

Gender, Production, and ‘the Transition to Capitalism’: Assessing the Historical Basis for a Unitary Materialist Theory

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ABSTRACT: When socialist feminists discussed the potential and pitfalls of Marxism in the “domestic labour debate,” the specific relationship between patriarchy and capital emerged as a defining concern. While offering a trenchant critique of orthodox Marxism, the tenor of the debate was highly abstract and theoretical, and largely ignored the question of capitalism’s *origins*. Political Marxists, in contrast, have devoted fastidious attention to this question in their own attempt to renew historical materialism; but their dialogue has dedicated little attention to questions of gender, families, and social reproduction in the feminist sense. This paper makes an initial attempt at closing the analytical gap between these two historical materialist traditions. It departs from an unresolved theoretical impasse within the socialist feminist tradition: how to conceive of the imperatives of capital accumulation and class in a way that avoids both reductionism and dualism. I argue that this tension stems principally from an inadequate historicization of capitalism. A critical assessment of Wally Secombe’s historical work illustrates how political Marxism can be deployed to correct this deficiency, while also revealing the extent to which these concepts must be rethought in light of materialist feminist concerns. A synthesis of the two traditions offers a more complete and effective account of the transition, while providing a basis for a unitary materialist theory.

KEYWORDS: Brenner debate, materialist feminism, political Marxism, primitive accumulation, social reproduction, socialist feminism, transition from feudalism to capitalism

Introduction

When socialist feminists discussed the potential and pitfalls of Marxism in the “domestic labour debate,” the specific relationship between patriarchy and capital emerged as a defining concern (Vosko 2003; Ferguson 1999). The debate, however, was highly abstract and theoretical, and most of its historical focus locked upon the formation of the “family wage” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discussion was crucially important, but it often arose from (and reinforced) a misleading conflation of industrialism and capitalism (Middleton

1985; Fine 1992:58). Thus, while socialist feminists engaged with orthodox Marxism on a variety of terrains, they largely left to one side the question of capitalism’s *origins*. “Political” Marxists,¹ in contrast,

1 I use the term “political Marxism” here to refer to the group of Marxist scholars who have taken theoretical inspiration from Robert Brenner’s work on the transition to capitalism. This group includes, but is not limited to, Brenner himself, Ellen Meiksins Wood, George Comninel, Benno Teschke, Hannes Lacher, Mike Zmolek, Larry Patriquin, and Samuel Knafo. For a concise outline of the political Marxist account, see Patriquin, “The Agrarian Origins of the Industrial Revolution in England,” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 36:2 (Spring 2004):196-216.

have devoted fastidious attention to this question as they have engaged in their own debate with more “orthodox” Marxian thought. While promising to provide the theoretical basis for a renewed historical materialism, their dialogue has dedicated little attention to questions of gender, families, and social reproduction in the feminist sense. Given the relative intellectual proximity of socialist feminism and political Marxism, the lack of meaningful exchange between the respective traditions is both lamentable and debilitating.

The objective of this essay is to make an initial, if necessarily modest, effort to break the silence, with the aim of merging the gap between the two theoretical approaches. It would of course be naïve to expect that such a *rapprochement* will be achieved easily; it must be acknowledged from the start that the two traditions have quite distinct concerns. Some materialist feminists² and feminist political economists might question from the outset why there is any need to pay heed to a body of literature which has given short shrift to the “feminist question.” Such wariness would be understandable; but as Heidi Hartmann (1981) pointed out three decades ago, the tension between Marxism and feminism portends either a “more progressive union” or a divorce. As a student of political Marxism who is nevertheless sensitive to feminist concerns, I intend to demonstrate that the insights of political Marxism provide a promising historical and theoretical *basis* for what has long been a central objective of materialist feminism: the construction of a “unitary, materialist theory” (Ferguson 1999; see also Sacks 1989; Vogel 1983). In fact, it would probably not be an exaggeration to suggest that political Marxism has come to style itself as exactly such a theory. Thus, a second component of my argument is that political Marxism, in sidelining gender and families, has fallen short in addressing *its own concerns*. The goal of constructing a unitary materialist theory is a lofty but necessary one; the

challenge lies in determining which elements of previous accounts are insightful and deserving of retention, and which elements obscure analysis and should be jettisoned.

The “transition to capitalism” has been chosen as the central question of this essay because it, more than any other, provides an historical pivot upon which these issues may be clarified. The transition is of course a defining concern for political Marxists; a small but insightful group of materialist feminists – particularly Wally Seccombe (1992), Maria Mies (1986), Sylvia Federici (2004) and Paddy Quick (2010) – have also addressed the question, providing fodder for fruitful comparison. Despite being smaller, however, this latter body of work is much more heterogeneous. Out of concern for space and coherence, I have therefore chosen to focus on Wally Seccombe’s work for this comparative study, while recognizing that it is by no means representative of all materialist feminist writing on the transition. Still, there are at least two compelling reasons for highlighting Seccombe’s work in particular. First, Seccombe seems to be the only materialist feminist who has *directly* addressed Brenner’s argument, enabling a more specific and nuanced comparison.³ Second, Seccombe’s historical and theoretical concerns are more congruent with those of the political Marxists, focusing narrowly upon socioeconomic and demographic developments within Western Europe, and doing so with the specific intention of *amending* the orthodox notions of historical materialism. A comparative review of Seccombe and political Marxists is therefore a sensible, if necessarily narrow, avenue for exploring the wider intersection between political Marxism and feminist political economy.

The argument of this paper is established in three parts. First, I briefly discuss a central unresolved tension within the socialist feminist tradition over how to conceive of the imperatives of capital accumulation and class in a way that avoids both functionalism/

2 For the purposes of this paper, the terms “socialist feminism” and “materialist feminism” are used interchangeably. In recent years “materialist feminism” (and sometimes “feminist historical materialism”) seems to have become the preferred designator, owing to the evolution of debates which are detailed below. Nevertheless, shifting terminology should not obscure the abiding concern of feminist political economists from the 1970s to the present: developing a materialist understanding of class and gender dynamics.

3 Seccombe does so in his Appendix to *A Millennium of Family Change*, apparently upon the encouragement of Ellen Wood. More recently Paddy Quick has also made reference to Brenner, offering a brief but insightful comment on the gendered nature of pre-capitalist “political accumulation” (2010:179), which is discussed below. However, Quick’s intervention draws eclectically from various Marxian accounts of the transition, without suggesting which (if any) is most compelling.

reductionism and dualism (Ferguson 1999). This provides a theoretical entry point within feminist political economy for a consideration of the *specificity* of capitalism as a qualitatively distinct form of class-divided society. I suggest that this analytical problem has not been exclusive to materialist feminism, but has also plagued Marxism as well. Among Marxist historians, Robert Brenner (1985) was the first to explain the emergence of capitalism in a way that does not assume precisely what needs to be explained, i.e. capitalist dynamics themselves. Brenner's historical investigation throws into question many of the Marxian categories and assumptions that socialist feminists themselves critiqued (e.g., base/superstructure dichotomy, productive forces determinism, etc.), and points the way towards new categories which enable a *potential* integration of gender and social reproduction within historical materialism. Yet the promise of integration has been frustrated thus far, as political Marxists have been largely inattentive to questions of gender and family.

Second, the insights and oversights of political Marxism are then brought to bear in an assessment of Seccombe's account of the transition. I suggest that Seccombe makes a considerable advance upon previous Marxist work by drawing explicit attention to gender relations and family forms, and synthesizes much of the historical literature that is undoubtedly essential for constructing a unitary materialist theory. However, the force of Seccombe's account is ironically limited by its retention of problematic concepts and assumptions developed by more orthodox Marxists – the very concepts and assumptions that political Marxists convincingly call into question. These theoretical shortcomings prevent Seccombe from providing a persuasive interpretation and understanding of the “hidden” variables he seeks to uncover.

Finally, the contributions of political Marxists and Seccombe are brought together in the final section of the essay to trace an alternative historical materialist approach to the transition. As space does not permit even a minimally detailed account, this section is necessarily tentative, and only aspires to call attention to crucial turning points in the evolution of English capitalism from the Black Death to early

industrialization. Its central purpose is to illustrate how political Marxist concepts can be deployed to answer materialist feminist questions, thereby establishing 1) a more complete and effective account of the transition, and 2) a methodological basis for a unitary materialist theory.

The Theoretical Impasse of Socialist Feminism

Within the Marxian tradition, political Marxism has been defined by a central – and seemingly obsessive – concern for tracing capitalism's origins. Indeed, one of its more creative proponents has recently called his co-thinkers to task for neglecting institutional and comparative questions, thereby yielding “an overly structuralist notion of capitalism as a system with inherent dynamics” (Knafo 2007:102). Such a result would be especially ironic given Brenner's (1977) original project of seeking to explain capitalism in a way that structuralist accounts (particularly world systems theory) could not. Knafo offers a welcome caution: historical materialist analysis should always seek to build and inform theory by examining history, rather than to use theory as a talisman for waving away complicated comparative questions. Still, even if political Marxists have been rather slow in expanding the scope of their concern, there remains an important sense in which an understanding of capitalism's emergence remains analytically primary for historical materialists. An appreciation of capitalism's specificity and uniqueness *as a social form* requires some understanding of how and why it emerged historically, in certain historical contexts and geographical places but not in others. Discerning capitalism's historical specificity remains the surest – and ultimately, the only – means of guarding against the logical circularities of structuralism.

It is in this sense, then, that the project of political Marxism is directly applicable to unresolved questions and debates within socialist feminism and feminist political economy. Over a decade ago, the socialist feminist Sue Ferguson issued a short but very useful summary of previous debates, and a sympathetic critique of “social reproduction theory.” Ferguson noted that the “festering (and ultimately unresolved) issue” fuelling socialist feminist thought

in the 1980s was the place of Marxist analysis (1999:2). Over its course, the debate tended to polarize around two poles: an “economic determinist” camp asserting the economic and class roots of women’s oppression, and a “dualist” camp suggesting the independent operation of a patriarchal sphere or structure. Both groups suffered from analytical difficulties. The first tended to posit women’s oppression as a function of capital accumulation and class processes, while the second had difficulty explaining the transhistorical basis for patriarchy in a way that did not assume men’s sociobiological drive for mastery. Patriarchy, commonly understood to mean the social subordination of women (Sacks 1989:537), could not serve as both *explanans* and *explanandum*. As Meg Luxton recently reiterated, “There is ample anthropological evidence that sex/gender divisions of labour do not necessarily produce gender inequality. Rather, women’s oppression emerges in relation to specific forms of social organization” (Luxton 2006:32; see also Coontz and Henderson 1986).

Social reproduction theory emerged out of this impasse as a means of establishing a unitary materialist theory. Here, to use the words of Pat and Hugh Armstrong, patriarchy and capitalism, “are not autonomous, nor even interconnected systems, but the same system” (1986:226). The class analysis of socialist feminism is retained, but the reductionism and dualism of previous analyses is overcome by focusing on “the ways in which the labouring population is produced, sustained, and reproduced on a daily and generational basis” (Luxton 2006:40). According to its proponents, social reproduction analysis permits a materialist understanding not only of gender, but also a third category of social identity allegedly trivialized by orthodox Marxism and early socialist feminism alike: race/ethnicity.⁴ Luxton explains that such investigations

put issues of imperialism, racialization and racism at the heart of gender and class analyses. Capitalist development depended on supplies of (reproduced)

labour from people who originally lived outside regions where capitalist relations were dominant and on people in and from colonies; the transnational, trans-regional locus of social reproduction and capital’s mobility mean that capitalism is foundationally racialized and dependent upon differences and divisions. [2006:38]

However, despite an avowed commitment to understanding the materialist foundation of social relations as an integrated and unified process, Ferguson maintains that many feminist materialists remain wedded to dualist approaches. For example, she charges Secombe with maintaining a sharp distinction between “economic” laws and “demographic” laws. The result in social reproduction literature is an ambiguity regarding the precise nature and locus of power within society, such that its proponents “tend to sidestep the twin issues of capital accumulation and class exploitation” (1999:10). If structuralism is to be replaced with a “truly integrative and historical understanding of social reproduction,” attention must shift to the decisive role that capital accumulation plays over the entire process, and to class and class consciousness as lived experience (1999:11).

Ferguson is certainly correct to criticize the “vague theoretical foundations” of much work in the social reproduction tradition, and her call for a more “rigorously constructed, coherent social theory” readmitting a Marxian focus on capital accumulation and class is welcome (1999:3). However, in the end it might be asked whether Ferguson’s analysis generates more questions than answers. There seems to be a real tension between the abstract contention that capitalism and patriarchy be viewed as “one system,” and the more concrete proposal that we overcome residual dualism by appreciating that capital accumulation “asserts its mandate over the whole process of social reproduction” (1999:12). How is the latter proposition to be accepted without lapsing into dualism’s dreaded counterpart, economic reductionism/functionalism? A notion of class and class consciousness as “lived experience” is undoubtedly a crucial step in the right direction (Johanna Brenner 2000). But what exactly are the imperatives of capital accumulation that have come to play such a decisive role? Can they be conceived as “laws,” and if

⁴ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of this third category in developing a satisfactory unitary materialist theory. A sustained treatment of race/ethnicity cannot be made in this paper, although I do offer some general methodological suggestions below.

so, how do we retain the focus on historically-evolved social relations? There is undoubtedly much to value in the Armstrongs' work, but on closer inspection their method of analysis seems to drive in a direction opposite to that which Ferguson wants to travel. Starting with an analysis of the capitalist mode of production at the "highest level of abstraction," they define capitalism as a system premised on free wage labour, and therefore also the division between private and public spheres and a sexual division of labour (1986:224-5). This is an insightful logical deduction, but it is not an historical one. We need to assess the transformation of social relations which *gave rise* to a system of free wage labour if we are to adequately trace the alleged necessity of a certain sexual division of labour in capitalism. Generalized free wage labour may not, in fact, be the *sine qua non* for capitalist development, even if it is certainly the *outcome* of capitalist social relations (Wood 2001).

The Transition Debate and the Specificity of Capitalism

Indeed, it was with the goal of explaining the emergence of a system of free wage labour and generalized commodity production that Marxists initially turned their attention to the historical question of capitalism's origins. In doing so, they naturally drew inspiration from the work of Marx himself. The problem, as Brenner (1989) initially pointed out, is that Marx seems to offer two *distinct* accounts of the transition within his work; moreover, on closer inspection, the two are not merely distinct but *mutually incompatible*. The first (hereafter "model one"), presented in Marx and Engels' early works (1961), was predicated upon a theory of historical development which suggested a relatively linear progression through different stages of mode of production, propelled by a tension between the forces and relations of production. Although the exact constitution of the productive forces is disputed, in these early works Marx seems to suggest that the division of labour directly expresses the level of development of the productive forces, in turn determining social relations of class and property (Brenner 1989:272).

It is worth pausing for a moment here to consider the extent to which model one was taken for granted

by the various contributors to the domestic labour debate. In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels extended the ambit of Marx's first model to incorporate women and family forms, suggesting that sexual oppression can be traced to the seclusion of women from the division of "productive" labour with the advent of class society (Vogel 1995). Feminist socialists of "dual systems" persuasion largely *accepted* Engels' transhistorical separation between "productive" work/production of goods and "reproductive" work/production of people.⁵ Their axis of intervention was to theorize and render more "visible" the latter form of work, which Engels shunted to one side. "Single system" critics such as Iris Young (1981) correctly pointed out that this largely took the orthodox Marxist model of production relations for granted; but her answer, somewhat ironically, was to revert back to certain aspects of Marx and Engels' first model, suggesting that the division of labour be taken as analytically prior to class analysis. Dual systems sought to more fully theorize domestic labour as separate from the productive division of labour; Young and others sought to "genderize" the division of labour itself. Both, in different ways, departed from (and took for granted) Marx's model one.

Within the premises of model one, the West European "bourgeois" revolutions are portrayed as but the latest example of the dynamic productive forces (represented by the urban bourgeoisie) bursting asunder "outmoded" (in this case, feudal) relations of production.⁶ Notwithstanding considerable finessing, the work of Perry Anderson (upon which Seccombe explicitly draws) offers a largely similar account, portraying towns, market trading, and the revival of Roman law and quiritary ownership as inherently antagonistic to feudal social relations (Anderson 1979:424; Seccombe 1992:144). An emphasis on the causal importance of trade and towns is also a hallmark of Paul Sweezy's work (1978), which was later

⁵ See especially Hartmann 1981.

⁶ For Marx's own account, see his and Engels' famous passages in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Volume One (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), especially p. 108-119. For a critique, see Brenner, "Bourgeois Development" and George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London: Verso, 1987), chapters 3 and 7.

elaborated and extended by Marxian world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, and Andre Gunder Frank. Here, the emergence of capitalism is understood as a much more temporally and geographically extended process, predicated upon the metropolitan bourgeoisie's exploitation of the "periphery" through mercantilism and colonialism. Various forms of coerced labour and generalized violence are thus given prominence as forms of "primitive accumulation" preceding industrialization and generalized "free" wage labour.

Precisely because it problematizes the status of "free wage labourer" under capitalism, Marxian world systems theory has often been invoked by feminist materialists who seek to integrate race/ethnicity into analyses of gender and class. Maria Mies and Silvia Federici are most explicit in acknowledging this intellectual inspiration.⁷ An implicit reliance upon world systems theory is also frequent, as in Luxton's argument that capitalism is *foundationally* racialized because its historical development depended upon processes of imperialism and colonialism which drew upon supplies of reproduced labour in regions where capitalist social relations were not yet dominant. In her landmark essay outlining a "unitary theory of race, class and gender," Karen Brodtkin Sacks draws upon the feminist world systems analyses of Veronika Bennholdt-Thompson (1981, 1984) and Mies (1986), as well as a wealth of feminist anthropological and historical studies, to underscore the racialized dynamics of capitalist accumulation on an international scale. Capitalism continuously creates "non-capitalist forms of production as its surroundings" for its "existence and future development" – but in doing so, "these cease to be modes of production in the sense of retaining independent dynamics, and become non-capitalist forms of production subordinated to and part of the capitalist mode of production" (Sacks 1989:541). These observations inform Sack's (re)definition of the working class, "in which membership is not determinable on an individual basis, but rather as membership in a community that is

dependent upon waged labor, but that is unable to subsist or reproduce by such labor alone" (Sacks 1989:543).

For Brenner and the political Marxists, the problem with all of the above accounts lie in their assumption of precisely that which needs to be explained – *viz.*, capitalist "rules of reproduction" and "laws of motion." Brenner points out that Adam Smith's *description* of capitalist dynamics is largely correct. Market competition induces actors to cut costs by innovating and improving labour productivity, leading to a more specialized technical division of labour. However, Smith is only able to describe this dynamic by assuming the causal priority of an intrinsically human capitalist rationality: the propensity to "truck, barter, and exchange" (Brenner 1986). Such a propensity is also assumed by Anderson and world systems theorists, who regard capitalism as already present within the interstices of feudalism. Since merchants have traded for centuries and even millennia, capitalism – despite references to "bourgeois revolution" – is really conceived as merely a quantitative extension of social relations that have always been present. Its emergence at a particular time is therefore attributed to the removal of barriers or obstacles in its path (guild and feudal restrictions, etc.), rather than a qualitatively new social dynamic.

Even the prominent British Marxist historians – Rodney Hilton and Maurice Dobb chief among them – exhibit the same explanatory tendency, which Wood (2002) refers to as the "commercialization model" of the transition. While focusing appropriately on the peasantry and rural social relations, they root the emergence of capitalism and a waged proletariat in processes of peasant differentiation and polarization. With the Black Plague and loosening of lordly exploitation, it is claimed, rich peasants were in a better position to take advantage of potential "gains from trade," while their poorer counterparts – those less able to produce and market competitively – fell even further behind. The differential effects of market competition eventually resulted in a polarization between capitalist farmers, on the one hand, and landless labourers, on the other (Wood 2002). Seccombe's understanding of the transition is largely informed by this thesis, in addition to what he takes from Anderson.

7 Indeed, Mies' work is explicitly conceived within the terms of world systems theory, and is peppered with references to Wallerstein in particular. Federici herself draws extensively upon Mies, and more conventional world systems theorists to a lesser extent. See Federici, p. 18, n. 1.

Political Marxists contrast all variants of the “commercialization model” with a second model, drawn from Marx’s *Capital*. In his famous chapter on “so-called primitive accumulation,” Marx does not trace capitalism to the lifting of barriers to profit-making, but rather to the forcible expropriation of the peasantry from customary lands through enclosure (Marx 1976:877-907). The separation of the direct producers from their means of subsistence is therefore the original “primitive accumulation,” not the accumulation of wealth via colonialism or trade. However, Marx’s account did not adequately explain the historical reasons for this expropriation. If we do not assume a capitalist rationality from the outset, how do we explain *why* feudal landlords sought to expel the peasantry from their land? Did a similar process occur outside of England, and if not, how are these societies to be characterized during the same historical period?

Brenner (1985) sought to answer these questions in his famously controversial essay on early modern Europe, which provided a foundation for the political Marxist tradition. In doing so he offered the first explanation of the origins of capitalism that did not confuse *explanans* with *explanandum*, and overturned the received Marxist models taken as reference points in the domestic labour debate. Rather than conceiving of a forces/relations dialectic propelling historical change, Brenner instead points to the radical difference between capitalism and all previous forms of class-stratified society. While technique, organization and technology have varied across time and place, in all pre-capitalist societies the production of most goods assumed a basically similar form: peasants cultivated the land they held in some form of direct possession (but not *ownership* in the contemporary capitalist sense). Surplus appropriation (and therefore class exploitation) did not generally occur at the point of production as it does in capitalist societies, but instead through the exercise of political power and (at least implicitly) violence/coercion, after the agricultural product had been cultivated. In pre-capitalist class societies, therefore, political and economic powers were fused, and were in fact indistinguishable. As some political Marxists have since pointed out, the operative concept for historical materialist analysis

should not therefore be the “mode of production” (as if production were the dynamic principle dictating political and social development) but rather the “mode of exploitation” (Teschke 2003:53-7).

Modes of exploitation are meaningfully distinguished from each other by their form of “social-property relations,” which Brenner defines as:

the relations among direct producers, relations among exploiters, and relations between exploiters and direct producers that, taken together, make possible/specify the regular access of individuals and families to the means of production (land, labour, tools) and/or the social product per se. The idea is that such relations will exist in every society, and define the basic constraints on – and the possibilities and limits of – individual economic action. [Brenner 2007:58]

It is notable that Brenner here makes explicit reference to families, and refers to them again when suggesting that distinct social-property relations give rise to particular “rules of reproduction” among both direct producers and exploiters. In fact, the novel historical materialist categories introduced by Brenner seem to at least *potentially* admit the importance and complexity of family forms and reproductive labour in a way that traditional Marxism never had. In practice, the political Marxists have fallen short of recognizing or realizing this potential – a fact which likely stems, at least partially, from a lack of concern for the “feminist question.”

Before engaging with this question and linking it to Secombe’s analysis, it is first necessary to identify Brenner’s “feudal” rules of reproduction and their relation to the origin of capitalism. Brenner sharply distinguishes between peasant and lordly rules of reproduction. Peasants, he suggests, adopted a “produce for subsistence” rule. To guarantee immediate subsistence and generational security, they minimized productive specialization, had large families, subdivided their holdings, and encouraged early marriage (Brenner 2007:69). Feudal lords, because they had minimal capacity to transform production, increased output and income only by “extensive growth” – carving out new lands, conquering new ones, etc. – as well as “political accumulation,” or investment in

the means of violence. Benno Teschke (2003:62-3) has added that marriage itself was a form of lordly political accumulation, as it was inextricably tied to the inheritance of land and peasant tenants. Dynastic marriage, therefore, constituted a ruling class strategy.

In this light, the problem of accounting for the transition to capitalism is explaining how it was possible at all. Why would lords enclose on the direct producers who provide their wealth and security? Brenner's answer, which has been given important elaboration by Comninel (2000), is that capitalism emerged as an *unintended consequence* of class struggles in England specifically. The Black Death (c. 1348) and consequent depopulation occurred throughout the continent, jeopardizing the normal rules of reproduction that once governed lordly accumulation. In France, peasant communities were able to secure rights of inheritance and fixed rents against their lords, even as new powers of politically-mediated appropriation were formed by tax-office absolutist states (Zmolek 2001:136). In England, however, a very different path was followed. Here, depopulation also turned the terms of class struggle against the lords, and attempts to re-impose feudal exactions failed. Whereas the serfs were once obliged to perform a certain amount of labour upon the lords' *demesne*, they were now relieved of labour-rent obligations and obliged to only pay money rents on their customary tenancies (Patriquin 2004:204).

This initial peasant victory set in motion a series of interconnected events which eventually yielded agrarian capitalism. Lacking traditional extra-economic powers of surplus extraction, in the mid-fifteenth century the lords began to rent their *demesne* land to the highest bidder, i.e., they established variable "economic" rents. Although this would have otherwise had no consequence for customary tenants, the English common law (absent in France) enabled the lords to gradually claim *exclusive* right to common lands. There thus began a process – largely "legal" – by which common lands and rights were extinguished, and lords increasingly asserted their right to enact variable rents on customary holdings as well (Patriquin 2004:206-8). Peasant access to the land (the means of subsistence) became conditional upon meeting a market-determined rent. For tenants,

production for the market was now an *imperative*, rather than an opportunity – they had to specialize, innovate, and improve productivity just to ensure their self-reproduction. Those who failed to do so sufficiently were evicted, and came to constitute a wage-dependent proletariat.

This result differed markedly from that of France, where enduring peasant possession of land ensured the maintenance of pre-capitalist rules of reproduction. There, a secular tendency of declining labour productivity set in as peasant families subdivided their holdings over generations. To subsist, many peasant families necessarily *supplemented* their income with wages and "proto-industrial" production; but "tenant farming and wage labor had changed little since the crisis of the fourteenth century...whereas capitalism had totally transformed the agriculture of England" (Comninel 1987:192-3).

To summarize, political Marxism offers at least two important conceptual contributions to feminist materialism and a unitary materialist theory. First is the more narrow concern of understanding the transition and explaining capitalism's specificity. Brenner and the political Marxists are alone in having done so without "begging the question." This does not mean that their account is in any sense comprehensive or complete, but it seems at least to be the best starting point, certainly better than world systems theory or other varieties of Marxian work. Most importantly, their analysis has shown that it is at least misleading to begin feminist materialist analysis (as the Armstrongs do) by conceiving of an abstract capitalist mode of production predicated upon free wage labour. Instead, market dependence is the historical basis for capitalist development, upon which proletarianization followed. As Ellen Wood suggests:

The moment access to the means of production and appropriation becomes market-dependent – and even before market dependence takes the form of the general commodification of labour power – the 'fundamental contradiction' of capitalism is already at work, and the market's imperatives of competition and profit-maximization come into play. [2001:284]

In assessing the specific relationship between capital-

ism and patriarchy, then, a necessary starting point should be an historical investigation of how relations of *market dependence* reshaped pre-capitalist gender relations, long before the onset of industrialization in the nineteenth century.

A basis for such work has been laid by the political Marxists' second contribution: the interlinked concepts of mode of exploitation, social-property relations, and rules of reproduction. The important point here is that pre-capitalist relations of exploitation, given their politically-mediated character, carried direct implications for gender relations. In fact, if "rules of reproduction" are to be sufficiently comprehensive, they must recognize the mutually-constituted nature of relations of exploitation, on the one hand, and gender relations, on the other. This can be demonstrated by embarking on a closer examination of feudal rules of reproduction. Brenner and other political Marxists correctly note that lords relied upon extensive rather than intensive growth, but it is crucial to point out that such extensive growth required the *political* management of peasant women's biological reproduction function. Not only was it advantageous to guarantee a surplus peasant population for new lands, it was even more necessary to ensure a secure and steady supply of labour for both the lordly *demesne* and customary tenancies (Middleton 1981:108).

Chris Middleton, in particular, has shown how regional variations in tenancy and rent obligations under English feudalism were associated with gender relations of greater or lesser equality. In regions where lords had larger *demesnes*, there tended to be a stricter regulation of peasant sexuality and women's reproductive capacities. Contrary to the suggestions of some socialist feminist authors (Federici 2004:25), there *was* a certain social separation between the productive and reproductive tasks in late English feudalism. Peasant women were largely excluded from labouring on the *demesne*, a central site of surplus production (Middleton 1979:156). On larger manorial estates, surplus was also produced *within* the lordly household by a permanent staff of waged but unfree labourers (the *famuli*). While both men and women laboured in this capacity, there were substantial differences. Most specialist occupations

(ploughing, shepherding, herding, carting, milling) were traditionally carried out by men (Middleton 1985:189). The great majority of female *famulae*, on the other hand, were recorded as "servants," and performed a wide variety of productive and reproductive tasks: growing vegetables, raising poultry, tending to the dairy, cooking and cleaning, maintaining clothing, and caring for the lord's children. Unlike the male *famuli*, a large proportion of the *famulae* were between the ages of 12 and 25, and conventionally left service upon marriage (Quick 2010:173-5).

After marriage, women established new households with their peasant husbands. On the peasant's customary holding, the division between productive and reproductive tasks was less sharp – but it did exist, alongside a corresponding sexual division of labour. Plowing, mowing (with a heavy scythe), hedging, ditching and the spaying and gelding of livestock were typically "men's work." Women laboured in the fields, but at different chores – planting, weeding, gathering straw, stubble and chaff, as well as washing and shearing of sheep. In the household itself women took care of the poultry, the dairy and the garden, labours which were more compatible with the demands of child-rearing (Middleton 1988:28). To be sure, there is evidence that women performed all of the above tasks at certain times, but it is important to note that mowing and ploughing seems to have consistently remained a male preserve (Hilton 1947:145-7; Casey 1976:227-31).

Gendered occupational specialization and discrimination, therefore, clearly *preceded* capitalism. However, this fact should not be taken as evidence of an autonomous "patriarchal" structure and/or the "functional" necessity of a sexual division of labour. Instead, the particular sexual division of labour and patriarchal norms of the period can best be explained with reference to the specific rules of reproduction that instantiated feudal social-property relations. Both feudal lords and peasant families had an interest in ensuring a large and stable inter-generational labour supply (i.e., large families). As Brenner noted, large families were important for peasants because they helped to meet the immediate requirements of subsistence and rental obligations, as well as long-term security in old age. Perhaps even more

importantly, lords sought the same because a large peasant population ensured the flow of surplus agricultural product from existing and newly established customary holdings, and surplus labour for the *demesne*. Middleton has convincingly argued that lordly demands, in particular,

made a married woman's fecundity her most valuable asset – more valuable, generally, than the labour she might contribute herself or the property she brought into the marriage. Her main function was to procreate. This expectation, combined with a high rate of infant mortality and relatively low adult life-expectancy, would mean that a considerable proportion of a peasant woman's married life would be absorbed by the sheer physical experiences of pregnancy, birth and lactation, and though this might not prevent her making a large and varied contribution to the household, it could impede her role in the *direction* of agricultural labour – something which requires regular and relatively uninterrupted involvement to be effective. [Middleton 1981:148]

The expectation that young peasant women would eventually marry and raise children shaped the terms and limits of the labour that they performed as servants before marriage; while the demands of child-rearing in the peasant household, after marriage, restricted women's role in agrarian production for the customary tenancy and the *demesne*.

An emphasis on female "fecundity" and the control of women's reproductive capacity provides a means of linking the rules of reproduction of both feudal lords and peasants. In Brenner, the two are often artificially separated, while the family itself is presented as something like a black box, in which gender relations are seemingly inconsequential. When an analysis of the feudal mode of exploitation is expanded to encompass the sexual division of labour, we gain not only a more complete understanding of its dynamics, but also an explanation for the particular form of patriarchal power it entailed. The male's assumption of superiority in the household, and a corresponding sexual division of labour in which women performed the bulk of childrearing tasks, is closely related to the *politically-mediated* character of feudal surplus extraction. Lordly demands

for surplus product from the customary holding and surplus labour for the *demesne* impelled a hierarchical organization of production within peasant households (Wood 1995:276-9). Households were also required to provide "political" representatives to village assemblies and the lord's manor, through which the broad management and regulation of agrarian relations was determined. Even though women made essential contributions to the productive and reproductive labour of the peasant (and lordly) household, they were excluded from participation in the labour-intensive tasks of agricultural (and thereby surplus) production on the customary tenancy and *demesne*. Through their authority in this domain, men claimed representation of their household "politically" at the village level and gained overall control of the household, its property, and its labour.⁸

With the separation of the political and the economic under capitalism, the basis of women's oppression in politically-mediated exploitative relations was dramatically altered. In pre-capitalist societies, the generational reproduction of the labour force was directly connected to exploitation and accumulation through "extensive" political mechanisms. Under capitalism, exploitation and accumulation is mediated by the market, and the political regulation of fertility can no longer be *directly* wielded for exploitative purposes.⁹ In this respect, Ellen Wood is justified in suggesting that capitalism "is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits" (Wood 1995:266). Yet – as feminist political economists have insisted – paid and unpaid labour remain profoundly gendered (and racialized). How is this fact to be explained in a non-functionalist and non-dualist way? It seems that the best and only way is to trace the process of transition in a manner that

⁸ On this very important point, see Middleton, "Peasants," p. 148. Although beyond the purview of this paper, it is worth linking the political foundations of male supremacy in feudal society with the larger question of the origins of the state, class, and gender oppression. Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson, for example, have traced male supremacy to their political role in kin-based societies, which was eventually transformed into a vehicle for accumulation. See Coontz and Henderson, "Property Forms, Political Power and Female Labour in the Origins of Class and State Societies," in Coontz and Henderson (eds.), *Women's Work, Men's Property: The Origins of Gender and Class* (London:Verso, 1986).

⁹ Which does not mean, of course, that fertility and other gendered processes cease to be regulated, or that they are of no economic consequence.

is attentive to capitalism's specificity, but which also demonstrates how *gendered* pre-capitalist rules of reproduction were reshaped and transformed by the social relations of market dependence.

Assessing Seccombe's Contribution

It is in this context that Seccombe's work should be assessed and appreciated. From a political Marxist perspective, there is much in his account that is problematic. On the one hand, Seccombe (1992:10) rightfully encourages a theoretical "integration" of the socioeconomic dimension with the politico-legal relations of the state. On the other hand, he does not engage in a concerted attempt to reformulate Marxian theoretical categories in a way that would enable such integration. Instead, readers are provided with a theorization of the "mode of production" that largely relies upon the previous work of more orthodox Marxist historians. While he does "expand" the mode of production concept to encompass family forms, there necessarily remains – as Ferguson (1999:10, 14 fn.22) pointed out – a certain dualism between the two. The categories that political Marxists provide in place of the mode of production – while not initially developed with the intention of illuminating such factors – actually seem better equipped to integrate gender and family forms directly into historical materialist analysis.

Seccombe's reliance upon more orthodox Marxian models is well illustrated by his treatment of the West European late/non-universal peasant marriage pattern, a social phenomena that is central to his account of the transition. This pattern – which Seccombe traces to as early as 1650 and attributes to a tightening land market and declining wages – ostensibly provides a "missing piece of the puzzle" in explaining the genesis of industrial capitalism (1992:239). He identifies seven interrelated factors to which the pattern gave rise, including higher life expectancy, greater savings, more "efficient" use of women's reproductive labour, and greater willingness among youth to assume proletarian employment (1992:239-41). However, these are all *quantitative* factors. They may explain the intensification of capitalist social dynamics once set in motion, but they cannot explain the origin of those dynamics. In the

end, like so many others, Seccombe assumes what has to be explained. For Seccombe, the pattern's greatest significance is not necessarily its restrictive function,

but rather the obverse capacity: to unleash a sustained *rise* in the birth rate by means of earlier and more universal marriage, in sensitive response to shifts in the mode of labour-power's employment and consumption. This occurred in zones of rural industry in the late eighteenth century. [1992:241]

An obvious question is how to explain the emergence and sustainability of rural industry. In his main narrative Seccombe appears to take this development for granted, but in his Appendix (critique of Brenner) he links it to the development of intensive agriculture in the same period. Curiously, Seccombe accepts that English agriculture, in contrast with that in France, developed "within an essentially capitalist structure" (1992:251) – but then denies that this difference had any measurable effect, and credits the development of intensive agriculture to the "stimulus" of rising grain prices in the late eighteenth century (1992:231, 251). Such a stimulus, however, can only be held to have *causal* effect if some underlying model of social development is assumed. In Seccombe's case, it is a model of peasant differentiation/polarization and proletarianization in the Hilton/Dobb tradition (Seccombe:1992:141-4).

For this reason, it is very difficult to accept Seccombe's specific critique of Brenner. As is suggested above, Seccombe correctly takes Brenner to task for "largely ignor[ing] the familial dimension" in his account of the transition (1992:253). The problem is that when Seccombe attempts to demonstrate the causal force of specifically English family forms – stronger traditions of unigeniture, neo-locality, and exogamy – he separates them from the social-property relations within which they were embedded. English unigeniture and neo-locality, for example, cannot be contrasted with French partibility and virilocality as causally independent factors. Instead, these patterns were inextricably bound with the experience of *differential* modes of exploitation spanning several centuries in both countries: distinct forms and degrees of lordly power during the feudal era before the fifteenth century (Comninel 2000),

and the divergence between English agrarian capitalism and French absolutism afterwards. Granting family forms the status of independent causal factors simply conceals Seccombe's underlying fidelity to flawed orthodox Marxian models which posit a fundamental *similarity* between England and France.

The above criticism is being offered not to undermine Seccombe's overall project of integrating gender relations and family forms into historical materialism. Instead, the objective is to build on this concern by highlighting the need for stronger conceptual foundations. Indeed, despite its flawed theoretical orientation, Seccombe's account has much to offer. By asking "feminist questions," he delivers a much richer and historically nuanced understanding of peasant family dynamics than Brenner. Some political Marxists (Comninel 2000:27; Teschke 2003:69-70) have recently attempted a more detailed periodization of the medieval era based upon forms of lordship (e.g., manorialism is contrasted with "feudalism" proper). The distinction between partibility and primogeniture is being raised in this context, but largely as a factor of lordly inheritance, rather than peasant gender relations. There is thus not just the possibility, but the necessity, of drawing both literatures together.

Reframed in this way, the late marriage pattern may still prove to have been causally linked to the transition, albeit for reasons entirely unforeseen by Seccombe. As noted above, the political Marxists trace the emergence of agrarian capitalism in England to a specific pattern of developments following the Black Death of 1348. Depopulation induced a crisis of lordly revenue extraction, eventually compelling lords to begin leasing out their *demesne* lands and, around 1450, enclose on the commons. Thus far, political Marxist authors have made almost no reference to the role that a delayed/non-universal marriage pattern may have played in the course of these events. Indeed, Brenner has asserted that the late marriage pattern was simply a *consequence* of agrarian capitalist development, which eliminated the basis for early marriage and high fertility embedded in peasant rules of reproduction (2007:104). However, Seccombe suggests that England was the first European country to experience such a pattern, beginning shortly after the Black Death in the late fourteenth century

(1992:155-6; see also Gottfried 1978:177, 191, 221; Hallam 1985). Although evidence of a late marriage pattern at this early date is only cursory, by the early sixteenth century its existence has been well established by historians (Youngs 1984:137). It seems, then, that the social significance of the late marriage pattern (and corresponding gender relations) should be dramatically rethought, by placing it *within* the history of the English feudal crisis. In this context, the late marriage pattern appears as neither the "missing link" for explaining industrial capitalism (as Seccombe suggests), nor the *consequence* of agrarian capitalism (as Brenner avers). Rather, it was the formative factor in the class struggles that *gave rise* to agrarian capitalism, exacerbating the crisis of lordly revenues.

The pattern's emergence would have been inextricably tied to the contours of the class struggle after the Black Death, involving peasant (and perhaps especially peasant women's) assertion of control over reproduction against lordly intervention and demands. The establishment of a late marriage pattern may have played a decisive contributing role to the transition by maintaining a high degree of land availability throughout the century of crisis. What this evidence suggests, then, is that peasant men and women significantly altered their previous rules of reproduction, in gendered ways, as they sought to cope with the constraints and opportunities of the crisis period. The persistence of a low peasant birth rate, however, also meant a crisis of surplus appropriation for lords, denying them an ample supply of labour for the *demesne* and a high rate of surplus product from customary tenancies. By reverting to leaseholding of the *demesne* and eventually the enclosure of common lands, the lords succeeded in turning the tables on the peasantry, "unintentionally" establishing an entirely novel form of capitalist social-property relations.

This thesis is certainly tentative, and requires much greater historical research of family forms and gender relations in fifteenth century England if it is to be upheld with confidence. Indeed, the historical record itself is patchy and contradictory, especially in the decades immediately after the Black Death. Nevertheless, such an investigation would provide an

ideal synthesis of the best elements of Brenner and Secombe, while also prompting a “rethinking” of the transition from both sides.

Family Forms and Social-Property Relations

At first glance, the minutiae of late medieval and early modern English agriculture may seem to bring us rather far from the contemporary concerns of feminist materialism. However, a rethinking of the transition is crucial not simply for ensuring historical accuracy and nuance, but also for overcoming the theoretical impasse of socialist feminism identified above. In conducting this effort, the conceptual limitations of much previous work in the political Marxist tradition will have to be confronted as well. Here we must return to, and take more seriously, Samuel Knafo’s suggestion that both Brenner and Wood have exhibited a tendency to essentialize the English experience of capitalism:

Partly because the comparative work on the various capitalist trajectories remains to be done in this approach, there has been a tendency among political Marxists to rely on an overly structuralist notion of capitalism as a system with inherent dynamics.... Political Marxism now needs to take a step further in applying its own comparative method to the study of capitalism itself in order to historicize it. This requires, above all, that we stop taking the imperative of the market as the defining feature of capitalism. Social imperatives clearly do matter because they compel social classes to find solutions to distinctive types of problems, and encourage the diffusion of successful innovations, thus normalising them. Yet these solutions are not predetermined. [Knafo 2007:102]

Knafo’s methodological concern, above all, is to assert the centrality of agency in critical analyses of social relations:

structures are established and transformed precisely in order to gain leverage and to influence a social reality. Structures are thus intimately tied to agency. Their purpose is precisely to create agency (for some), not simply to close it off (for others). [Knafo 2010:509]

International relations scholars inspired by political Marxism have offered some instructive examples of how a focus on agency can be deployed to historicize capitalism. Benno Teschke, for example, stresses that the *pre-existing* absolutist state system had a profound effect upon the development of capitalism, including the state in which it was pioneered: “Britain never developed a pristine culture of capitalism [contra Wood 1991], since she was from the first dragged into an international environment that inflected her domestic politics and long-term development” (Teschke 2003:266). But just as British capitalism was inflected by the international relations of European absolutist states, so too did absolutist “rules of reproduction” come under increasing strain from the *geopolitical* competition imposed by Britain’s uniquely dynamic and productive capitalist economy. The international expansion of capitalism is therefore best understood as a geopolitically combined and socially uneven process, whereby pre-capitalist state classes had to design counter-strategies of reproduction to survive in an international environment. These strategies were not uniform, and were always refracted through pre-existing domestic class relations. The transposition of capitalism to the Continent and the rest of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was therefore riddled with social conflicts, from civil and international wars, to revolutions and counter-revolutions (Teschke 2003:266).

Taken together, what do these internal critiques and extensions of political Marxism offer for the project of a unitary materialist theory? At least two important implications stand out. First, the concept of geopolitically combined and socially uneven development affords a way of understanding the international dynamics of capitalist expansion and accumulation that avoids the problems of world system theoretic approaches often utilized by feminist materialists. Contra Luxton, capitalism was not *foundationally* racialized, but *became* racialized with the expansion of the British empire and, more importantly, the international instantiation of capitalist social relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By recognizing the comparatively “late” development of capitalism outside Britain, feminist

materialists will actually be in a better position to assess the specific historical processes by which capitalist development in and between certain localities became intertwined with racial/ethnic identity and subordination. A further exploration of this important point, unfortunately, is not possible here.¹⁰

The first point does, however, relate to a second: the concept of “rules of reproduction” must be employed and interpreted in a more flexible and historically open way to capture the social significance of agency. Indeed, Teschke and Hannes Lacher have suggested that the term “ways of reproduction” may better serve an “agency-centered and dialectical” approach to international capitalist competition (2007:571). The same concerns, I suggest, apply to domestic capitalist class relations. Brenner and Wood were quite correct to highlight the historically specific rules of reproduction that attend market dependence, but these rules are also too abstract to denote the specific and historically contingent strategies that class actors may pursue in achieving their objectives. Particularly pertinent for this discussion are the ways in which “non-economic” structures of social differentiation based on gender were instantiated and transformed in order to gain leverage and influence in the novel circumstances of agrarian capitalism.

Despite largely conflating the British and continental European (especially French) developmental experiences, Seccombe does note a number of profound contrasts between the two. He correctly observes that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, increasing numbers of land-poor cottagers in both France and England had to resort to wage labour to supplement diminishing agricultural income. In England, however, the land-poor were much more likely to become *landless*, “forced to rely ever more exclusively on selling their labour-power to subsist.” In contrast, a far greater proportion of smallhold-

ers in France “clung tenaciously” to a small plot, a common garden, and common use right (Seccombe 1992:253). Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century according to Seccombe, “most English labourers were devoid of any productive property at all. On the continent, however, the proportion of small property owners had risen substantially, while the growth of the property-less class was comparatively negligible” (Seccombe 1992:252; Fischer 1973:165). As we have seen, Seccombe also identifies differing family forms between the two countries as causally independent factors promoting early English industrialization. These factors, in England and France respectively, were unigeniture versus partibility; neo-locality versus virilocality; and dispersed versus locally dense kinship networks.

Once the differing patterns of proletarianization are recognised as stemming from qualitatively distinct social-property relations (agrarian capitalism and absolutism), the divergent families forms are also explicable. This divergence had its origins in distinct outcomes of class struggles during the feudal crisis. In France, peasant struggles enacted a definitive end to the system of seigneurial exploitation, whereby lords wielded the political power of the *ban* to command a variety of arbitrary exactions from servile tenants (serfs). Rents were fixed, and peasants gained personal freedom as well as effective and alienable title to the land they tilled (Comninel 2000:20-21). Crucially, however, these changes did not signify an end to extra-economic exploitation of the peasantry. Deprived of their old feudal prerogatives, French lords increasingly purchased “offices” in the king’s centralized state, providing new opportunities for wealth and status through the prerogatives of taxation. Thus, even as French peasants were able to entrench their right to petty property, they not only faced the obligations of fixed levies, but also the growing surplus exactions of an absolutist “tax/office state” (Teschke 2003:169).

Precisely because direct producers in France retained direct access to the means of subsistence, while also having thrown off the social regulation of banal lordship, they were able to organize inter-generational reproduction through the norm of partible inheritance. Partibility itself was not

10 Wood (2005:101), for example, suggests that racial ideology, in particular, emerged only because of the previous development of capitalism in Britain. Without the ascriptive categories and hierarchies of pre-capitalist societies, slavery could only be justified by inventing a new category of labour subordination, based on skin colour. However, capitalism in many other societies may have been “foundationally” racialized. France, for example, established racial categories as a participant in the Atlantic slave trade decades before it developed capitalism. For an insightful discussion of some of these issues, see Shilliam (2009).

historically novel. Absent lordly restrictions, this norm was adopted almost universally by peasants, in Europe and elsewhere, because it allowed the basis for (male) children to start families of their own at an early age and enhanced the security of aging parents (Brenner 2007:69; Seccombe 1992:39). Partibility, in turn, went hand-in-hand with virilocality and the formation of locally dense kinship networks, as male adults established new households in close proximity with those of their fathers.

This family form, then, was one that invested the elder patriarch with immense power over both children and wives. The historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie studied the transformations that occurred in one French province at the outset of this period:

In fifteenth century-Languedoc there was a move to substitute the extended patriarchal family for the nuclear family, to reconstitute the 'great household' of archaic rural societies.... They lived under the same roof, eating and drinking the same bread, and the same wine. There was a sole money box, and the patriarch retained the keys. Without the express consent of the parent, the married son did not have the right to more than five sous for himself.... The veritable master of the wife's dowry... was the husband's father. It was he who received and disposed of it. Among the extended family groups that allied themselves to one another through marriage, the dowries passed from father to father. [Ladurie 1974:31-33]

It should be noted here that Seccombe himself traces this transformation of peasant family forms and patriarchal power to the conditions of early modern France (1992:147). Yet, just as Seccombe's adherence to a conceptual model of single, West European transition to capitalism in the early nineteenth century prevents him from locating the causal role of family forms in the rise of agrarian capitalism in England, so too he misses their significance in shaping the conditions that yielded a distinct mode of exploitation (absolutism) in early modern France. There are at least two important ways in which the emergence of this particular peasant family form (and its attendant gender relations) may have played a heretofore unrecognized role in forcing the French

lordly class to devise new class-exploitative rules of reproduction. First, the reorganization of peasant production and reproduction under an elder patriarch would have strengthened peasants' claim to free status and *de facto* property rights over their smallholdings, curbing lordly attempts to maintain and re-institute the privileges of banal power. Second, the emergence of the elder patriarch as pre-eminent authority in the extended household and among kin would have facilitated the reorganization of politically-mediated social relations of surplus appropriation. Instead of acting as political representatives of the household in village communities dominated by individual lords, the patriarchs now served as the mediating link between their formally "free" peasant communities and a new stratum of tax-seeking office holders in the absolutist state (Comninel 1987:190).

Over many generations, however, the cumulative effect of partibility was to dramatically reduce the average size (and therefore productivity) of individual peasant holding. Eventually, only a minority had fully sufficient land for their own subsistence. To ensure their reproduction, peasants everywhere engaged in a variety of *supplementary* activities, such as leasing land (including even tenant farms to operate commercially), contractual sharecropping, wage labour and proto-industry. This last factor, in particular, has been pointed to by Seccombe and others as evidence of a fundamental similarity between France and England, where "putting out" industry expanded rapidly in the eighteenth century (1992:206-7). Proto-industry is seen as significant because it served as a transitional form to full capitalism (industrialization); but Seccombe also notes that it blurred traditional gender roles and softened patriarchal power:

The need to combine industrial work with child care and housework at one site fostered a much greater flexibility in the allocation of tasks between households. When a wife went out to do business with the contractor, her husband would take care of the home, mind the children, tend the garden and milk the cows. In these circumstances, the sex-typing of skills and areas of responsibility, so pronounced in peasant households, was frequently blurred and sometimes inverted. [1992:207]

Seccombe is not incorrect to identify the growth of proto-industry in the continent and England, and there is no doubt that it was associated with changes in the sexual division of labour and an *alteration* of patriarchal forms. Indeed, proto-industry and attendant commercialization often figured in peasant strategies of reproduction, when partibility was carried out to such an extent that individual plots can no longer meet basic subsistence needs. A particularly prominent non-Western example is the Yangzi Delta of late imperial China, where peasants also secured rights to their smallholdings and a fixed (albeit still very onerous) level of rent to lords. In the Yangzi, women who once worked alongside men in the fields moved into the household to engage exclusively in spinning and weaving for market sale (Cantin 2009:257; Brenner and Isett 2002:629). In the Chinese example, at least, proto-industry seems to have actually rigidified the sexual division of labour, and the extra-economic relations of kinship empowered men of the household to appropriate surplus from the women who produced it (Cantin 2009:456-7). In fact, some historians have evidenced a similar pattern in at least parts of France, with women withdrawing from agrarian activity to combine proto-industry with household tasks (Thirsk 1961:73, 81; Shorter 1976:517).

The gendered implications of proto-industry, therefore, cannot be assessed without a wider consideration of historically specific social norms embedded in rules of reproduction. For our purposes, what must be stressed are the distinct social-property relations that facilitated proto-industry in pre-capitalist societies such as France and China, on the one hand, and agrarian capitalist England on the other. The central difference is that in the former, direct producers retained non-market access to sufficient land so that proto-industry remained only a side-line (if an increasingly important one). The emergence and instantiation of market dependence in England, however, produced very different results for direct producers and the gendered division of labour.

When the social-property relations of agrarian capitalism are taken into account, the family forms observed by Seccombe in England are also readily explicable. While unigeniture was already a norm

among lordly families in feudal England, it assumed renewed importance for all agricultural producers with the onset of agrarian capitalism. Under the competitive pressures of market dependence, the size and integrity of land holdings were of vital economic necessity. Landowners, of course, sought to constantly expand the extent of their arable and/or pasture land to ensure economies of scale and maximization of output on their tenancies. However, freeholders and even remaining customary tenants were cognizant of the same factors because they too increasingly felt the pressures of the market in purchasing inputs and selling outputs, especially as the capitalist market became more national and fully integrated. The sub-division of holdings was therefore detrimental to landholders of all types and sizes.

By the early seventeenth century, the effect of enclosures and continued concentration of holdings pressed hard against customary tenants and small leaseholders alike, forcing them to give up their land. Some became cottagers if they could receive a minuscule "allotment" of land, taking up home industries such as weaving, or working as wage-labourers for larger farms. Others among the dispossessed went to the cities in search of work, became "vagabonds" or lived off poor relief (Zmolek 2001:143). By the late seventeenth century, customary tenures comprised only one-third of all tenures (and certainly a smaller proportion of total agricultural land), and leasehold prevailed everywhere except the northern district of Cumberland at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Indeed, by 1750 there were hardly any customary tenures left in England, which again explains Seccombe's observation that English labourers were devoid of any productive property at all by this period (Patriquin 2004:208; Seccombe 1992:252). The insecurity of smallholder agriculture and extensive dispossession and proletarianization help to explain patterns of neo-locality and dispersed kinship networks. Children of smallholders and especially proletarians were forced to leave their homes and villages of birth in search of employment, leading to increasingly scattered kinship ties across the country.

Patriarchy, Gendered Labour and Agrarian Capitalism

The above narrative of persistent agrarian capitalist growth and attendant proletarianization leads rather tidily to the historical conjuncture of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, widely recognized as the beginning of the first industrial revolution. However, although it is crucial to identify the historical origin of capitalism with the specific and novel social relations of market dependence that emerged in early modern English agriculture, industrial capitalism did not come to fruition several centuries later through the simple unfolding of a capitalist logic. The process of enclosure, dispossession, and proletarianization was not only gradual – it was marked by massive social struggles and contentions, as both capitalists and direct producers constantly devised new strategies to reproduce themselves amidst a changing social reality. Although a tremendous amount can (and has) been said about this, the focus here is limited to the ways in which gender relations were embedded in these class strategies. The objective is to clarify the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism by employing the revised political Marxist approach outlined thus far, thereby laying a foundation for a unitary materialist theory.

With the separation of the political and the economic under capitalism, surplus appropriation took the form of a wage-labour contract between individuals, rather than a politically-mediated obligation between formally unequal households. Nevertheless, wage labourers who entered into such contracts – especially in the first two centuries of agrarian capitalism – often did not rely upon their wages alone for full subsistence. Even after being dispossessed from their customary tenancies or leaseholds, new proletarians were often given tiny “allotments” of land, or were able to keep or establish a “cottage” with a garden (Patriquin 2004:209; Quick 2010:165). In addition, many common rights from the feudal era remained in place into the eighteenth century, though they varied by locality and their status was always under threat (Humphries 1990). Thus, members of the working class generally subsisted as family units, supplementing wages with agricultural production from small plots, proto-industry, and whatever could be still garnered from the commons.

Paddy Quick suggests that the transition from feudal tradition and custom to capitalist wage labour contracts “denoted a reliance on the sex-gender-age relationships within the working class for the reproduction of the working class, and a severing of the responsibility of the ruling class for the regulations guiding this” (Quick 2010:172). There is a crucial element of truth to this, insofar as those directly exploiting the direct producers lost their capacity to *politically* manage sex-gender-age relationships. “Freed” of the regulations of the lordly manor, working class families assumed a new responsibility to organize gender and age relationships among themselves, enabling a degree of flexibility and variety in family forms and gender relations that was unprecedented in the feudal period. Yet, the separation between the political and the economic did not divest the ruling class of its own agency in shaping these forms. While not directly wielding political power, agrarian capitalists used their economic prerogatives (hiring, firing, wage-setting, etc) to shape gender relations. Likewise, politicians and officials in the capitalist state did not shy from instituting a variety of legal regulations that implicitly and explicitly reordered gender relations, often in profound ways. Indeed, it was the conflictual interaction of these factors that served to reinforce, undermine, and transform patriarchal norms within the new social context of agrarian capitalism.

Agrarian capitalism began and developed most quickly in the south and east of England. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a continuous and remarkable expansion in the size of the great landed estates. Market pressures pushed small and inefficient tenants and freeholders into bankruptcy, while landlords engrossed their holdings through forms of enclosure and the purchase of additional land to maintain competitive size. In the early stages of this process, when the average farm size remained small, unmarried proletarian men and especially women were hired on yearly contracts to act as servants – half “family member” and half “hired help.” Contractual labour afforded protection against the uncertainties of the labour market, but it also served as a school for inculcating inherited gender expectations: “Girls in service were not only expected to acquire the skills they would need as a farm labourer’s

wife, but also the virtues of a submissive demeanour" (Middleton 1988:32). The particular tasks she was asked to perform – including the balance between indoor and outdoor labour – varied according to the size of the household and its form of farming. Once married, however, women generally found it more difficult to obtain regular employment than men. To a much greater extent, women's waged labour tended to be menial and low paid, combining agricultural work with household tasks or cooking for day labourers (Middleton 1988:32). Occupational segregation and discrimination, therefore, endured into the era of agrarian capitalism, and was likely reinforced by women's predominant labour in the "domestic" cottage, where gardening, husbandry and proto-industry ensured a higher income than wages and was also more amenable to the tasks of child-rearing.

The growth of large estates in the succeeding centuries had a contradictory effect, expanding the opportunities of wage employment but also reinforcing a pattern of occupational segregation resembling that of late feudalism. To meet competitive market pressures, farmers not only "improved" their farms through territorial consolidation and expansion, but also by introducing innovations in technique and technology and a more pronounced technical division of labour within their estates. Servants were gradually replaced by wage labour hired on a daily or weekly basis, and there was a marked rise in agricultural specialization within the workforce (and consequent stratification based on "skill," status and income). As in feudalism, it was intense work on the arable land that was regarded as most essential (and most remunerative) because of its tangible connection with surplus production, even though the surplus was now being secured through market competition rather than extra-economic coercion.

Interestingly, however, early records indicate that men as well as women were hired as reapers and mowers, even though women still predominated in dairy and garden work. It was only with the replacement of the sickle by the scythe that women were displaced. Michael Roberts has argued that this transition occurred because men possessed greater physical capacity to utilize the scythe (Roberts 1979). Middleton criticizes this explanation as a form

of "physiological-cum-technological determinism" (1988:35), and he would be correct for doing so *if* the introduction of the scythe is isolated from the wider social logic that compelled its use. However, if we connect its introduction to the social-property relations of capitalism – specifically, the need to enhance productivity under market pressure – then it can be shown that neither technology nor biology "determined" its impact on women. Indeed, we can achieve a social-historical understanding of why it was that certain forms of gender subordination persisted (indeed, were reintroduced) in a new social context. In these circumstances, pre-existing patriarchal norms had a material force, insofar as they provided a resource for capitalists (and some male workers) to achieve their strategies of reproduction. The capitalist farmer, unlike the feudal lord, was compelled to transform production under market pressure, which was both a cause and consequence for extinguishing customary rights. Yet broader social norms and customs remained important in shaping *how* this was achieved.

Similar considerations must be brought to bear in understanding the profound changes of the eighteenth century. The exclusion of women from reaping and mowing did not immediately result in an end to their employment on the harvest fields, where they continued to work as rakers and "followers." Indeed, it should also be noted that the scythe was only gradually implemented, as the sickle was still used to mow cheaper quality grains (in work that still involved women) (Middleton 1988:34). Around 1720, capitalist farmers responded to falling grain prices (and therefore falling profitability) with a vigorous effort to lower production costs by enhancing productivity and yields (Patriquin 2004:210). The "cereal belt" of large, grain producing estates was geographically extended throughout the country, placing further pressure on whatever small plots and customary lands the working class still claimed. While these developments ensured that England as a whole did not experience subsistence crises such as those that occurred on the Continent, it posed new and profound challenges for workers. Productivity increases made many male labourers redundant, generating structural rather than simply

seasonal unemployment. Although these pressures were faced by workers of both sexes, they were felt most acutely by women. Over the next few decades, it seems that women were entirely excluded from any harvest work, as their employment became restricted to gleaning and the poorly-paid (low demand) spring-time tasks of weeding corn, hay-making, and stone-picking. Snell suggests that this new gendered division of labour was a product of male labourers' defensive actions. In order to secure their own income, male workers actively sought to exclude female competition in agricultural labour, especially the more remunerative harvest tasks of all types (Snell 1985:57-66). Here, the class agency of male labourers, rather than capitalists, seems especially important in explaining the further subordination of women in the wage-dependent division of labour. Once again, though, pre-existing patriarchal norms were utilized as a resource for securing reproduction under the conjunctural conditions of the capitalist economy. In the process patriarchy was instantiated but also transformed in its specific social content.

Such a strategy may have seemed reasonable to male workers, and met with little resistance from their female counterparts, because of the remaining opportunities to meet subsistence needs through proto-industry and common rights, which were also more compatible with nursing and child care. Indeed, the eighteenth century was something of a "golden age" for proto-industry, as the expanding capitalist economy provided a large market for domestically produced crafts. Both of these alternatives to wage labour, however, were to be virtually eliminated by the turn of the century. As capitalists increasingly invested in the production of non-agricultural goods, the market became fiercely competitive even before the widespread use of machinery and industrial methods. Household proto-industry simply could not compete in a market governed by capitalist principles, leading to a spiral of debt and poverty (Zmolek 2001:150).

Just as important, in considering the fate of working women, was the final assault upon common right. As Jane Humphries has emphasized, the vestiges of common right in England were pivotal in ensuring women a certain degree of independence from male

wage-labourers, as well as the material reproduction of the family as a whole. But these rights were also a nuisance for agrarian capitalists seeking to expand cereal production, and their advocates strenuously lobbied parliament for enclosure. One such advocate, Arthur Young, observed in 1791: "The advantages of inclosing to every class of the people are now so well understood and combated at present but by a few old women who dislike it for no other reason but a love of singularity and a hatred of novelty" (quoted in Humphries 1990:22). Indeed, women figured prominently in the resistance to the parliamentary enclosures that ensued, though not of course for the reasons Young sneeringly imputed. The final elimination of common right extinguished women's major non-wage source for survival, increasing their dependence on wages and family wage-earners (and thereby, male workers). It also ensured women's full "availability" for existing and new forms of employment. The implications of these changes, for the history of industrial capitalism, gender, and family forms were profound.

These implications cannot of course be explored here. For the purposes of this analysis, though, it is enough to note that they prepared the ground for the dramatic expansion of capitalist industry in the nineteenth century. The gender relations that accompanied and shaped industrialization provided the historical pivot for the early socialist feminist debates, and the empirical ground for theoretically conceptualizing the relationship between patriarchy and capital. In many ways this focus is understandable because the historical significance of industrialization has been so far-reaching – including, as I have suggested, for the combined and uneven development of capitalism on an *international* scale. However, the common conflation of industrialism with capitalism prevents an understanding of capitalism's origins and specificity. Without such an understanding, attempts to theorize the relationship between class and gender inevitably yield some variant of functionalism, reductionism, or dualism. With such an understanding, however, we acquire conceptual tools that enable a fully social-historical explanation of their relationship and causality.

Conclusion: Toward a Unitary Theory

As the century of crisis in early modern England underscores, much of the history of the transition remains unwritten. Political Marxists have provided an invaluable contribution by pointing to a cardinal flaw in all previous accounts. Their alternative historical materialist approach has focused attention on the need to explain what had always been taken for granted or assumed: capitalist rationality and social relations themselves. In doing so, they have furnished a host of new concepts which provide the basis for a genuine *explanation* of the transition. Yet their work has, thus far, largely avoided questions of gender relations and family forms, an oversight that undermines the explanatory efficacy of their account. Secombe and other materialist feminists, in turn, have exhibited something of an opposite error. They have devoted significant attention to women and families, but have done so in a way that largely “adds” these factors to traditional, and inadequate, Marxist models. A synthesis of the two literatures – utilizing the political Marxist concepts of social-property relations and “rules of reproduction,” but also broadening the scope of these concepts in order to fully integrate families, gender, and racial/ethnic relations – would provide a solid methodological foundation for a unitary materialist perspective.

A unitary materialist theory should not, and cannot, be a positivist “theory of everything” akin to what is being sought in modern theoretical physics. Knafo has usefully suggested that social theory “only represents a means for specifying in a richer way social reality, not a means to abstract from it. Theory provides clarity in specifying what needs to be explained, but it cannot serve as a substitute for historical research” (2007:100). What socialist feminists have sought to explain is the relationship between capital and patriarchy, with more recent social reproductionist literature focusing on how class, gender and race constitute “one integrated process” of pro-

duction and social reproduction. In this, it might be said that some feminist materialists have been more consistent than many Marxists in pursuing “a theory of the social totality” (Rioux 2009:597). There can be no doubt that literature produced from a social reproduction perspective has offered a wealth of empirical analyses detailing the complex intersection of class, race and gender. However, without a clear conception of capitalism’s specificity, the “social totality” is often described without the theoretical tools that enable an *explanation* of how it came about and why it changes. In this context, a discussion of the transition to capitalism is highly pertinent. First, it illuminates the uniqueness of capitalism as a social form, something that is surely necessary for any materialist theory ascribing explanatory power to class relations. Second, it highlights the importance of agency and contingency, even in something as historically momentous as “the transition” itself. Once this analytical shift is made, we arrive at more useful and historically open historical materialist concepts – ones that that enable an integration of gender (as well as race/ethnicity, age and other identities and differentiations) into a materialist analysis that explains their causal significance in social change. The account of the transition and history of agrarian capitalism presented here, while very limited, attempts to demonstrate the possibility and utility of a unitary materialist theory based on such concepts. Certainly, the history of how patriarchy/gender subordination was instantiated and transformed between late feudalism and early industrialization supports no variant of dualism or functionalism/reductionism. But it also does not allow for the simple ontological alternative, that class exploitation and gender subordination are “one single system.” A unitary materialist theory must explain why and how this was and is so, amidst the vast process of social change, animated by a diversity of historical actors.

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