

Recovering the Marxist Feminist Eye

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This project recovers what we call a “Marxist Feminist eye” in critical educational research. We begin by tracing the roots of this project, discussing the gender disparity present in the traditionally-cited literature of critical pedagogy. Next, we share a brief history of Marxist Feminist work, looking at educational research by Madeleine Arnot, Anne Marie Wolpe, Rosemary Deem, and Linda Valli. These relatively unknown Marxist Feminist perspectives from the 1970s and 1980s show how capitalist and patriarchal forces mutually constitute. Finally, we expand upon this framework to understand multiple intersections of exploitation and oppression, such as race, ability, sexuality, nationality and others. Finally, we highlight how the Marxist Feminist eye is useful in understanding ourselves and educational spaces within our neoliberal context.

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Having completed a practice-centered teacher preparation program, I (the first author of this essay) entered a Master’s program in philosophy and education. During my graduate experience, I was introduced to Marxist and feminist theories that began to shape my understanding of education, schooling and what it meant to be a teacher. In my final semester, I began developing a thesis based on my interest in Marxist philosophies of education. I started my research looking at Bowles and Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and continued to follow the histories of reproduction and resistance theories. Henry Giroux’s *On Critical Pedagogy* led me to works by Michael Apple, Paul Willis and Peter McLaren. During this research, I aimed to incorporate my interest in feminist pedagogies and build an understanding of what it meant to be “intersectional.”

In insisting upon a Marxist, materialist lens, however, I began to recognize that my reference list was a list of male, predominately white, theorists. I knew that scholarship in any field had historically been dominated by men, but the study of Marxism seemed to appear as a boy's club. Studies of educational resistance, such as Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* reinforced the observation that for 1980s left-wing sociologists of education, the problem of class reproduction was almost always a question of *boys'* education (I did not know, for instance, about Angela McRobbie's work on working class girls and the culture of femininity).¹ At the end of the semester, my master's thesis was complete, my final bibliography contained 26 citations of men, 1 solo female author and 1 female co-author.

Attempting to find *any* female authors in this area proved to be quite the challenge. Not only that, the perspectives I found offered in the literature did not include a robust critique of patriarchy such as those I encountered when reading feminist authors. Recognizing that my literature review as a graduate student at the time was somewhat limited, I see now that there were scholars and writing that I remained unaware of at the time (indeed, the ones my co-author and I will discuss in this article). It was not until this last spring at the PES annual conference where, in conversation with my co-author, we discovered a similar interest in this lack of attention to Marxist Feminist scholars, especially in education. He shared with me some work he had come across by a female author, Madeleine Arnot, on Marxism, gender, and education. Inspired by this conversation, we set out to study what we came to call the Marxist Feminist eye, a perspective developed by a generation of Marxist Feminist educational researchers that are rarely mentioned in literature reviews or source texts in critical pedagogy or social foundations of education generally.

THE MARXIST FEMINIST EYE

There is a little-told history of Marxist Feminist educational research. Though their work is not as widely known, a generation of scholars examined the fine-grained complexity of social reproduction in education, theorizing and measuring educational practices that ensure the continuity of gender and class

relations in capitalist societies (or what was known then as “the sexual division of labor”). Marxist Feminists such as Michele Barrett, Christine Delphy, Lise Vogel, Selma James, Angela Davis, Angela McRobbie, and Maria Dalla Costa, across disciplines and in several countries, addressed education here and there (Barrett and Davis notably include whole chapters to the subject in their flagship books *Women’s Oppression Today* and *Women, Race, and Class*). The work of neo-Marxist researchers such as Jean Anyon, Pauline Lipman, and Lois Weiner examines issues of race, class, and gender in education from a critical urban perspective. Their work is known quite well in their respective fields, but in the years before critical pedagogy formed as a research paradigm a cohort of scholars across disciplines and contexts followed the Marxist Feminist’s lead to look at education more carefully. Anne Marie Wolpe, Madeleine Arnot, Rosemary Deem, and Linda Valli each wrote important contributions to a specifically Marxist Feminist paradigm of educational research.

In books such as *Some Processes in Sexist Education*, *Becoming Clerical Workers*, and *Women and Schooling*, these authors showed how classrooms, curriculum, and educational policy work to reproduce idiosyncratic striations of exploitation and patriarchal oppression in modern social formations. They took their lead from social reproduction theorists, building on insights like those made by the French Communist philosopher Louis Althusser, who—with his student Etienne Balibar—claimed that the perspective of reproduction (how social formations maintain continuity over time) is perhaps the most important perspective when thinking about how modern capitalist social formations change, and how to change them in turn. Althusser was famous for claiming that schools are the most powerful apparatus for reproducing these ideologies in modern capitalist societies. But the Marxist Feminists also followed the work of (and in some cases were mentored directly by) the British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein, whose theory of codes was similar in some respects to Althusser’s notion of ideology.

Throughout these authors’ work, there is what we will call a “Marxist Feminist eye”: a way of seeing and understanding educational matters at the intersection of gender and class. We believe this eye is important to describe

for several reasons. First, it is crucial to know the intellectual history of educational research. Particularly now that social formations around the world are changing dramatically, specifically the rise of further left and right forces in the West, it may be tempting to call for new paradigms of thinking that incorporate intersecting social categories into a more traditional class analysis. We risk limiting our resources in intellectual and political battles if we do not know about who charted this territory before. Second, drawing from it as a resource, we think that such a Marxist Feminist eye is important for thinking through how to see intersections of social forces in education generally. While the Marxist Feminist eye in the 1970s and 1980s was able to see how capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression operate fluidly in educational institutions, that eye can be widened and sharpened today to see other intersections as well, namely race, ability, sexuality, nationality and others. We see the work of Valli, Deem, and Arnot in particular as helping to show us how to see education through an intersectional Marxist lens.

The Marxist Feminist eye draws on the strengths of both Marxist and feminist traditions to situate its theory with an understanding of how each of those forces intermingle. They show us that Marxist theory that does not include an understanding of the forces of patriarchy results in a limited understanding of political economy and only a partial view of how reproduction occurs. At the same time, this analysis shows the limits of a feminist position that isolates gender oppression from capitalist exploitation.

In Jean Anyon's 1984 essay "Intersections of gender and class: Accommodation and resistance by working-class and affluent females to contradictory sex role ideologies," she interviewed boys and girls at two elementary schools—one working class and the other affluent—about their experiences, expectations, and notions of gender and work. One participant student, a young girl, told her this anecdote: "My mother says she wants a job—but he [my father] doesn't want her to. And when they have a fight she says, 'I'm going to get a job.' And he treats her like a waitress. He just tells her to get the dinner."²² In this passage we hear a young girl talking about her parents fighting. The mother desires employment, to get out of the house and work, but the father wants the

opposite—for her to “get the dinner.” As a threat to the husband’s attempt to reinforce what gender studies has long known as the separate spheres doctrine where women stay at home and men go to work, the mother threatens to get a job. Yet we find out that the mother has to work anyway because the father’s wages are not enough for the family to live on.

This passage, like most of the writings in the lesser-known tradition we refer to here, shows the ways that patriarchy and exploitation are what intersectional theorists call mutually constituting forces. Insights from feminists about domestic labor and connections between home and school were important contributions in setting the stage for Marxist Feminists to engage in conversations around social reproduction. Feminism’s use of Marx’s critique of political economy enables us to understand how intersecting identities develop within a capitalist society. Feminism without this critique is at risk of being enveloped within its neoliberal context and fails to address the material conditions produced by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy (for example, the practice of giving microloans to women in poor countries marking them as “impoverished entrepreneurs”).³ In the following section we draw from Madeleine Arnot, Rosemary Deem, and Linda Valli to give examples of the Marxist Feminist eye, beginning with Arnot’s use of “gender codes.”

Arnot develops her theory of *gender codes*, drawing heavily on the work of her mentor Basil Bernstein, to illuminate how divisions of gender are reproduced in schools. Bernstein’s research on codes seeks to understand distributions of power and the principles of social control. The classroom, for Bernstein, is not only involved in transmission, but is a site where structures are embodied in social relationships.⁴ To borrow language from Althusser, the “dominant ideology” taught (be it heteronormativity, white supremacy, or others) frames our social relationships, shaping our language and, through this, our mental structures; this is what it means “to be interpellated.”⁵ Arnot picks up this project by looking at the schooling of girls in the 1980s and the school’s emphasis on docility and domesticity. Living under the forces of both patriarchy and capitalism, education served as means of hailing females into their expected “femaleness,” which is both an education for exploitative relations (woman as

docile *worker*) and an education for oppressive gender relations (*woman* as docile worker). Arnot's writings capture educational realities at the intersection of patriarchy and exploitation in just this way. In her essay, "Feminist Perspective on the Relationship Between Family Life and School Life," she cites research differentiating between "'spontaneous' forms of pedagogy (which typify the work of mothers in childcare and teachers in primary schools) and the more 'instrumental' pedagogic styles (found in secondary schools)" in order to show how pedagogy "reproduces not only the sexual division of labor but also bourgeois class culture."⁶

Another fascinating example is Arnot's writings on single-sex education. She asks, "how does one locate female class differences in an educational system designed to reproduce the seemingly more important set of class relations—those of men and male occupational hierarchies?" She continues:

The implications of feminist struggles over sex segregation for class struggles over education cannot be ignored, or seen as separate. Single-sex schooling was part of the reproduction of class relations ... The history of class reproduction, of class relations and bourgeois privilege includes not as a marginal but as an integral feature, the reproduction of bourgeois family forms (the norms of heterosexuality, female virginity, and marriage) as well as particular concepts of masculinity and femininity which held together the gender division of labor within paid employment in family life.⁷

A traditional Marxist perspective might focus on the ways such schools reproduce class relations, and a feminist lens might look at the gendered and sexualized aspects of schooling. Arnot's Marxist Feminist eye sees both social forces acting simultaneously: the reproduction of class relations includes gender relations not as a marginal but as an integral feature. She concludes in that essay: "I have tried to show that the issue of co-education and single-sex education ... involve[s] notions of what the relations between the sexes should be in an educational system which was already class divided."⁸ Like femaleness in curricula and distinctive kinds of pedagogy, gender and class mutually constitute single-sex education.

Linda Valli also draws from Bernstein's theory of codes to talk about how a cooperative program at a midwestern high school reproduces the sexual division of labor. While the term may be outdated today, we would say something like "gendered division of labor" to think through this concept. In her ethnography, she recounts the comments of Mrs. Lewis, a self-identified feminist teacher in the cooperative program, when talking about professional expectations for women: "I tend to look at appearance as being extremely important. For instance, in New York, what do girls who work in top-notch jobs look like: Fabulous! ... that's the way it is everywhere."⁹ Valli, like Arnot above, sees the cooperative program at the intersections of gender and class. Mrs. Lewis's exhortation that girls must look good to get top-notch jobs shows how interpellations in school reproduce both class and gender. In this anecdote, the class character of the comment is mutually constituted by its gender character.

Valli found other examples of gender intermingling with class during the school day. When asked about taking shop classes, a female student replied: "I would have liked an auto repair course even though I'm all thumbs. But it was all boys so I wouldn't have felt right ... Nobody would think you'd take mechanics, unless you were loose."¹⁰ The student speaks here about being perceived as "loose," or a sexually deviant woman, if she were to take a technical course on fixing cars. That technical course is clearly a vocational course, one directed explicitly at preparing students for a particular labor market. The student's worry about her reputation, her gender and sexuality, as she pursues that education is clear here, and by highlighting the response Valli points us to yet another example of gender and class intersecting.

In *Becoming Clerical Workers*, Valli writes explicitly about exploitation and patriarchy. After a lengthy section on the difference between technical and social relations in a mode of production, illustrated by the increased rate of automation in the adoption of computers in offices in the 1970s, Valli writes that:

Capitalist relations do not fully account for the sexual division of labor, a division in which women by and large have not merely different but inferior positions to men. While capital determine that most workers will have subordinate positions

in a hierarchical division of labor, it does not necessarily determine that that division be sexual or that women will be disproportionately allocated to those positions. For an adequate explanation of this phenomenon, the concept of patriarchy must be utilized.¹¹

In each of the cases mentioned, she blends the two frameworks of exploitation and oppression together, finding examples of how they mutually constitute one another.

Rosemary Deem would use the same Marxist Feminist eye when writing about the history of women's education and their entrance into the labor market from 1850 to 1970. She confirms Valli's finding: "what [girls] got out of that education was a confirmation of the position of women in the social relations of capitalism, particularly with regard to the sexual division of labour."¹² As women's work began to move outside the domestic realm, often in working-class homes as a response to an economic need for two incomes, women's labor became subsumed by the driving "needs" of the capitalist market. Deem analyzes the difference in curriculum between boys and girls through the lens of a capitalist labor market. Whereas a traditional Marxist analysis might pass over the differences between boys' and girls' curriculum, and whereas a feminist lens might focus exclusively on the inequality in this curriculum, the Marxist Feminist eye sees the inequality in terms of the reproduction of labor. Her conclusion to the historical chapter of *Women and Schooling* demonstrates this dual concern clearly: "it will be suggested [in this book] that the achievement of equal education by women is something incompatible with the present culture, ideology, and social relationships of production in capitalist Britain."¹³

This Marxist Feminist eye is explicit in her theoretical framework when she writes:

[I]n most capitalist societies there remains a strongly entrenched sexual division of labour, separating what women do from what men do. Because of this, it is both possible and feasible to argue that the sexual division of labor must be

essential to the maintenance of capitalist society ... Althusser has argued that societies involved in the production of goods must, in order to continue that production, reproduce both the forces of production ... and the existing relationships of production.¹⁴

These “relationships of production” get reproduced in schools, where students learn (again, Deem cites Althusser) “first, the techniques or ‘know-how’ of the dominant culture in society, and second ... the rules of good behavior.” Deem continues:

[B]oys, according to whether they are the sons of capitalist employers, middle-class professionals, or working-class semi-skilled laborers, learn at school their appropriate place in the class and work hierarchy, girls, irrespective of their class background, are much more likely to learn that a woman’s place and primary responsibilities lie in the home and the family, not the labor market.¹⁵

Today, forty years after Deem’s work was first published in 1978, women in the United States enter the workforce at comparable rates to men,¹⁶ but the category of family remains an important notion for neoliberalism’s reliance on unpaid domestic and care work.

Each of the above authors—Arnot, Deem, and Valli—constructed what we call a Marxist Feminist eye. This eye’s theoretical framework combines a Marxist critique of exploitation with a feminist critique of patriarchy, seeing the two social forces at work together, mutually constituting, in the educational moment. Arnot would write that: “I feel that the complex dynamics of the lived experience of class and gender relations are beginning to be glimpsed and that the ambiguities which mark a system such as patriarchal capitalism are being brought into focus for the first time.”¹⁷ Indeed the Marxist Feminists from her generation did glimpse these complex dynamics as they played out in school. Their work was a rigorous look at how exploitation and oppression mutually constitute one another in education, though the eye through which

they looked has since been lost. While Marxist educational researchers continue to develop and apply the traditional analysis of exploitation, in some cases including gender in their accounts, and authors in the feminist tradition focus on patriarchy but without such an explicit focus on capitalism as exhibited above, the authors cited give each pride of place in their thinking in ways rarely found in contemporary research.

There are obvious limits to the Marxist Feminist accounts cited above and those like them, in that they have a somewhat narrow focus on gender and class. Nearly all white women, the authors above do not include robust critiques of race, sexuality, ability, or nationality in their analyses. Later authors in the critical tradition would expand the Marxist Feminist eye, particularly with respect to race; bell hooks being just one prominent example. However, we believe the eye with which the above Marxist Feminists analyzed educational matters can be augmented to include other social forces and used to analyze contemporary educational issues.

CONCLUSION: DECODING HEGEMONY AND NEOLIBERALISM

Arnot develops the concepts of class-based gender codes to understand how educational institutions, families and workplaces “win over” new generations to particular definitions of masculinity and femininity, reproducing inequality through the favoring of one over the other. Her conception of hegemonic institutional authority and dissemination of divisions of gender can be expanded to understand how white supremacy, heteronormativity, and bourgeois norms are actively produced in school settings. Recognizing this as a social coding process where a subject is *subjected to* dominant modes of power, means recognizing the opportunity and need to “*decode*.”

If we wish to interrupt social coding in education, we must have the tools available to name the process. The term “reproduction” was popular when the Marxist Feminists above were writing. With Arnot we understand reproduction in the context of the larger theory of *hegemony*. Such an understanding of reproduction emphasizes the active nature of learning, as well as

the power struggles and points of conflict that exist in, and outside, the school. Arnot offers us a definition of male hegemony as “a whole series of separate ‘moments’ through which women have come to accept a male-dominated culture, its legality, and their subordination to it and in it.”¹⁸ This process of accepting forms of dominance is key to Antonio Gramsci’s geological theory of social formations, where a balance of forces is governed by a structure in dominance because ruling classes have secured hegemony through wars of position.¹⁹ Social reproduction always happens in this larger context of contingency. Ruling classes secure consent through subjects in the social formation, reproducing subjectivities to maintain continuity of their rule, and gender thus can be seen as both arbitrary, socially constructed, and recognizable through *patterns of experience*. Arnot’s conception of “women” is forward thinking in this way, as she does not fall prey to the dichotomous thinking that prevailed in second wave feminism insisting on the homogenous category of women in relation to men. By focusing on the collective lived experience of women *as women*, Arnot’s feminist framework turns away from an insistence on metanarratives and calls upon relationships and interactions to theorize how divisions of gender are reproduced in educational settings. Understanding divisions of gender are inherently socially constructed and thus contingent, we recognize that individuals must inhabit these gendered categories, even as they strive to decode, or unmake them.²⁰ Standing within the Marxist tradition, we recognize that divisions of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and others are categories that are socially constructed and confined, and serve to limit the material conditions of marginalized groups. We join the Combahee River Collective in the belief that: “We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives.”²¹ By shifting our concern to hegemony, intersecting identities can be understood through the concept of categories as what we will call “*patterns of lived experience*.”

As a tool, this Marxist Feminist eye gets us looking at how the economization of schooling shapes identities. Neoliberalism, for instance, promotes broad inequality and threatens democracy. The Marxist Feminist eye is helpful

because it makes apparent the interlocking nature of capitalism and patriarchy (and more broadly white supremacy and other systems of power). It reveals the ways neoliberalism attempts to isolate us from one another and against a collective “we.” Kaela Jubas describes how institutions and discourses of liberal democracy “distract the attention of the oppressed and marginalized from problems of material and social relations, and seduce them with an ideological premise of individual rights, freedoms, and potential.”²² Neoliberalism’s practice of individualizing is an attempt to depoliticize, moving the locus of responsibility from the state to the individual. Wendy Brown describes this as the “responsibilization” of individuals.²³ This shift of responsibility is in the movements of school choice, accountability movements, and the student loan system. We share Adriana Cavarero’s concern of the over-privileging of the “we” in movements.²⁴ However, rather than abandon the collective as a means of revolutionary possibility, we aim to shed light on the subjectivity in which “we” have come into being, and by which we are continually shaped. Judith Butler writes: “The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not fully mine. They are not born with me.”²⁵ Indeed, the norms, or codes, present in today’s societies shape and confine our responses. While the tradition of critiquing neoliberalism, as well as Butler’s perspective on identity, are well-known in the educational literature, we see a role for the lost tradition of Marxist Feminism in thinking through these questions. A distinctive approach, exemplified by Arnot’s notion of gender codes, the Marxist Feminist eye sees educational matters at the intersection of exploitation and oppression. Such an eye would pick out aspects of these social forces that are crucial to understanding how to change them.

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2 Jean Anyon, “Intersections of Gender and Class: Accommodation and Resistance by Working-Class and Affluent Females to Contradictory Sex Role Ideologies,” *The Journal of Education* 166, no. 1 (1984), 36.

- 3 Daniel Immerwahr, "Thinking Small Won't End Poverty," *Jacobin* (November 2015), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/11/capitalism-small-is-beautiful-world-bank-imf-free-trade>
- 4 Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control. Vol. 3, Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions* (London: Routledge, 1977), 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 6 Madeleine Arnot, "A Feminist Perspective on the Relationship Between Family Life and School Life," *The Journal of Education* 166, no. 1 (1984), 9.
- 7 Madeleine Arnot, "A Cloud over Co-Education: An Analysis of the Forms of Transmission of Class and Gender Relations," in *Gender, Class and Education*, eds. Len Barton and Stephen Walker (London: Falmer Press, 1983), 88.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 9 Linda Valli, *Becoming Clerical Workers* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 62.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 12 Rosemary Deem, *Women and Schooling* (London: Routledge, 2012), 19.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 16 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, January 2011, Annual Averages.
- 17 Arnot, "A Feminist Perspective on the Relationship Between Family Life and School Life," 13.
- 18 Madeleine Arnot, "Male Hegemony, Social Class and Women's Education," *The Journal of Education* 164, no. 1 (1982), 64.
- 19 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Geoffrey Smith and Quintin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
- 20 Laura Lee Downs, "If 'Woman' Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 2 (1993): 414-437.
- 21 Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," (1977); <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/>.
- 22 Kaela Jubas, "Theorizing Gender in Contemporary Canadian Citizenship," *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, no. 2 (2006), 569.
- 23 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).
- 24 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 25 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 35.