

# What Is Social Reproduction Theory Trying to Explain?

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Sue Ferguson's *Women and Work* has the great virtue of giving a history of various theoretical trends in feminist thinking about, well, work. If you have ever, like me, had the experience of wading into literature on this topic and left feeling more disoriented than before you began, Ferguson's book does the service of putting various arguments into their context as well as relating them to one another. Indeed, one of Ferguson's goals is diagnostic: to disambiguate trends in feminist theorizing about the relationship of women's work to their oppression, so as to develop a more coherent socialist feminist perspective than currently exists.

Why might one need a diagnosis of this kind? One learns quickly that many feminists talk about work, so a first glance may give the impression that they mostly agree. Certainly, liberals are often the ones who criticize gender norms and promote body positivity and strong friendships with other women, and one tends to gravitate to the left if one wants to get to the bottom of things. But left-liberals, radical feminists, and socialists alike have a history of identifying the kind of work that women do, both in certain "feminized" segments of the labor market and in the home, as a core cause of women's oppression. This similarity notwithstanding, the radicals and the socialists tend to equate liberalism with white, wealthy, professionals whose leading lights are the likes of Hillary Clinton and Susan Sontag.

This equation always felt like a cheap shot at the liberals to me. It might make for a good polemic, but it's not all that analytically meaningful. Liberal feminism can be egalitarian, and its theorists sometimes make extraordinarily similar claims to those made by socialists regarding issues like domestic labor, labor market discrimination, universal childcare, family leave, sexual agency, challenging the conceptual distinction between the public and private domains, and so on. They are not always, in fact, anti-egalitarian, racist, status-clinching monsters trying to break a mythical glass ceiling. Liberals quite often agree that such an aspiration is completely insufficient, and their ranks include plenty of women of color, too.

Ferguson helpfully avoids cheap shots in the interest of figuring out what the meaningful analytical and political differences among us really are. Instead of the usual political distinctions like the ones

that I have mentioned, she uses conceptual distinctions to describe historical-theoretical trends. First, Ferguson describes “equality feminism” as one of the earliest trends to discuss women’s work. Equality feminism leverages rational-humanist arguments to justify women’s equality with men by virtue of their capacities to act as independent, thinking persons.

A standout equality feminist is Mary Wollstonecraft, who saw women’s work as part of the problem and the solution. She was scathing toward the frivolous lives led by aristocratic and middle-class women, arguing that the path out of their dependency on men is through work. Wollstonecraft was indebted to the radical republican ethos of her time, which had some real strengths, but Ferguson argues that Wollstonecraft has the shortcoming of taking class divisions among women for granted. Thus, she concludes that working women are paradigms of autonomy rather than oppressed for reasons that differ from their wealthy peers. She does not interrogate the form that their labor actually takes on its own terms, or the relationships in which it is embedded. Wollstonecraft is not unique in this regard, but she is paradigmatic.

By contrast, critical equality feminism develops an analysis of reproductive labor under capitalism that is more historically specific to its form. Beginning with the utopian socialists, like Flora Tristan, critical equality feminism notices that there is some reciprocity between how the economy is organized and how people organize themselves. In political-economic language, there is a feedback loop between production and reproduction. Although they don’t develop this analysis systematically, critical equality feminists see the desirability of communalizing reproductive work. They frequently see work as a source of suffering, but also as having a creative potential. To change society fundamentally, one must change how one reproduces life itself, not just how one produces the things that we need to live life.

Ferguson’s distinction between equality and critical equality feminism is rarely examined. But, as she points out, it is crucial for developing a coherent account of women’s oppression, and not one that assumes that work, generically speaking, will liberate the millions of women who already work in a manner that is undesirable or unjust for historically particular reasons. The analytical payoff is appreciating the political difference between the demand to do more work or to transform work. The latter is where Ferguson places her political allegiances so as to have an inclusive feminist perspective that avoids elitism by class and race.

The prescriptive part of the project is to endorse social reproduction theory, which, Ferguson argues, is the most capable of the socialist feminist traditions of understanding capitalism’s distinct system logic. Social reproduction theory de-centers household labor, which goes a long way to taking on-board Black feminist critiques of that focus in the other traditions. For social reproduction theory, capitalism reproduces gender and race relations as it demands that certain populations reproduce the life that is required for its use of labor power.

Ferguson’s recommendations are to see how an analysis of this process of social reproduction plays out regarding a host of oppressions, including sexuality, disability, and others, as well as in “non-productive” institutions like schools, daycare centers, and hospitals. Politically, she supports a web of alliances between workplaces and non-workplace sites of reproduction to transform both from the ground up. There is much to recommend in what this latter ideal of what taking social reproduction theory on board in socialist politics might entail. Indeed, it is quite necessary for all sustainable strike actions to have the support of non-workplaces. Systematizing why that might be so, and why one should further exploit the opportunities therein, can only be a good thing.

Ferguson uses the idea of a “social reproduction strike” as an example of a political strategy that follows from her interpretation of social reproduction theory. By way of example, she foregrounds the “Feminism for the 99%” slogan and the “Women’s Strike” organizing efforts around

International Women's Day (1-8, 121-39). Ferguson's political adherence to the idea of a social reproduction strike throughout the text is reason to wonder whether social reproduction theory is being made to fit political reality, or the other way around.

The Women's Strike in the United States had some organizing legs in 2017, in the fallout after Donald Trump's election. But it did not continue to draw much interest. I suspect that whatever initial enthusiasm existed was a spillover from the Women's March on Washington. And it makes sense that American women in general have little interest in striking in this way. There are relatively few legal or economic cross-class obstacles that they have in common, the existence of which are normally the basis for a politically distinctive, mass feminist movement, as in South America.

Indeed, Ferguson seeks to deploy social reproduction theory as the key to unlocking the potential of a mass feminist movement that not only has feminist goals but develops in a way that makes socialist revolution its logical conclusion.

This motivation drives what seems like a functionalist argument throughout the book, despite Ferguson at one point briefly criticizing such explanations for reducing oppression to what facilitates capital accumulation. She criticizes critical equality feminists for having "tended to default to a functionalist logic, explaining gender relations as shaped by the demands of capital to keep wages as low as possible" (87). A functionalist argument explains a phenomenon by its tendency to have an effect. Critics of functionalist explanations usually point out that they neglect to posit a causal mechanism for how the phenomenon X comes to have a certain effect Y, instead relying on overly vague claims about the inherent potential of X to bring about Y. Functionalist explanations are notoriously resistant to the kind of counterfactual reasoning that one might use to explain why a phenomenon had one particular effect instead of another, or how the phenomenon changes over time relative to other changes in a system. Thus, even if functionalist explanations are logically valid or one can say that their premises are true, they do not explain as much as they advertise. They can instead come to reflect motivated reasoning.

The relevance of this point is that I do not see why Ferguson offers an altogether different explanatory framework. At one point, she says that it is insufficient to explain women's and racial oppression via capital's need to funnel those populations into low-wage work to divide, conquer, and better exploit workers, but she normally explains oppression by how it "enables," "ensures," "sustains," or "reinforces" the labor power required for capital accumulation. The latter all mean the same thing, which is that racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and so on exist because capitalism needs reproducible labor power that is cheap, segmented, or atomized. For example, Ferguson argues that capitalism must "sustain and reinforce racist and patriarchal practices and relations that degrade some bodies more than others" and that "this socially differentiated workforce reinforces and sustains the conditions for capital accumulation" by keeping "the costs of social reproduction lower by ensuring some people take on labor at a free or low wage" and by ensuring "a steady supply of sufficiently marginalized and precarious workers prepared or forced to accept waged work that is unregulated, unhealthy, and poorly paid" (115-16).

Theoretically, functionalist explanations tend to emerge from overburdening a theory with unrealistic expectations, given existing limits on our knowledge. They tend to reach beyond those limitations in a way that is hard to falsify. In the Marxist tradition, the motivation for doing so has been to try to link together many social issues into one potential revolutionary movement. Ferguson shares this motive, but is also more specific in her stated desire to avoid "class reductionism." The latter is presumably the point of view that would most fail to create the requisite revolutionary link, although Ferguson never quite defines what it means. I suspect that wanting to avoid this third rail leads Ferguson to oscillate between criticizing functionalist explanations for reducing race and gender to the logic of capital accumulation in one chapter, while doing much the same thing in the

next.

There were two political trends that seemed more, and not less, ambiguous after reading *Women and Work*. I was left wondering what the difference is between a class reductionist perspective and a feminist one, at least in the medium term. Is it a commitment to build alliances between workplaces and non-workplaces? To organize the unorganized in feminized service sectors or those dominated by migrant workers? To represent enough women in unions so that they have leverage to demand universal daycare and family leave? To involve health care workers in a universal health care campaign (and use it to expand reproductive rights)? But then again, none of these seems reductive to me. And even if one were to think so, it is nonetheless urgently important to emphasize them at a time when mainstream feminism has for many years been undergoing a full-blown discursive revolution under the heading of diversity, equity, and inclusion. My own view is that left feminists would do well to free themselves of this preoccupation with class reductionism. It is an albatross that may not have as clear of a referent as its critics assume.

Undoubtedly, however, these questions wouldn't have emerged without Ferguson's careful framing of the debates surrounding women and work. One very good reason to read Ferguson's book carefully is that she lays out the issues, doesn't hide behind political labels, and advances a sophisticated analysis that crystallizes some contemporary thinking. One may now respond by thinking much more clearly than before about the big-picture questions for socialist feminist theory today: Where have we failed, what is our progress, and most importantly, how can we make our analysis politically relevant in the twenty-first century?