



# **MATERIALIST FEMINISM**

*A Reader in Class, Difference,  
and Women's Lives*

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# **Introduction**

## *Reclaiming Anticapitalist Feminism*

**Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham**

### **THE NEED FOR CLASS ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S DIFFERENT LIVES**

We see this reader as a timely contribution to feminist struggle for transformative social change, a struggle which is fundamentally a class war over resources, knowledge, and power. Currently the richest 20 percent of humanity garners 83 percent of global income, while the poorest 20 percent of the world's people struggles to survive on just 1 percent of the global income (Sivard 1993; World Bank 1994). During the 1990s, as capitalism triumphantly secures its global reach, anticommunist ideologies hammer home socialism's inherent failure and the Left increasingly moves into the professional middle class, many of western feminism's earlier priorities—commitment to social transformation, attention to the political economy of patriarchy, analysis of the pervasive social structures that link and divide women—have been obscured or actively dismissed. Various forms of feminist cultural politics that take as their starting point gender, race, class, sexuality, or coalitions among them have increasingly displaced a systemic perspective that links the battle against women's oppression to a fight against capitalism. The archive collected in *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives* is a reminder that despite this trend feminists have continued to find in historical materialism a powerful theoretical and political resource. The tradition of feminist engagement with marxism emphasizes a perspective on social life that refuses to separate the materiality of meaning, identity, the body, state, or nation from the requisite division of labor that undergirds the scramble for profits in capitalism's global system.

As the gap widens between those who own and control the world's wealth and those who do not, women's labor continues to be a primary source of capital accumulation.

## 2 • Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham

Feeding and caring for children, attending to the sick and the elderly, and providing one of the main sources of cheap labor in waged work have been women's longstanding contributions to capital accumulation across the globe. Women perform most of the world's socially necessary labor, and yet they are far more vulnerable to poverty than men. Many women in the United States working inside and outside the home must provide for themselves and their families on less than two-thirds of the wages earned by men. Of all poor people over eighteen living in the United States, 63 percent are women, and women who head households bear the brunt of poverty. This disproportionate impoverishment does not affect all women, nor does it affect them to the same degree. Again, using wages as a gauge of these differences, white women earn 70 percent of white men's earnings, while black women earn only 64 percent of what white men earn (U.S. Bureau of Census 1995). It is important to remember that poverty is not mainly a function of gender or race but a permanent feature of capitalism that affects children and men too. The socially produced differences of race, gender, and nationality are not distinct from class, but they play a crucial role—both directly and indirectly—in dividing the work force, ensuring and justifying the continued availability of cheap labor, and determining that certain social groups will be profoundly exploited while others will be somewhat cushioned. In this division, it is often children who lose the most; in fact, the vast majority of the world's poor are children.

If feminism is to maintain its viability as a political movement aimed at redressing women's oppression and exploitation worldwide, the theory that underlies feminist practice cannot eclipse the material realities that bind race, gender, sexuality, and nationality to labor. And yet, these are the very connections that have been abandoned by western feminists in the past twenty years. As feminism has been absorbed into the mainstream of advanced industrial societies and incorporated into the professions, its dominant voices have grown to disparage ways of making sense of women's lives that connect the oppressive construction of difference and identity to capital's drive to accumulate. Instead, feminists have increasingly promoted knowledges and political strategies that appeal to the visible differences of sex or race. When feminists have questioned visible differences as the basis for political movement or forging coalitions, the alternatives proposed often appeal to abstract, ahistorical, or merely cultural categories like desire, matter, or performativity. In bracketing the relationship of visibility and bodies to capitalism as a class-based system, feminism has implicitly and at times even explicitly embraced capitalism—or, more commonly, ignored it. Often when feminist analysis does address class it is as one of a series of oppressions experienced by individuals. But this seeming "return to class" is in fact a retreat from class analysis. As Ellen Mieskens Wood has indicated, the retreat from class occurs not so much because class disappears from feminist analysis but because it has been transformed into another form of oppression.<sup>1</sup> The effect is that class is unhinged from the political economy of capitalism and class power is severed from exploitation, a power structure in which those who control collectively produced resources only do so because of the value generated by those who do not. While the concentration and global diffusion of capital has made the class possessing power more difficult to identify, it is precisely because capitalism has become ever more pervasive, insidious, and brutal that a rigorous and revitalized feminist analysis of its class dynamics is politically necessary now.

Linking women's identities and bodies, desires, and needs to class matters to feminism because capitalism is fundamentally a class system. Without the class division

between those who own and those who labor, capitalism cannot exist. Women's cheap labor (guaranteed through racist and patriarchal gender systems) is fundamental to the accumulation of surplus value—the basis for capitalist profit-making and expansion. A feminism that aims to improve the lives of all women and at the same time recognizes their differential relation to one another cannot ignore the material reality of capitalism's class system in women's lives. Class objectively links all women, binding the professional to her housekeeper, the boutique shopper to the sweatshop seamstress, the battered wife in Beverly Hills to the murdered sex worker in Bangkok or the Bronx. But class also pits women against each other, dividing those allied with the private and corporate control of wealth and resources from the dispossessed.

Historically, marxist feminism has been the most theoretically developed feminist critique of the reality of class in women's lives. Because marxist feminists see the continuous historical connections between women's oppression and capitalism, theirs is a politics of social transformation that ultimately looks to the elimination of class. Many of the essays in this book reiterate the contention that a feminist politics aimed at combatting women's exploitation and oppression and eliminating the forces that divide women from one another must oppose capitalism. Against the current fashion in western feminism, the tradition of socialist and marxist feminism does not shy away from the elimination of capitalism as a long-range goal, but holds the importance of this vision as a necessary component of the fight for social justice. Granted, feminist movement in advanced industrial sectors has achieved immensely important reforms *within* capitalism, reforms that indeed have improved many women's lives. And most socialist feminists have endorsed these improvements. But if feminism is to be a social movement that aspires to meet the needs of all women, *it must also confront its own class investments in refusing to connect its analysis to a global social system whose very premise is that some women benefit at the expense of others.*

While the critical knowledges of anticapitalist, materialist feminism have been marginalized and even suppressed in the past two decades in the West, they have not disappeared. One of the objectives of this *Reader* is to make the fertile, varied archive of this work more visible and readily available to those who struggle in the ongoing collective effort to produce knowledge for transformative social change.

### **WHAT IS MARXIST FEMINISM?**

The historical links between marxism and feminism were forged in the contradictory situation of first-world women under monopoly capitalism and played out in the insights and oversights of nineteenth-century socialists. Inspired by the historical materialism of Marx and Engels, first-wave socialist feminists—among them Clara Zetkin, Isaac Bebel, and Alexandra Kollontai—promoted the struggle for women's emancipation. Activists like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mother Jones, Rose Pastor Stokes, and others took these ideas to the front lines of labor organizing. Over the course of the next century, feminists found in the theory of historical materialism concepts that could be used to explain the social structures through which women are exploited and oppressed. At the same time, feminists have not approached marxism uncritically. Indeed, the history of feminist interest in marxism has been punctuated by a great deal of critical exchange as feminists challenged marxism's limits and in the process

#### 4 • Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham

expanded its explanatory power as a theoretical framework that might more adequately address the differential historical situation of women. This critical debate has been fundamental to what marxist feminists call political praxis—that is, the practical-theoretical struggle involved in movements for social change.

The names for the knowledges that have emerged out of the intersection of marxism and feminism in the past thirty years vary—sometimes designated as marxist feminism, socialist feminism, or materialist feminism. These signatures represent differences in emphasis and even in concepts, but all signal feminist critical engagement with historical materialism. While socialist and marxist feminist thinking was never the dominant voice of feminism in the industrialized world, during the early years of feminism's second wave and throughout the 1970s this work had a profound effect on feminist theory and practice. In the past decade or so, however, as feminism has become more absorbed into the middle-class professions, these knowledges have been increasingly discredited. As a result, many young first-world scholars and activists, whose introduction to feminism has taken place in the wake of the conservative backlash of the 1980s and '90s, are unaware of the history of socialist and marxist feminism and the knowledges it produced. It is important to remember, though, that while feminists in overdeveloped countries during this time may have ignored or consciously rejected marxism as outmoded, irrelevant, or worse, an obstacle to the emancipation of women, "two-thirds world women" activists have continued to take seriously historical materialism as a theory for social revolution (Chinchilla 1991; Dunayevskaya 1985).<sup>2</sup>

What has been the appeal of historical materialism for feminists? Simply put, *historical materialism is emancipatory critical knowledge*. Historical materialism offers a systemic way of making sense of social life under capitalism that simultaneously serves as an agent for changing it. It is not only interested in explaining the world but also in transforming it. In other words, as this gloss on Marx's Thesis XI on Feuerbach suggests, historical materialism argues that explaining the world (theory) and changing it (practice) are integrally connected.<sup>3</sup>

As emancipatory knowledge, historical materialism takes as its starting point real living individuals and what they need in order to produce their means of subsistence, that is, in order to survive. It recognizes that the continual production of life through the satisfaction of human needs is a collective undertaking involving an ensemble or system of connected productive activities. One of the key concepts of historical materialism is this recognition that the production of life is a *systemic* process, one that takes place through a system of related activities. Historically, these activities have taken the form of divisions of labor or relations of production, organizations of state and of consciousness or culture. Emancipatory change that aims to eliminate exploitation and oppression within a social system cannot take place by eradicating inequities only in one sphere of social life—whether it be the economy, state, or culture. For change to be truly emancipatory, it must include civil rights and cultural reforms and extend to the social structures that allow wealth for the few to be accumulated at the expense of the many.

Under capitalism, the production of the means to satisfy human needs has taken the form of relations of production in which resources that are collectively produced are not collectively controlled or shared. Those few who own or control the forces for producing (technology) what is needed to satisfy human needs do so because of the surplus value (profit in the form of capital) that they accrue through the unpaid labor-power of many. Knowledge-making is an integral material aspect of this arrangement

because knowledges—what is considered true or the ways things are—can legitimize how labor and power are divided. For this reason, culture—the domain of knowledge production—is both a stake and a site of class struggle. Historically, the oppression of women and people of color through patriarchal and racist ideologies has been necessary to and embedded in this fundamental structure of capitalist production. While the ways of making sense that prevail in capitalist societies may serve to legitimate and reproduce divisions of labor benefiting the owning class, however, they do not always succeed in doing so and are themselves often contradictory. Moreover, oppositional knowledges that contest the ruling ideas also circulate and vie for the status of truth.

In keeping with the premises of historical materialism, marxist feminists argue that the starting point of any theory has consequences; as a way of making sense of the world, any theory helps to shape social reality. In arguing their standpoint and evaluating the usefulness of other theories, marxist feminists ask, What are the consequences of this way of thinking for transforming the inequities in women's lives? How is this way of explaining the world going to improve life for all women? Underlying these questions is marxist feminism's visionary horizon—the social transformation necessary to meet women's collective needs. In the past decade or so, however, concepts like social transformation have been disparaged by many feminists in favor of more local or contingent explanations of social life. Along with the disappearance of a vision of transformative change, class as the fundamental social structure of capitalism has also faded from most feminist analysis. Against this trend, materialist—marxist and socialist—feminism argues that social transformation is not a romantic fantasy. On the contrary, we contend that the history of social movements has shown that in times of deep cynicism it is especially important to maintain a vision of possibility on the horizon of the struggle for social change. This vision was one hallmark of the early years of feminism's second wave and is echoed throughout this book—in essays by Margaret Benston, Christine Delphy, Mary Alice Waters, Lindsey German, Barbara Smith, Nellie Wong, and others.

We have deliberately reviewed some of the premises of marxist feminism because they have been persistently misread, distorted, or buried under the weight of a flourishing postmodern cultural politics. In addition to social transformation, many other concepts that were basic to marxist feminist theory in the early 1970s—among them social structure, production, patriarchy, and class—have been dismissed by post-marxist feminists in favor of analyses that treat social life in terms of contingencies, local force relations, or discourses.<sup>1</sup> Post-marxist feminism rejects historical materialism's systemic view of social life, the premise that human survival is based on the existence of real living individuals who must produce the means to survive and do so under historically variant conditions. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on ideological, state, or cultural practices, anchor meaning in the body and its pleasures, or understand social change primarily in terms of the struggle over representation. While many post-marxist feminists insist that their analyses are materialist and may even present themselves as materialist feminists, post-marxist feminism is in fact cultural materialism. Cultural materialism rejects a systemic, anticapitalist analysis linking the history of culture and meaning-making to capital's class system. It is important to note that many post-marxist feminists are the very same socialist feminists whose work was once so instrumental in drafting concepts that link the production of knowledge and the formation of identities to capitalism as a global system. Among them are Michèle Barrett, Drucilla Cornell,

## 6 • Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham

Nancy Fraser, Donna Haraway, Gayle Rubin, and Iris Young. Although we do include the early work of some marxist feminists who later rejected marxist feminism in this volume, we have not represented post-marxist feminism because this work is widely published internationally and readily available. However, any full understanding of feminist debates over how to understand the materiality of women's lives should attend to post-marxist feminism because it has become the dominant discourse of western academic feminism. For this reason we address its pivotal role in the historical sketch of materialist feminism that follows.

At the crest of the second wave, feminist theorists working in critical engagement with marxism and the formation of the New Left in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States developed sustained and rigorous theories of women's place in patriarchy and capitalism. Socialist feminists argued for a theoretical and political analysis that would explain the systemic intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. The lines of division between radical and socialist feminism were often blurred during this early phase of feminism's second wave. But it is clear that the theoretical frameworks feminists devised were deeply affected by the marxist theory circulating in the civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States, in first-world student and labor movements, in liberation struggles in Vietnam, China, and Cuba, and in the emergent New Left. Rejecting the "old Left" attachment to the Soviet Union and socialist parties, the New Left was an effort to acknowledge that capitalism succeeds in part because of the ways ideology permeates every aspect of daily life. And yet within New Left efforts to politicize the personal, women and women's interests were often ignored. Many of the founders of radical feminism were socialists frustrated by the refusal of men on the Left to address patriarchal systems of power. As Alice Echols's history of this period in U.S. feminism makes clear, much theoretical work in the early years of the second wave was done by feminists who wanted to elaborate and rework the New Left's analysis of global capitalism in order to explain the relationship between sex-gender structures and class.

During the early years of the second wave, socialist feminists, fortified by the burgeoning feminist movement, exerted new pressures on marxist theory and practice to reformulate the "woman question" by rethinking key categories of marxist logic, including production, reproduction, class, consciousness, and labor. They asserted that the classical marxist insights into history were gender blind and ignored women's contributions to social production, while feminist analysis—although strong regarding the systemic character of relations between the sexes—was often ahistorical and insufficiently materialist. A marriage between marxism and feminism was called for. Debate turned on the terms of the arrangement.<sup>5</sup> The radical force of socialist feminism over the ensuing two decades derives from its refusal simply to graft the interests of women onto classical marxism. Instead, socialist feminists worked over certain marxist concepts in order to explain women's role in social reproduction and the integral function of patriarchal structures in the smooth operation of capital accumulation and in the formation of the state and consciousness. Socialist feminists typically argued that a fundamental connection exists between women's struggle and the class struggle, and yet they also acknowledged that because capitalism is a social totality, this struggle is not confined to wage labor but is also fought out in culture.

By 1975 the systemic analysis characteristic of early radical and socialist feminism was already being displaced or recast as cultural feminism. Cultural feminism begins with the assumption that men and women are basically different. It aims to reverse

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patriarchal systems of value that privilege male over female, focuses on the cultural features of patriarchal oppression, and primarily aims for reforms in this area. Unlike radical and socialist feminism, cultural feminism adamantly rejects the Left's critique of capitalism, emphasizes patriarchy as the root of women's oppression, celebrates women's rituals and spaces, and veers toward separatism. Even though it does not argue for women's equality with men, cultural feminism shares an ideological affiliation with liberal feminism and with liberalism generally in that it focuses exclusively on superstructural change. Maria Mies outlines the historical background and political implications of this standpoint:

The belief in education, cultural action, or even cultural revolution as agents of social change is a typical belief of the urban middle class. With regard to the woman's question it is based on the assumption that women's oppression has nothing to do with the basic material production relations. . . . This assumption is found more among Western, particularly American, feminists who usually do not talk of capitalism. For many Western feminists women's oppression is rooted in the culture of patriarchal civilization. For them, therefore, feminism is largely a cultural movement, a new ideology, or a new consciousness. (Mies 1986: 22)

In contrast to cultural feminists, materialist, socialist, and marxist feminists do not see culture as the whole of social life but rather as only one arena of social production and therefore as only one area for feminist struggle.

Although socialist and marxist feminism was germane to the political and theoretical development of second-wave feminism, it wasn't until the late 1970s that the term "materialist feminism" came into circulation. The development of materialist feminism in the West is linked historically to the shift to cultural politics in western marxism post-1968, and some of the unevenness in its history, in particular the growing attention to ideology, must be read in that context. Annette Kuhn, Anne Marie Wolpe, Michèle Barrett, Mary MacIntosh in Britain, and Christine Delphy in France were among the initial promoters of materialist feminism. They favored this term over "marxist feminism" in order to emphasize the point that although marxism had not adequately addressed women's exploitation and oppression, a historical materialist analysis might be developed that would account for the sexual division of labor and the gendered formation of subjectivities. More than socialist feminism, materialist feminism was the conjuncture of several discourses—historical materialism, marxist and radical feminism, as well as postmodern and psychoanalytic theories of meaning and subjectivity. In drawing on postmodern critiques of the humanist subject and neo-marxist theories of ideology, materialist feminism constituted a significant shift from the feminist debates of the early '70s, both radical and socialist alike.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid-80s, the general terms of debate among first-world socialist and marxist feminists had drifted so far into theorizing women's oppression in terms of culture, consciousness, and ideology that concerns over how to explain the connection between patriarchy and capitalism, or the links between women's domestic labor and ideology, had been all but abandoned. In an anthology like Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt's *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (1985), for instance, it is clear that materialist feminism was beginning to mean "more attention to ideas, language and culture than in much traditional Marxist criticism" (xix) and that, even more than its

socialist and marxist feminist relatives, materialist feminism in the United States was becoming primarily an academic discourse.

While the particulars of the history of marxist feminism in advanced capitalist countries vary, the drift toward cultural feminism and away from marxist feminism has been a general transnational trend.<sup>7</sup> Like other members of the New Left, many U.S. feminists rallying under the banner of materialism during the '80s were critical of the role of the university in the corporate state, even as they became the bearers of the university's class privilege (Ehrenreich 1990). Like other second-wave feminists, mostly white and middle-class, many U.S. women (and men) came into feminism through a fraught relationship to the academy. As student or young faculty activists, they challenged the university's authority, tying the interests of technological experts and academic researchers to patriarchal power and to the military industrial complex driving U.S. economic and imperialist ventures globally. Yet they also stood to benefit materially from the professional credentials the university offered. The dilemma for many feminists and marxists both turned on how to make a living in this institution without betraying their radical politics. For those who found their way out of this contradictory situation by becoming oppositional intellectuals on the margins of the university, the economic recession of the 1970s exacted heavy penalties. By the '80s, however, many socialist and marxist feminists working in or near universities and colleges not only had been almost thoroughly integrated into the professional middle class, but also had abandoned historical materialism's class analysis. It is worth noting here that the relationship of the contest over knowledge in this phase of the postmodern academy's history to changes in the welfare state and in the relations of production globally remains an unwritten chapter in late feminism's class history.

If materialist feminism emerged out of western marxism, it also drew on and helped to formulate postmodernism's critique of empiricism and of the individual as an autonomous and coherent self. We understand postmodernism as a historical crisis accompanying the shifts in relations of production under late capitalism. It is symptomatic that this crisis has been most attended to in the West in terms of cultural changes, including challenges to empiricism and the Cartesian self played out primarily in avant-garde fiction and poetry, linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and history. Understood in historical and materialist terms, however, postmodernism is not just a matter of disruptions occurring at the level of culture. Rather, these cultural changes are bound up with, and to some degree even caused by, crises in capital's divisions of labor and neoimperialist arrangements. Postmodernism, in other words, is an effect both of shifts in production from the first to the two-thirds world and of technological developments, especially microprocessing, that have made possible the rapid movement of capital and new forms of work; at the same time postmodernism is an effect of the dismantling of empire and its neoimperialist reconfiguration in the second half of the twentieth century. As the cultural logic of these late capitalist conditions, postmodernism is also deeply embedded in patriarchal structures upon which capital's multinational reach depends. For example, the recruitment of middle-class women into the newly formed service professions of overdeveloped sectors—into education and middle management—has depended upon the accompanying recruitment of two-thirds world women into the production lines in the maquilladora, the Pacific rim, and the sweat shops of the United States. The colonization of the unconscious promoted through advertising and high-tech telecommunications produces desire and sexuality,

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family and femininity in modalities that commodify women's bodies and labor as the property of men, even as some women are allowed more freedom to exert their "independence" in the competitive marketplace.

Marxist feminism sees in much postmodern theory a refusal to acknowledge the historical dimensions of postmodernism and a limited and partial notion of the social—in Marx's words, an effort to fight phrases only with phrases. Deconstruction's critique of western metaphysics, for instance, which has served as a matrix for much postmodern feminist cultural theory, sees the social as primarily textual and sees meaning as the effect of the radical instability of language.<sup>8</sup> Many cultural materialists who have critiqued or distanced themselves from deconstruction's textual analysis, however, also make use of theoretical frameworks that tend to reduce social life to representation, albeit a much more socially grounded understanding of language as discourse.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, historical materialist (marxist) feminists aim to make visible *the reasons why* representations of identity are changing, *why* they do not take the same forms they did a century or even fifty years ago, and how these changes in identity are connected to *historical shifts* in the production of life under late capitalism.

Marxist feminism is a critically engaged feminist standpoint, forged in part through the struggle over knowledge with other feminist perspectives. One stake in the struggle over materialism in feminist theory now is professional feminism's class alliance. If a shared commitment within feminism to the improvement of women's lives exists, there is no shared agreement that feminism necessarily involves combatting capitalism's class system. Increasingly, work that claims the signature "materialist feminism" shares much in common with cultural feminism, in that it does not set out to explain or change the material realities that link women's oppression to class. Many "materialist feminists" do not even consider themselves socialists. As the quote from Maria Mies we cited earlier suggests, however, marxist feminists do connect women's oppression to capitalism as a class system and refuse to limit feminist practice to changing forms of consciousness or discourse. We see this book as an effort to reinsert into materialist feminism—especially materialist feminism in those overdeveloped sectors where this collection will be most widely read—those (untimely) marxist feminist knowledges that the drift to cultural politics in postmodern feminism has suppressed. It is our hope that in so doing this project will contribute to the emergence of feminism's third wave and its revival as a critical force for transformative social change.

## THE ARCHIVES

The book's three archives trace a rough chronology of debates from 1969 to 1996. They are not meant as a definitive collection of marxist feminism but rather as instances that convey some of the key concepts and debates from a range of sources. Several of the essays were originally published in pamphlet form, some appeared in independent Left journals, and others first appeared in books or academic collections. Many have not been readily available or widely circulated. Archive III contains mostly unpublished work. Although the essays collectively represent feminism's engagement with historical materialism during this time frame, individually they mark out a range of positions. Some speak from standpoints that veer toward radical feminism (Bunch) while others are marxist-Leninist (Waters) or revolutionary Trotskyist (Wong); others do not

## 10 • Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham

explicitly embrace the label marxist or socialist. At times, the points of conflict among these positions are quite overt—as in Lindsey German’s critique of Christine Delphy or Meera Nanda’s critical reading of Maria Mies. At other times, the critical debates extend to work outside this collection—in Lindsey German’s review of feminist theories of the family, Iris Young’s critical assessment of dual systems theory, or Carole Stabile’s critique of postmodern feminism. We highlight these points of contention as valuable and crucial features of these archives. Against the grain of liberal feminism that sees contention over differences as threatening to sisterhood (albeit a sisterhood often premised on very undemocratic understandings of community), materialist feminism sees critique and critical exchange as a necessary aspect of articulating the collective struggle for which a social movement speaks, and in this sense as fundamental to the historical production of new knowledge.

The essays in Archive I all tackle the problem of how historical materialism might be used to explain and change women’s oppression and exploitation under capitalism. We chose Margaret Benston’s essay as the lead piece because it is an early, bold argument for taking the historical materialist premise that production is a fundamental necessity of human survival as the starting point for feminist theory. Even though they take varying positions on the relationship between feminism and the struggle against capitalism, most of the other essays in this archive follow Benston’s lead in seeing women’s labor as socially necessary and historically essential to capitalist accumulation. Some, like the essays by Mary Alice Waters and Lindsey German, contend that the struggle to abolish capitalism is a precondition for women’s liberation, while others argue for a more dualistic or even unified view of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy.

Although most of this archive sees the material as an ensemble of social practices, some of the selections endorse the classical marxist position that economic arrangements—the division of labor that is the basis for class—have a definite determining effect under capitalism. This stance is captured in a quote from socialist feminists Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, which Margaret Benston uses as the epigraph for her essay: “The position of women rests, as everything in our complex society, on an economic base.” But not all the essays here would agree with Marx and Aveling—or with Benston. What is meant by material reality is at times vague or, especially in some of the essays in Archive II, more emphatically cultural than economic. Some writers, like Lindsey German, Martha Gimenez, or Nicola Field, endorse Benston’s view, which stresses the determining material force of economic arrangements. Others, like Nellie Wong and Swasti Mitter, emphasize the global structural dimension of capitalism, while Charlotte Bunch draws attention to the ways class as economic status is affected by the institution of heterosexuality. These differences are not insignificant, nor are they merely academic. They are important points of conceptual tension that translate into action on issues like how to understand women’s oppression, what sexuality, race, or gender have to do with capitalism, and how to form collective agents for change. We hope these points of difference provoke discussion and debate that further the ongoing work of feminist theory and practice.

While there is general agreement among marxist and socialist feminists on the need for analysis of capitalism and patriarchy as historically differentiated social structures (Barrett, German, Gimenez, Vogel, Young), how to theorize the relationship between them has been a vexed question. Patriarchy has been a particularly fraught concept for marxist and socialist feminists, and some of the debates about what it means, whether it

is at all useful, and if so how to understand its relation to capitalism are represented here.<sup>10</sup> While marxist feminists are generally critical of theories of patriarchy grounded in an ahistorical understanding of power relations between men and women, much debate turns on the problem of precisely how to historicize it. Some of the early work of second-wave feminists (Delphy for instance) saw capitalism and patriarchy as dual systems of oppression for women.<sup>11</sup> Iris Young's essay provides a critical assessment of this dual systems approach and advances her own argument for a unified theory. Although it appears late in discussions of the relative merits of dual systems thinking, Young's alternative is not entirely new. The earlier work of marxist feminists like Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe also called for a theoretical frame that would address the sexual division of labor and power as linked to relations between classes. In contrast, Lindsey German's critique of patriarchy theories argues that family structures within capitalism are fundamentally driven by a division of labor that patriarchal family arrangements serve.

Much of the work of materialist feminists has been to delineate how patriarchal practices have been differentiated across social groups. Hazel Carby makes this case when she challenges a feminist concept of patriarchy that ignores the fact that "racism ensures that black men do not have the same relations to patriarchal/capitalist structures as white men" (213). Carby examines how patriarchal arrangements of family, sexuality, dominance, and dependence have been historically differentiated for black men and women and how the state has made use of these structures in the service of a racialized division of labor. She highlights the ways black women are dominated differently by men of different colors (218). As the second archive makes clear, debates over whether patriarchy or some alternative concept is the more useful explanatory tool are far from resolved. In the course of her critique of western white feminists who see the family as categorically oppressive to all women, Carby recommends Gayle Rubin's notion of the sex-gender system as an alternative to the overgeneralizing concept of patriarchy. Yet Martha Gimenez takes Rubin's sex-gender theory to task as itself an ahistorical formulation of social structures.<sup>12</sup> Marxist feminists generally agree with Engels that patriarchal gender systems are not peculiar to capitalism. As changes in the gendered division of labor suggest, the capitalist owning class historically inherits and benefits from patriarchal social structures, but they may not all be essential to capitalism. Clearly violations of women's needs and rights as human beings by patriarchal practices like rape, battering, clitoridectomy, and other forms of sexual violence, as well as the neglect and infanticide of girls, are not exclusively bound by or peculiar to capitalism. But the historical forms these practices take and their use against many women in the world now are not independent of capitalism either.

One of the major chapters in the history of marxist and socialist feminism, and indeed one of its primary contributions to feminist theory, has been the effort to show the ways in which women's unpaid labor is necessary to social reproduction and has been a rich but often invisible source of profit for capitalism. While we have included only a few contributions to the so-called domestic labor debates in the collection, the pieces by Vogel and German review these discussions. In addition, the essays by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, Margaret Benston, and Martha Gimenez treat the political economy of women's domestic labor. Against classical marxism, Dalla Costa and James argue that women's domestic labor is integral to the production of surplus value. They see the entire domain outside the wage market as a "social factory" that is not strictly speaking outside capitalist production at all, but is the very source of

## 12 • Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham

surplus labor. Women's housework—feeding, laundering, cleaning, educating—is indispensable to wage work because in doing this unpaid labor women produce the living human beings who enter the wage sector. This position is shared by Benston and Gimenez, who contend that the material base for women's oppression is their exploitation as domestic workers. As Benston explains it, women's reproductive labor in the home is necessary "if the entire system is to function," and it is therefore a crucial component in the class system. In this respect, women are potentially the central figures of subversion in the community. Swasti Mitter elaborates this point as she details the role of women's labor in the global factories of late capitalism and outlines strategies for organizing women workers internationally.

An essential feature of capitalism's gendered division of labor is gender ideology—those knowledges, beliefs, and values that present women's oppression as natural. In the 1970s, many materialist feminists in Britain and the United States especially drew upon the work of the marxist theorist Louis Althusser to explain the ideological production of gender and sexuality. In fact, some have argued that the distinguishing feature of socialist and materialist feminism is its focus on ideology (Ehrenreich). Michèle Barrett is one materialist feminist whose contributions to theorizing gender as ideology are well known. In the excerpt from her book *Women's Oppression Today*, included here, Barrett critiques the tendency of some post-Althusserian feminists to posit ideology as autonomous from class or to make it *the* materiality of social life. Unlike those feminists who were drifting into postmodern cultural feminism, Barrett argues that it is imperative to explain the connection between the materiality of ideology and the materiality outside representation. She contends that representation in itself does not effect change but it does bear a relation to things that we can know exist outside language. Unfortunately, her own later post-marxist stance abandons this position on the materiality of social life outside of language.<sup>13</sup>

Frigga Haug's work stands out among those feminists who have tried to make use of and extend marxism's analysis of social structures—in particular the role of ideology in reproducing women's oppression—to the material realities of women's everyday lives. Her piece included here connects the structures of affect, memory, and narrative that organize women's experiences in industrialized countries like Germany to changing relations of capitalist production and consumption. Her project on memory-work described in this essay also exemplifies the ongoing effort of marxist feminists in the West to work collectively in the critical production of knowledge.

These archives provide a collective critical challenge to an incipient racism in feminist thought that sees all women situated in the same way by patriarchal social structures. This critique applies to socialist feminists, too, for their complicity with a homogenizing Eurocentric perspective. It is represented most explicitly in the essays of Gloria Joseph and Hazel Carby.<sup>14</sup> Both challenge the class and race politics underlying any feminist perspective that lumps all men together as the enemy. And both contend that such a position fails to account for the lives of many first-world black women who struggle against their oppression as women but also struggle with their brothers against oppression in general. Along with other black feminists, they contend that black women's social position is compounded by racism to the degree that their relation to capitalism is historically different from white women's. In addition, because of the effects of racism, black women carry a greater burden for providing underpaid or unpaid yet socially necessary labor.

Many of the other essays in Archive II represent the efforts of materialist and marxist feminists in the past decade to explain the ways in which women and men are historically differentiated and pitted against one another through the material bonds that connect their lives across an international division of labor. Some of these essays explicitly point out the class basis of the left's increasing enchantment with identity politics (Smith, Field). One of this collection's lessons is that critical insights like these have a long history; Selma James's eloquent distinction between caste and class in Archive I is an important critique of what came to be known as identity politics. While they do not all agree on the particulars, taken together the pieces in Archive II offer a rich set of theoretical resources or the differences between women by connecting sexuality, race, and gender to capitalism as a global system. Both the historical analyses (Mies, Hennessy and Mohan, Brewer) and the more polemical essays (Wong, Smith) make clear the ways in which effective action for social change requires a theoretical "bridge to freedom" that connects the identities of women and men, black, white, queer, and straight, to capitalism as an economic system.

The third archive includes essays by a new generation of scholars who address more recent social developments—reproductive engineering, the Green Revolution, and ecofeminism—as well as longstanding issues often ignored by socialist feminists—heterosexuality and prostitution. This archive illustrates that historicizing women's lives remains a contentious concern and that debate persists over some categories of analysis like materiality and difference. While this sample of ongoing work does not present a single or even coherent standpoint, these pieces turn to historical materialism because it continues to offer feminism a useful framework for explaining and changing women's place in the world. The collection ends with Carole Stabile's strong critique of the incorporation of feminism into the academy under the mantle of postmodern dismissals of class as a category of analysis. Her critique of the class interests of postmodern academic feminism sketches the state of knowledge in an institution where many of our readers work and study. In linking postmodern feminist theory to the class interests underlying the representation of "family values" by the state and the media, her essay exemplifies a way of thinking that demystifies theoretical abstractions and connects the knowledges circulating in the academy to the growing levels of immiseration that capitalism has incurred elsewhere.

It is our hope that the three archives collected here inform readers who are new to materialist feminism of its long history and rich and vital links to historical materialism. More importantly, we hope that these archives remind readers of the intimate and necessary connection between theoretical concepts and social change. It is precisely because social change requires theoretical concepts—what we mean when we speak of the social, of power, difference, or change itself—that the legacy of materialist feminism ultimately lies with those who engage and extend its ideas for the emancipation of all people.

## NOTES

1. In addition to Wood's critique of the retreat from class, see Naiman (1996).
2. We first encountered the phrase "two-thirds world women" in a note from Ann Ferguson on the materialist feminism (matfem) list on the Internet. She proposed this corrective to the

## 14 • Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham

phrase “third-world women,” and we find the shift in perspective it offers to be an important one, signaling less the cold war neoimperialist divisions of the globe and more the distinction between overdeveloped and peripheral sectors. The difference between one-third and two-thirds does not correlate with national boundaries so much as it signals one’s historical position in relation to resources and wealth. Two-thirds world women live in parts of the United States and Europe as well as in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

3. Marx’s Thesis XI on Feuerbach is the following: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”
4. For a more extended critique of post-marxism see Ebert (1995), Hennessy (1993), and Stabile in this volume.
5. The best source on this debate is Sargeant (1981).
6. One useful history of materialist feminism, although from a more post-marxist position than ours, can be found in chapter 1 of Landry and MacLean (1993). See also Hennessy and Mohan in this volume.
7. On this period in U.S. feminism see also Willis (1992) and Evans (1980). On French feminism see Duchen (1986, 1987). On Italian feminism see Birnbaum (1986); on British early second-wave marxist feminism in Britain see Rowbotham (1979) and Lovell (1990).
8. For examples of feminist appropriations of deconstruction see Cornell (1991), Fuss (1989), and Elam (1990).
9. This line of feminist theory has developed primarily out of the work of Michel Foucault. Examples include Braidotti (1994), Butler (1990, 1993), and Haraway (1991). See also the collections by Butler and Scott (1992), and Diamond and Quinby (1988).
10. For valuable overviews of feminist thought on patriarchy see Omvedt (1986) and Walby (1990).
11. Perhaps the most well-known discussions of the problems of dual systems theory were collected by Lydia Sargeant in the volume of responses to Heidi Hartmann’s essay, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism.”
12. Another noteworthy critique of Rubin can be found in Hartsock (1985).
13. This shift in her thinking, already represented in the 1988 preface to the revised edition of *Women’s Oppression Today*, is most fully developed in *The Politics of Truth* (1991).
14. The critique of cultural feminism by black and two-thirds world feminists constitutes an important and by now large archive in its own right. Some notable contributions include Anzaldúa (1990), Brown (1992), Davis (1983), Hooks (1984), Hull and Smith (1982), Lorde (1985), Mohanty (1991), and Ramazanoglu (1986).