

BOOK REVIEW

Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction.

Martha E. Giménez. Leiden: Brill, 2019 (ISBN 978-90-04-27893-6)

Amy E. Wendling

Philosophy, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, USA
Email: AmyWendling@creighton.edu

This excellent volume largely comprises essays Martha Giménez wrote between 1975 and 2009. It tracks the main debates within Marxist feminism, and within feminism more broadly, of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The essays are divided into three sections: “Marxist-Feminist Theory,” “Capitalist Social Reproduction,” and “Whither Feminism?”

Giménez is a sociologist by training and long practice, so presents essays rich in empirical detail, such as the fact that women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours (325). Still, she is a very fine theorist as well, exhibiting the manipulation of concepts that characterize philosophical discourse, so this book will be of interest to the readers of this journal. For example, the essays offer neat distinctions that clarify complex analyses, such as the four-term categorization of domestic labor into production of use values such as food, consumption work such as shopping, infrastructure maintenance such as home improvement, and market goods (243). To take another example, questions about population and capitalism are grouped into the categories of fertility, mortality, and migration (132).

The volume functions as a retrospective, as in many cases Giménez has updated the essays with new examples that fit old patterns—such as egg-freezing, which is now both a procreational and employment issue (207)—or with addenda that update the empirical information in a particular chapter (227). Two original essays in the volume highlight some of the concerns of the early twenty-first century, especially intersectionality and social reproduction theory. As is to be expected in such a volume, some themes and ideas are repeated.

Throughout the volume, Giménez argues convincingly that feminists and sociologists have taken one of three tacks with respect to Marx: ignoring him outright, subjecting him to what she calls a “ritual critique” (82), or treating him as a “fixer-upper” (296). Giménez rejects all three strategies while at the same time showing their footprint on feminist discourse. The socialist and Marxist feminisms of the 1970s and early 1980s, including her own, were simply ignored by much of feminism’s third wave (362). Along with this, any robust discussion of women’s class status, distinct from the thinner concept of socioeconomic status, was erased (220).

Giménez explains how these strategies arise even as she rejects them. The pressure to ignore or malign Marx occurs because capitalism hides itself, and efforts to call it out are often drowned out by other noises. The stronger the effort, the louder the noise. As such, Giménez remobilizes Marx’s own ideology critique, which is a distinguishing merit of the volume.

Giménez's critique of intersectionality, in one of the volume's new essays, follows the path of this ideology critique, and should be read alongside two other essays in the volume: the immediately preceding essay, "Marxism and Class, Gender, and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy" (82–93), and "The Feminisation of Poverty: Myth or Reality" from later in the volume (210–33). For Giménez, intersectionality lacks theory and, with this, explanatory power (96). She means this in the technical sense: intersectionality cycles in the endless description of the empirically obvious, and, like the class, gender, and race theories that preceded it, may rely on experience as an unexamined category (90).

For this reason, intersectionality is not so much wrong as untethered. Either it has a narrow meaning, in which case it is a new code for the feminization of poverty that Giménez criticized, along the same lines, in the late 1980s. Or it has a broad meaning, in which case it applies to everyone and, like other identity categories, will be open to political manipulations, including the ugly ones of white supremacy. In particular, per Giménez, the exclusion of class from explicit and sustained deliberation within the intersectional paradigm both supports the capitalist status quo (105) and makes the unifying aspects of social class across identity categories difficult to mobilize (106).

Make no mistake: for Giménez, the theory to which intersectionality must be tethered in order to overcome its category problems is Marxism. She writes, "Marxism is theoretically and politically necessary if the study of class, gender and race is to achieve more than the endless documentation of variations in their relative salience and combined effects in very specific contexts and experiences" (83).

But this will require coming out from underneath what Giménez calls the "straw Marx" (345) that has dominated the picture of the figure, and hardly only within feminism. Marx is not an economic determinist. He is not a class reductionist, because there simply is nothing reducible about his very rich and intricate concept of class. Marx does attend to both gendered and racialized categories in his work, though Giménez is right to point out that his methodology more than his specific analysis of these categories may be most useful to feminists today (347). Finally, Marx does pay attention to non-Western societies.

Marx simply is a figure who is very difficult to see, both for the reasons of ideological determination that Giménez outlines accurately and also for reasons of political history, including the bizarre editorial history of his voluminous corpus. Fortunately, a spate of new Marx scholarship supports Giménez's contentions in these directions; I refer the reader to Kevin Anderson for his attention to Marx's interest in non-Western societies (Anderson 2010) and to Michael Heinrich for his comprehensive understanding of the figure's reception (Heinrich 2004). Others could be mentioned.

Giménez's own understanding of Marx is remarkably rich. It is influenced both by Marx's original texts and also by the best theoretical interventions from French Marxist Louis Althusser, who is frequently mentioned in the volume. Giménez's grasp of Marx is evident not only in her attention to ideology critique and methodology, but also in her attention to capitalist accumulation, capitalist contradiction, and labor power.

Giménez pays attention to the importance not just of capitalism, nebulously defined, for women, but to capitalist accumulation in particular. Capitalist accumulation is the idea that the resources held by capitalist forces grow relative to other kinds of resources, especially labor. In Marx, it is a historical process that has various implications, some of which actually are self-contradictory. For example, the rate of profit rises with the initial introduction of automation, but then falls when the automating technology becomes generalized to a particular branch of industry. To take another example, capitalist

accumulation develops what Marx calls the general intellect, in the form of universal education: especially literacy, basic science, and mathematics. It needs workers with particular sets of skills. At the same time, capitalist accumulation hobbles the general intellect in cases where literacy, basic science, and mathematics might empower workers.

To take Giménez's example, capitalist accumulation proliferates rights discourses in wealthy countries, but to do this makes rights discourses impossible in those countries that the wealthy countries expropriate. Since this is a zero-sum game, there will be no way for rights discourses to universalize, even if countries may, within some limits, rise and fall in status. Giménez then applies this to human rights debates within feminism, and to globalization debates in particular. She writes, "globalization is a de-politicized, euphemistic way to refer to the spread of capitalism over the globe . . . a powerful ideology that obscures . . . the roots, in the capitalist mode of production, of the deepening inequality and decline in living standards that afflict the majority of the world's population, particularly the female population, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989" (312).

Contradiction is another key idea that Giménez develops from Althusser, and behind him, Marx and Hegel. Capitalism produces contradictory tendencies. To take the key example from Giménez's volume: women are capitalism's beneficiaries as well as its victims, and sexism has a particular set of functions within capitalist conditions (178). As Giménez writes, "[capitalism] contributed to undermining traditional forms of gender inequality while, at the same time, creating new forms which, paradoxically, contributed in the long-run to increased gender inequity" (312). This observation can be paired usefully with what puzzles Kate Manne in her first book, *Down Girl*: why does the logic of misogyny hang on precisely, and virulently, in postpatriarchal environments (2017, xii)? Giménez rejects the notion of undifferentiated patriarchy because it is insufficiently attentive to historical circumstance and therefore offers only an essentialist history of domination unbound from the capitalist story (123). As such, it tends to cover over not only power differentials among women but also the very idea of low-power men. In general, Giménez's volume makes many fine observations about the ontology of power and the categories in which it both unfolds and hides itself.

Finally, Giménez powerfully develops Marx's concept of labor power. This concept from Marx's later work stresses that labor is not an ontology of the human but a mobile set of capacities and skills that workers are required to have. Giménez emphasizes, in what I believe to be some of the best essays in the work, the conditions and types of labor power, including rich discussions of alienation, domestic labor, unwaged labor, the combination of waged and unwaged labor, and the malleable concept of skill.

In "From Social Reproduction to Capitalist Social Reproduction," one of the new essays in the volume that was written partly as a response to a special issue of the critical Marxist theory journal *Historical Materialism* (2016), Giménez returns to the labor power theme. This essay alone could serve usefully as an introduction to the volume as a whole. Here Giménez argues that producing labor power is not the same as simply producing people (281). In fact, poverty conditions suppress the capacity for adults to produce labor power in their children, who at best will have skills and capacities well below a given standard. The example that Giménez gives is of working-class women and children in Flint, Michigan (304).

Both Giménez and the editors of the *Historical Materialism* book series in which the volume finds a place, especially Sebastien Budgen, are to be congratulated on the sweep and timeliness of the work. Feminist philosophers will find it useful as they consider, or reconsider, the key concepts of a politics of resistance.

References

- Anderson, Kevin. 2010. *Marx at the margins: On nationalism, ethnicity, and non-western societies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heinrich, Michael. 2004. *An introduction to the three volumes of Marx's Capital*. Trans. Alexander Locascio. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Historical Materialism. 2016. *Symposium on social reproduction*. *Historical Materialism* 24 (2).
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Amy E. Wendling is the executive editor of the *Radical Philosophy Review* and the author of two books: *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009) and *The Ruling Ideas: Bourgeois Political Concepts* (Lexington 2020). She has also authored numerous articles, especially about the intersection of feminism and technology.