marx 1996, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For a concise account of the central distinctions central to social reproduction theory, see Bhattacharya 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Marx 1993, pp. 85-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Bhattacharya 2017, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, for example, Young 1990, pp. 39-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. On this point some may feel compelled to raise questions about the distinction between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ labour, given that the categories of formal and real subsumption were originally intended to refer to the specific aspects of the labour process that generate surplus-value. Furthermore, given the controversy surrounding the distinction between feminist thinkers, it is worthwhile to say a few words about this question. It is necessary to clarify that such a distinction is not intended as a normatively laden distinction; for Marx, the distinction is intended simply to circumscribe the specific processes which produce surplus-value as a particular form of value, a category which is wholly original to capitalism (which need not mean that the category has absolute primacy, one can easily imagine that novel categories are not the only category which allow systems to function). This circumscription is intended—as is all of *Capital*, as Marx understands it—as a rational abstraction of real relations and processes in order to help distinguish capital’s logic for the sake of understanding its fundamental structure so that it may be rigorously challenged. In the case at hand, the distinction is not especially relevant as we have a) already established the continuity between this project and the basic insights of SRT, which understand the two circuits of re/production as reciprocally formative and b) because I understand these two circuits as constituting the mode of production as a whole, where relations of production exist and mediate both these circuits. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See, Skinner 2018. See also, Sauer 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See for example, Oyewùmí, 1997. Lugones, 2008. For a critique of claim that gendered relations were established solely by European imperial domination, See, Segato 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Barrett 2014, pp. 10-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See, Wood 2010. See also, Scully and Ward 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Delphy’s concept of the “domestic mode of production” is, in part, predicated on this fact. Since women’s experience of unpaid work in the ‘domestic’ sphere to the benefit of their husbands (as the institution of heterosexual marriage is the focus of her analyses), she insists that its relative stasis demonstrates that it has not been radically altered by capitalist relations. Moreover, because the expropriation of women’s (she does not use this term per se, but rather refers to it as ‘exploitation’) predates capitalism, she views them as functioning autonomously, each with its own set of distinct ‘relations of production’ (though, again, the term as she uses it bears little resemblance to its technical meaning in the work of Marx and Engels). See Delphy 2016, pp. 69-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. More than being indexed to different categories, these processes are related causally in a determinate way. Per the basic commitments of historical materialism, I take the view that structures of oppression emerge, even when they extend beyond, *out of relations of expropriation and exploitation*; forms of oppression are not things in themselves but ramifications (albeit sophisticated and grave) of material relations, including but not limited to the expropriation of labour (for example, slavery), dispossession (for example, the theft of native and indigenous lands and natural resources), and relations of exploitation (for example, the stigma of waged work versus an aristocratic disposition). In short, the material conditions give rise to the need for retroactive justification and rationalisation, which is then codified into social hierarchies which take on a life of their own, but which ultimately function to serve the ends of capital accumulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The reader may note the familiar logic with which we grasp this distinction from numerous iterations of the ‘base superstructure model’ popularized by figures like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. While there has been much controversy over such a model and its purported ‘economism’ or ‘reductionism,’ it is important to note that in its simplest form this ‘model’ only points to the most preliminary commitments of historical materialism and, thus, is intended simply to organize certain phenomena as they relate to the concrete conditions of production. It does assert the ultimate primacy of material conditions in determining how certain social forms take shape, persist, or are altered, but this is not strictly unidirectional and the apparent trivialisation of the ‘ideological’ that has developed both within and outside feminist theory is not a seamless logical conclusion from the model itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Giménez 2018, 357. See also 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For a critical reading of the tendency to treat gender inequality in strictly ideological/cultural terms, see Barrett 2014, pp.29-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Lukács 1971, pp. 8-28. See also, Adorno 1966, pp. 1-30; Adorno 2010, pp. 23-25; Adorno 2008, pp. 51-88, 130-139. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Bhattacharya 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Marx 1992, pp. 517-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Fraser 2013, Weeks 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Here I am referring to the 2014 Isla Vista killings, the 2015 Umpqua Community College killings, the 2018 Toronto van attack, the 2018 Tallahassee shooting, among other incidents. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The specificity of the ‘incel’ phenomenon to moder capitalist societies has been noted in both academic and mainstream social commentary: Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, pp. 5003-27. See for example, Grice 2018; Solnit 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. For a critical examination of the continuum of ‘unfree’ labour under capitalism vis-à-vis liberal feminist approaches to sex work and migration, See Cruz 2018, pp. 65–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Arruzza straightforwardly defines capitalism as follows, indicating that hers is what we might call an “exploitation critique” of capitalism: ‘If, in my definition of capitalism, the core of capitalist accumulation is the valorisation of value (and hence the extraction of surplus-value through exploitation), then I cannot conceive of a capitalist society sans exploitation without logically contradicting my given definition’ (2015, p. 4). She gives this definition to clarify that exploitation is necessary to capitalism (a claim which is compatible with her account of the logic/history distinction). As previously mentioned, while this critique is not incorrect, it is not, in our view, the most comprehensive as it does not center the aim of production (that is, infinite accumulation). Defining capitalism in this way raises problems for discussing capitalist historical integration outside the sphere of exploitation, on this view integration outside the sphere of commodity production would maintain a degree of autonomy that we are arguing against here. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. This bolsters Arruzza’s position that ‘The distinction between a logical precondition and a necessary consequence of a social dynamic is warranted given that a set of social phenomena can be necessarily and constantly produced by the logic of capitalist accumulation without being a logical precondition for it. So, even if we were compelled to concede that gender oppression or racial oppression are not logical preconditions for capitalism, this concession would still not entail the conclusion that the relationship between capitalism and these forms of oppression is only an opportunistic and contingent one, and that capitalism is ‘indifferent’ to them’ (Arruzza, 2015, p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Arruzza 2015, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Arruzza 2015, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)