The Gender Rift in Communisation

P. Valentine

http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/gender-rift-communisation

theanarchistlibrary.org
Contents

The Communising Current on Gender .......................... 7
Gender in Capital ............................................. 11
Whither Sexual Violence ................................. 13
Abolition of Race? ........................................... 18
resistant to these questions than any other comrades we’ve en-
countered around the world, in our experience), the obvious fact
that the reproduction of racial and ethnic hierarchies affect, form
and constitute every moment and place of capital’s reproduction. A
range of feminists, from African-American feminists like Patricia
Hill Collins to eco-feminists like Maria Mies, have noted and ar-
gued that gender is produced through racialisation, and that racial-
isation is produced through gender. Communisation has now been
able to say, there is never a proletarian who is not gendered, so we
must also be able to say there is never a proletarian or a ‘woman’
or ‘man’ who is not raced. There is never a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’ who
is not also a woman who is raced. Communisationists can’t afford
to turn a blind eye to these necessary processes of the capitalist
totality.
black death reveal a truth that, if ignored or dismissed, leaves an account of the totality not only incomplete but a potential tool of capitalist violence.

We believe that capital is a totality which is ‘classed’, ‘gendered’ and ‘raced’ by virtue of its own internal logic. These are not three contradictions which sit on three thrones in the centre of the capitalist totality, homologous with one another, dictating its logic. We must reveal exactly how race and gender are necessary social relations based on particular material processes within the capitalist mode of production.

Through the recent work of communisationist gender theory, we have come to understand ‘women’ as the category describing those whose activity, unwaged and waged, is appropriated in their totality by society (‘men’). This relation inscribes two distinct ‘spheres’ that ground the gender binary. The fact that the boundaries around these spheres are violently policed does not mean they are static – in fact their policing also involves a constant manipulation of the boundaries. We understand ‘proletariat’ as the category describing those who do not own the means of production, and are forced to either sell their labour to those who do (the ‘capitalists’) or are cast out to waste away. How are we to understand the category of ‘racialised’, or perhaps of ‘black’, or perhaps ‘ethnicised’? It seems possible that these categories are necessarily related to capital’s necessary overproduction of humans within the necessary movement of capitalist development, and its consequent need to kill, obliterate, remove and dispossess such bodies.

For now, despite our revulsion at relegating the race question to so brief a moment within this conversation, we merely note, especially for our European comrades (who continue to be more

In a contested ‘swerve’ in debates around communisation, issues of gender, class and race are coming to the fore. Reviewing key texts in this debate, P. Valentine discusses the material basis of the gender distinction in capitalism, and its centrality to class exploitation.

Communisation theory is primed to do what only a minority of Marxist-feminists have attempted to do over the last 50 years of inquiry: re-articulate the capitalist mode of production as being constituted no less by the man/woman relation than by the class relation. What would ideally emerge from such a project is a ‘single system’ in which the gender relation and the class relation are equally necessary elements within a totality, rather than the subsumption of one to the other, or the erection of a ‘dual system’ of two different and autonomous systems of patriarchy and capitalism. We say communisation is ‘primed’ for this project because one of the major interventions of communisation theory has been to theorise communism as the abolition not only of capitalists, but also of workers; of work itself and thus of value; of the wage labor relation itself and thus of the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘life’. This distinction is cast in a variety of terms including the conceptual dyads public/private; social/nonsocial; public/domestic, and is almost unequivocally understood by gender theorists as a grounding element in the production of gender.

Communisation’s very starting point is a demand for the abolition of fundamental material elements of the reproduction of gender – the division of social life into two ‘spheres’. This implies an analysis of the system of gender and class as a unity, and because it focuses on the gender binary as a material relation of exploitation or oppression in which the two sides are produced rather than given, it also articulates the patriarchy in a way which, opens av-

26 There are some inchoate formations that we know of in the US which are beginning to take on this task. See http://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com and http://liesjournal.info. We are sure there are many more we do not know of.

27 See Endnotes #2, 2011.

1 Examples are: I. M. Young; Silvia Federici; Katherine Mackinnon; Fulvia Carnevale; and others. Others, e.g. Gloria Joseph, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Maria Mies and Angela Davis, demand a theory which also articulates race as a necessary structural element.
enues of new and more rigorous theories of gender oppression that are able to link the exploitation and oppression of women with violence and oppression based on hetero-normativity and cis-normativity. However, until the work of Théorie Communiste (TC) and recently Maya Andrea Gonzalez, conversations around communisation had completely ignored gender, or had merely added gender to the list of things to be abolished through communisation, amounting to little more than buttering the toast of communisation with radical cultural gender theory.\footnote{Maya Andrea Gonzalez, 'Communisation and the Abolition of Gender' in Benjamin Noys (Ed.), Communisation and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles, New York: Minor Compositions/Autonomedia, 2011.}

A critique of the gender binary, of the essentialist identities of 'woman' and 'man', which could lead equally to their destruction or proliferation, is attached to a theory of communisation without affecting the concept of what constitutes the capitalist totality. The mere shift from women’s liberation to gender abolition cast in these basic terms represents little advance in theory over the well-trodden ‘postmodern’ shift to de-essentialise identity (an important move, but not particularly new or rare). As TC have written,

> If the abolition of the gender distinction is necessary from the point of view of the ‘success’ of communisation, it is not in the name of the abolition of all the mediations of society. It is in its concrete and immediate character that the contradiction between men and women imposes itself on the ‘success’ of communisation, against what that relation implies in terms of violence, invisibilisation, the ascription to a subordinate position.\footnote{Théorie Communiste, 'Response to the American Comrades on Gender', http://libcom.org/library/response-americans-gende...}

The race question has yet to be put on the table for communisation theory. Theorists who analyse race and racialisation as a fundamental social relation that grounds and reproduces capitalist society, (from Cedric Robinson’s epic Black Marxisms to the recent ‘afro-pessimists’ like Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton) have not been addressed within communisation. This is a testament to the persistent Eurocentrism of current communisation theory, even as it is drawn into the American context.\footnote{Communists have certainly not dealt with race well elsewhere, but European ultra-left and communisationist theory remains somewhat uniquely unconcerned with race – as does its American counterparts.}

Frank Wilderson claims that white supremacy: 'kills the Black subject that the concept, civil society, may live...' and later,

> We live in this world, but exist outside of civil society. This structurally impossible position is a paradox because the Black subject, the slave, is vital to civil society’s political economy: s/he kick-starts capital at its genesis and rescues it from its over-accumulation crisis at its end. Black death is its condition of possibility. Civil society’s subaltern, the worker, is coded as waged, and wages are White. But Marxism has no account of this phenomenal birth and life-saving role played by the Black subject.\footnote{Frank Wilderson, 'Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?', We Write, Vol.2, Number 1, January, 2005, p.9. and p.15.}

Similar to Miram’s phenomenological and hermeneutic account of the sex-right, this language is not yet legible to existing communist or Marxist conversations. The limits of such conversations are threatening to their strength, for these theories of sex-right and
if we consider sexual violence as an essential material ground in the production of hierarchised gender relations, then we can begin to see how such patterns relate to the production of the categories women and man and the distinction between the spheres of waged/unwaged; social/non-social; public/private.

**Abolition of Race?**

Many have argued that the category ‘women’ is not required for the social functions currently performed by women to ‘get done’ – that is to say, capitalism could rid itself of gender, and still maintain the necessary distinction between ‘spheres’ of social/non-social or waged/unwaged. The emerging communisationist gender theory, on the other hand, argues generally that the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’ are nothing other than the distinction between the spheres of activity. Abolishing gender while retaining the waged/unwaged division is like abolishing class while retaining the split between the owners of the means of production and those who are forced to work for a wage in order to survive.

The very same manoeuvres are used to make similarly deflationary arguments about what is usually called ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’. Even the more militant theorists of race often claim that, at base, race and ethnicity are historical leftovers of past violences that capital has picked up, found useful, and mobilised to its advantage. Even some of the theorists most intent on elevating and integrating a theory of racial and ethnic oppression into the analysis of capitalism – from autonomists like Harry Cleaver and Selma James to canonical theorists of white supremacist, capitalist soci-

Only a substantive theory of the production and reproduction of gender in capitalism can give real non-idealist content to the abolition of gender. The important questions are: what is ‘woman’ and ‘man’, what is the gender relation, and what is its relation to class? The nascent forays into gender theory from the communising tendency have tended towards two major elisions: avoiding the problematic of race and its relation to class and gender, and displacing an analysis of sexual violence to the sidelines of the production of the gender distinction. We will here attempt a brief overview and assessment of existing communisationist gender theory and point towards some obvious gaps.

**The Communising Current on Gender**

TC’s initial texts on gender claimed: ‘it’s immediately apparent that all societies hinge on a twofold distinction: between genders and between classes’ and ‘The evidence of the abolition of genders will be a revolution in the revolution’. The initial texts – ‘Gender distinction, programmatism and communisation’ and the two supplements, ‘Gender – Class – Dynamic’ and ‘Comrades, but Women’, published in Théorie Communiste Issue 23, were still filled with inner conflict and tension around how exactly to describe the material basis of the gender distinction and the way in which is related to the class relation. Their stronger, and more provocative analysis (which are not often referenced by other male-dominated theory collectives) addressed women’s role and experience in working class struggle. TC understands that women experience an entirely different realm of oppression and exploitation than men, so that whenever they rise up, this rising up calls into question the differential positions of men and women – namely, that men do the appropriating of women and women are those who are appropri-

---

3These two supplements are translated into English and made available at http://petroleusepress.com
ated by men (even and especially the men who are supposed to be their ‘comrades’). When women call this relation of appropriation into question, men will fight back, fight against the women, in an attempt to put the women ‘back in their place’. As Lyon, a member of TC, says in the recently published SIC journal: ‘The defence of the male condition is the defence of male domination. It is the defence of the existence of two separated spheres of activity.’

However, the real material ground of the gender distinction is not fully formed in these early texts. The concept of separate ‘spheres’ or ‘realms’ was concretely raised, but the material genesis and reproduction of the distinction between these spheres, as well as the consistent description of ‘women’ as loosely but not systematically associated with ‘biological’ traits such as childbearing, XX chromosomes, breasts, vaginas and so forth, was not explained. In particular, they attributed the production of ‘women’ (which they generally equate with the production of the gender distinction) with the fact that the increase in the population is the primary productive force in classed societies.

When queried further TC wrote ‘Response to the American Comrades on Gender’, a dense and lengthy text that left many important questions unresolved. They do argue that class societies

When women fight, whether in the private or public sphere, when they attack the very existence of those spheres which is constituted by their separation into public and private, they must confront their male comrades, insofar as they are men and insofar as they are their comrades. And they (the women) are the men’s comrades, but women.’ (Théorie Communiste, ‘Comrades, But Women’, originally published in Théorie Communiste, Issue 23, English pamphlet (2011) available here: http://petroleusepress.com/


TC were posed the following questions: 1. Why do all class societies depend on the increase in population as principal productive force? 2. What does it mean for the increase in population to be the main productive force? 3. TC often write that ‘labour is a problem for capital’. Does this mean the falling rate of profit? Or does it mean the increasing surplus populations pose a problem of revolt? Or both? 4. TC say that women/the family are a problem for capital.

Understanding sexual violence as a structuring element of gender also helps us to understand how patriarchy reproduces itself upon and through gay and queer men, trans people, gender non-conforming people and bodies, and children of any gender. Gendered divisions of labour within the waged sphere, in conjunction with baby-bearing, do not account for the particular patterns in which, e.g., trans people are economically exploited within capitalist economies, which differs dramatically from cis-women, as well as the endemic murder of trans women of colour which amounts to a sort of geographically diffused genocide. It cannot account for the widespread rape of children by male family members. But

www.sojournerruth.net/rrwwm.html


The visibility of this genocide, as with most, is almost totally nil. Its invisibility is only emphasised when social movements recognize some isolated in-
violence. They do put a strong emphasis on the direct physical violence that proletarian men inflict upon proletarian women, when those women attempt to struggle in a way that problematises the separation of the spheres. They draw from accounts of Argentina’s piquetero movement:

There are female comrades who declare in the assembly: ‘I couldn’t come to the ‘piquete’ (road blockade) because my husband beat me, because he locked me down.’ For that, the women-question helped us quite a bit... because you’ve seen that it was us, the women, who were the first to go out for food, job positions, and health... And it brought very difficult situations – even death. There were husbands who did not tolerate their wives attending a meeting, a ‘piquete’.

It is meaningful that rape and systematic sexual violence make no appearance in the formally published texts of TC on gender, nor in the entirety of SIC, nor Communisation and its Discontents. The neglect of rape and sexual violence as structural elements of the gender distinction, and thus of the capitalist totality, leads to an account of gender that cannot make sense of an enormous amount of gendered social relations. Some have argued correctly that some strains of feminist emphasis on rape have served a racist or classist function within struggles and analysis, but it is also true that the neglect of rape and sexual violence is just as easily used in racist or classist attacks.

It becomes this [...] insofar as a specific social arrangement has population as its object.[10]

This begins to answer the question of ‘what is woman’, and the inchoate answer is woman is she who is appropriated by society for the purpose of increasing the population. It is easy to see also that severe gender distinctions, will necessarily arise in places where there are intense pressures on population stability, and thus intense conscription of women to constant childbearing.

Both Gonzalez and TC correctly articulate the way this ontologically negligible feature (child-bearing) comes to ground a hierarchised social relation:

The possession of a uterus is an anatomical feature, and not immediately a distinction, but ‘baby maker’ is

---

8 Théorie Communiste, op. cit.
9 Gonzalez mentions this also, Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., p.226. 10 Théorie Communiste, ‘Response to the Americans on Gender’, op. cit.
a social distinction which makes the anatomical feature a natural distinction. Within the nature of this social construction, of this system of constraint, that which is socially constructed – women – are always sent back to biology.  

[...] sexual difference is given a particular social relevance that it would not otherwise possess. Sexual difference is given this fixed significance within class societies, when the category woman comes to be defined by the function that most (but not all) human females perform, for a period of their lives, in the sexual reproduction of the species. Class society thus gives a social purpose to bodies: because some women ‘have’ babies, all bodies that could conceivably ‘produce’ babies are subject to social regulation.

But the questions remain: why and how? While countless activities slip easily between the boundaries dividing the two gendered ‘spheres’, why is baby-bearing not only confined to the female/domestic/private/non-social/non-waged sphere, but constitutive of it? Why, then, is baby-bearing so pernicious a domestic activity, if others (cleaning, laundry, emotional labour) traverse the spheres more easily? Why haven’t we started making babies in test tubes? Why hasn’t surrogate motherhood become more popular (though its popularity is dramatically rising)? Why aren’t women paid to bear children? These questions must be answered in order to explain why and how baby-making can be understood as the essential activity which constitutes the female, non-waged sphere.

Further, and more fundamentally, how does this appropriation of women, on whatever basis (baby-making or no) begin? In other words, what is the origin of the gender distinction and how is it

\[10\] Ibid.

\[11\] Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., p.224.

\[15\] Radical feminism followed a curious trajectory in the second half of the 20th century, taking first childbearing, then domestic work, and finally sexual violence (or the male orgasm) as the ground of women’s oppression. The problem was that in each case, these feminists sought an ahistorical ground for what had become an historical phenomenon. ‘Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., footnote 203.

\[18\] Domestic labor, positioned within the division of labor, forms of integration/interruption in the immediate process of production, ‘atypical’ forms of the wage system, everyday violence of marriage, family, negation and appropriation of female sexuality, rape and/or the threat of rape, all these are the frontlines where the contradiction between men and women plays out, a contradiction whose content is the definition of men and women and the ascription and confinement of individuals to these definitions (none of these elements is accidental). These frontlines are the loci of a permanent struggle between two categories of society constructed as natural and deconstructed by women in their struggle. The frontlines are never stable. The public-private distinction
crete terms, where we are able to talk about the real patterns of employment women experience, and the real concrete ramifications of pregnancy and childrearing on the appropriation of women inside and outside the wage relation, but she ends up treating the relation between actual men and actual women of similar classes in an abstract space where violence does not occur. It is impossible to accurately theorise the feminised ‘sphere’ without referring to sexual violence, and so this represents a serious oversight in the existing theory. Women’s subordination in the home; women’s experience in waged labor; baby-bearing – all these things are produced directly through sexual violence as a mechanism of control over women’s bodies. Sexual violence is not an unfortunate side effect in the appropriation of women – it is a necessary element of that appropriation. Sexual and domestic violence (‘private’ violence within intimate family or friend relations) are the types of violence that are constitutive of the gender relation.

Gonzalez’ mention of violence against women in general is confined to two footnotes, and only one mentions sexual violence. The first reads

[... ] violence against women, sometimes carried out by women themselves, has always been necessary to keep them firmly tied to their role in the sexual reproduction of the species.\(^17\)

Here, ‘violence against women’ refers to the amount of women who die in childbirth and the taxing experience of bearing upwards of eight children in a lifetime. This violence has no immediate perpetrator. The only thing to blame is the whole system. Even though

TC and Gonzalez both agree that, once capital comes on the scene, there is a shift in the material basis for the appropriation of women, because ‘In the capitalist mode of production, the principal ‘productive force’ is the working class itself.’\(^13\) If the production of woman emerges from a situation in which the increase in the population is the principal productive force, this means that the production of woman fundamentally changes in capitalism. They argue that ‘the determination of a public sphere’ is actually the ‘source’ of the sex difference, and we may infer that this is because the public sphere formalises the appropriation of women in/as the private sphere. Due to capitalism’s absolute distinction of labour as separate from ‘reproductive activities in the private sphere’, we find that ‘The cleavage between production and reproduction, of home and workplace, is perfect, structural, definitive of the mode of production.’\(^14\) TC write:

The sexed character of all categories of capital signifies a general distinction in society between men and women. This general distinction ‘acquires as its social content’ that which is the synthesis of all the sexu-

\(^{12}\) TC disavow a serious discussion of the origins of the gender distinction, which seems disingenuous considering the important role that the theory of the origin of capitalism (in primitive accumulation) plays for the theory of class exploitation.

\(^{13}\) Théorie Communiste, op. cit.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
We agree that the categories of the capitalist totality are sexed; that this sexuation arises from a distinction between the realm of wage labour and that of something else. But is the distinction that grounds the hierarchical gender binary that between ‘public’ and ‘private’, or between ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’, or between the ‘social’ and the ‘non-social’? This ambiguity of the real, material and historical nature of the separate spheres betrays a further ambiguity concerning the real material construction and reproduction of the gender distinction, before and during capitalism. How are women produced and kept in such a relation of hyper exploitation and appropriation? What are the material mechanisms that enable men to reproduce themselves as men, the appropriators?

Because capital does not consistently face dwindling populations (and in fact, the opposite is often true) both TC and Gonzalez agree that we cannot maintain the same theory of gender when capital comes on the scene. Baby-bearing can no longer be the functional reason for appropriating women in their totality, because it is no longer the principal productive force. Here, Gonzalez and TC part ways, Gonzalez positing that baby-bearing remains the ground of gender but, because it no longer plays the same social function, it is ‘more or less ideological’, while TC defer primarily to the ever more materially distinct separation of spheres necessitated by the wage-relation as the material ground for gender in capital. Gonzalez’ relegation of gender in capitalism to ideology ends up drawing her argument closer to those Marxist-feminists who have argued that capitalism more or less mobilises an historical echo of past material relations of oppression, and this is the reason for persistent patriarchy.

Whither Sexual Violence

It is important to note also that sexual violence and rape are consistently displaced or left out of a schematic account of the gender relation within TC and Gonzalez’s accounts. Gonzalez effectively draws the notion of separate ‘spheres’ of activity into more con-

15Ibid.
16Though TC also sometimes lean towards Gonzalez’ point: Lyon writes that gendered domination ‘would always have had the allocation of women to child-