

Theoretical explorations on the specificity of working class women's exploitation

Exploraciones teóricas sobre la especificidad de la explotación de la mujer trabajadora

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Abstract

As social scientists we face the difficulty of unraveling the chaos of social relations as perceived by the naked eye. On the one hand, there seem to be relations of production; on the other, antagonistic gender relations coexist together, while we also see ethnic inequalities. While intersectionality studies have advanced all these topics, in this article I propose a more sophisticated analysis of Marxism, by compounding relations of production (class) and gender relations, as they are embedded in real life. Studies on these matters still appear to be separate, resisting a combined analysis, so I believe that as social scientists we need to overcome this inertia from an interdisciplinary perspective. In order to do so I have considered feminist approaches on the subject, a gender studies perspective, and the social history of work, looking at it through a constructive critique of Marxism. By analyzing such theories I propose

categories that may unify this array of social relations; I also advance on the key notion of gendered class; and finally I highlight the need of a multi-layered analysis. Social studies of the working class in particular, need to include women worker's specific exploitation. My method of analysis is dialectical materialism.

Keywords: social history of work, Marxism, gender studies, feminism, gendered class relations.

Resumen:

Todavía nos cuesta desentrañar el caos de las relaciones sociales como se nos presentan a simple vista al observarlas como científicos/as sociales. Por un lado, parecen estar las relaciones de producción, por otro lado, parecen convivir las relaciones antagónicas de género, aparecen también las desigualdades étnicas. Se ha avanzado mucho con los estudios de la interseccionalidad. Lo que voy a hacer aquí es complejizar el análisis desde el marxismo. En este trabajo me propongo avanzar, siguiendo con investigaciones previas, en la relación entre las relaciones de producción (de clase) y de género y cómo están imbricadas en la realidad concreta. Los estudios sobre estas temáticas todavía suelen estar escindidos y se resisten a aunarse, es una inercia que a mi criterio debemos combatir como científicos/as sociales sobre todo desde una perspectiva interdisciplinaria. Para llevar adelante mi examen he puesto en consideración los abordajes del feminismo, de los estudios de género y de la historia social del trabajo haciendo una crítica aguda pero constructiva del marxismo. A través del análisis de estas teorías propongo

categorías para llevar adelante esta unificación de relaciones sociales, sigo avanzando sobre el concepto fundamental de clase generizada y demuestro lo imprescindible de un análisis complejo. Los estudios sociales, sobre todo los de la clase obrera, deben incluir en su mirada la explotación específica de la mujer trabajadora. El método que utilizo para llevar adelante el trabajo es el materialismo dialéctico.

Palabras clave: historia social del trabajo, marxismo, estudios de género, feminismo, relaciones de clase generizada.

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Introduction to Analytical Frameworks

In this article I advance on theoretical issues I have already explored in previous works (Norando, 2013, 2016, 2018a and 2018b forthcoming). There I have explored how gender relations and relations of production (class) have been studied as differentiated fields for a long time, each reaching one-sided conclusions on class and gender inequalities. Here I propose a unifying perspective that includes intersectionalities (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989) of social relations, as they are actually combined in reality. When we speak of class and gender relations we can only understand them as a unified phenomenon in real life. Thus, when we speak of women exploited by patriarchal capitalism, we need to go beyond intersectionality, and consider instead the notion of union—the

union of class and gender relations. I do not mean to ignore studies that have advanced the concept of intersection, but rather I propose to compound them when we consider one aspect of it: the exploitation of women workers. Our main challenge is in understanding how intersection works, what is the structure that supports the interplay of specific social relations that have been analytically separated. Therefore, the main goal in this work is to describe my conclusions (so far), and develop a hypothesis on how that structure works.

These debates did not surface in Argentina until the 1980s, after the demise of the 1976-1983 dictatorship responsible for the exile of thousands of intellectuals and the disappearance of many more, which effectively prevented intellectual development in Argentina during that ominous era. However, once exiled Argentine scholars returned with the new democracy, they brought with them

these discussions. The pioneer works of Mabel Bellucci and Cristina Camusso already integrated class and gender relations associated to debates on domestic work.² Even so, they were rather isolated articles, while other studies began to look at women's experience at work as part of class-gender relations.

Such debates took place while Marxism was in the process of renovating itself, leaving behind deeply embedded Stalinist determinisms. In the aftermath of the dictatorship debates and historiographical advances took into account the experience of male

² Dora Barrancos directed Mabel Bellucci and Cristina Camusso's project "Class and Gender Articulation in Anarchist Women's Struggles", CONICET, 1987-1989. See also, Bellucci, Mabel and Camusso, Cristina: "La huelga de inquilinos de 1907- El papel de las mujeres anarquistas", Cuadernos CICSO, N.58, Buenos Aires, 1987, and Bellucci, Mabel, "Tensiones entre la reproducción social y la producción: Estudio de caso de las mujeres gráficas de Buenos Aires" (1890-1914), II Jornadas de Historia de las Mujeres, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, UBA, 1992.

and female workers from a gendered perspective, related with different aspects, such as left cultures, the relationship with the State, the labor market, etc. (Barrancos, 1990; Lobato, 2001)

We are making theoretical advances on the subject, picking up on the debates that were left unfinished in the 1980s.

My own interest in formulating more clearly a concept that allows us to understand the complexity of these social relations, stems from my doctoral and postdoctoral degrees, where I have been focusing on the class experiences of the working class community in the textile industry of Buenos Aires between the two World Wars, as well as my present research on the work process in the textile industry. My ideas have been informed by Marxism (Marx, 2010; Bráverman, 1981, among others), radical feminism (Delphy, 1977; Firestone, 1970, etc.), socialist feminism (Mitchell 1971; Hartmann 1980; Eisenstein 1978, etc.), US social history, or *New Labor History* (Weinstein, 2000, among others), English social history or British Marxism (Thompson, 1989; Hobsbawm, 1985; Hill, 1985; Thompson D. 2013), Argentine labor history (Barrancos, 1990; Iñigo Carrera, 2000; Lobato, 2001; Camarero, 2007; Andújar, 2016), and the work of present day feminist intellectuals such as Silvia Federeici (2010). In sum, I propose that the sexual division of labor (that assigns women to domestic work) is the greatest catalyst in the increase of capital's surplus value and overall profit because it increases capital's production capacity. This is the root of the specific exploitation of women workers, and how the complex structure of gender and class relations works. I will develop in depth this notion in the following

pages, analyzing the mechanism that makes women workers do domestic work and thus turns them into the major producers of surplus value. I will explore how free work combines with wage work in such a way that women become the largest surplus producers in a capitalist economy.

Marxist theory provides a good framework for this analysis, although I am quite critical of what is known as vulgar Marxism. I do agree with him that as intellectuals we are, in fact, the product of class struggle, and women's struggles throughout the twentieth century also changed the course of much scholarship. What is true is that women's struggles and class struggles have advanced gender studies, and not the other way around. And women's struggles had not yet taken place in Marx's time. However, I disagree with the feminist reproach to Marxist theory. I agree with Zillah Eisenstein (1980) in that the relevance of a Marxist analysis for the study of women's exploitation is two-folded. First because it contributes the necessary class analysis for the study of power and exploitation; and second, because it provides a historical and dialectical method of analysis. Angela Davis has also highlighted the relevance of a materialist analysis to sex-gender relations, meaning that we cannot do away with class (nor race) differences in the analysis of contemporary societies. (Davis, 1981) In line with this perspective, I argue that the patriarchal capitalist society is organized around a certain mode of production of material life (Marx, 2010), although these determinations are not only productive, they are reproductive as well.

Therefore, my theoretical and conceptual work is a critique of the so-called economistic or deterministic Marxism that has ignored such a fundamental issue as the sexual division of labor, which in my view and in light of the advances of the twentieth century, is the key to capitalist exploitation. They also do not include secondary though relevant topics such as gender conditioning and normative. This work is also a critique of feminist perspectives and gender studies that ignore class determinations and the importance of relations of production. Thus, advancing on previous works where I have argued that it is essential to come up with a theory that combines class and gender relations, in which patriarchy and capitalism are considered as one system and not two separate entities that work together, I intend to look into this in more detail. (Norando 2018a and 2018b, forthcoming)

I believe that this will enhance the understanding of social and human sciences as regards social relations in history. I particularly seek to understand the specific exploitation of women in the development of contemporary society in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Empirical analyses on actual, circumscribed, case studies are improved if they are done in light of a theory that allows them to build around the complexity of social relations, where the accent is not just on gender relations, or only relations of production. As I conclude in other works, these two elements are part of the same social relation that could be called gendered social relations (at least until all social scientists have internalized the fact that social relations **are** gendered). In

the following sections I will look at working class women domestic and wage work, on the one hand; and on the other, I will outline the theoretical tools I have been developing on how to identify the specific exploitation of women workers in patriarchal capitalism. I will also substantiate my theoretical explorations and conceptualize key guidelines to understand the specific exploitation of women workers, who in my view are the ones that carry on their shoulders the weight of society at large. And not just that, but they are also the major producers of surplus value in patriarchal capitalism.

Domestic Work and Wage Work: the Labor of a Working Class Woman

One of the fundamental material pillars of the patriarchal capitalist system is domestic work. (Norando, 2018a) The capitalist mode of production regulates contemporary society, where the latter is structured in two basic social classes, the bourgeoisie and those who work for a wage.

In this section I will analyze these two aspects: women working outside and inside their homes, that is, wage work (as might describe it as pertaining to the sphere of class relations), and domestic work (perceived as pertaining to the sphere of gender relations). I will look at working class women as defined, women who are paid wages that are not enough to pay for another woman's domestic work and thus have to perform that job themselves, once their wage work outside the home is done. I will describe and analyze these

two jobs performed by working class women, their working conditions, circumstances, social mandates, cultural imperatives, but above all the economic and sex-gendered determinations that define them.

“Housewife” was the central female role in the Western world in the interwar period, 1918-1939. All women are housewives; even those who work outside their homes are still considered as such, because domestic work is what defines women’s place anywhere she is. Women workers are born to do domestic and caretaking work, besides their jobs outside the home. And although there is of course a large group of women that are able to avoid wage work, they do not manage to escape domestic work. I will describe each group in detail and their specific form of exploitation.

As defined in patriarchal capitalist society, domestic work is “not work;” it is not considered valid work by capital because it does not produce actual goods for the market, thus it lacks exchange value. (Artous, 1982; Seccombe, 1974, among others) Instead, domestic work is supposed to produce use values that, when consumed by people, in turn produces a commodity—labor power. However, although the latter is true, it does not mean that domestic work does not produce for the market, or that it lacks exchange value. If we think about it in this way, it does generate value by producing services that later contribute to the reproduction and production of labor power, even if it is done privately and in secluded conditions. (Rowbotham, 1977) These authors argued that this kind of work does not exist on a social level, because there is no contract

that negotiates the conditions between two parties. Women do it out of inertia, because cultural “nature” and patriarchal education dictate it. But although this is true, it does not imply that it is not actual work in a social sense.

Domestic work shares the features of social work: it is rather a private, personal service that women perform in their homes, although their motivations are not economic or professional (working for money or advancing in a profession). Rather, these motivations should be sought outside the job: to lend a service to her husband and children, to take care of others, to devote herself to them. (Artous, 1982) “This is why housewives do not reach fulfillment in their work, because the work is in itself secondary vis-à-vis the main role that allows her to assume such services. A housewife becomes one through the service rendered to husband and children. In other words, she lacks the sense of fulfillment of a personal destiny.” (Artous, 1982)

However, I will argue that domestic work is quite compatible with the theory of exchange value, although it might be characterized as having residual pre-capitalist features. But it can be quantified, measured, calculated, and it is socially necessary (as I shall prove in numbers with present-day examples). It is actually work that has become a labor power that can be sold and bought, with domestic workers and monthly and hourly wages, except that the great majority of women do it for free and almost in slave conditions. This work is also expropriated by capital, as any other pre-capitalist work adjusted by the capitalist mode of production,

such as clandestine textile workshops (with slave work), or women-trafficking, also based on slave work. This work performed by women is also subject to the extraction of surplus value, in which gender difference plays a key role, and where pre-capitalist conditions make it difficult to perceive the mechanisms of exploitation.

In order to analyze the relationship between working class women and “housewives,” the notion of “care economy” has been very useful. This notion has a relatively recent use to refer to a rather undefined space of goods, services, relations, and values related to basic needs, that are relevant for the existence and reproduction of people (Esquivel, 2011). The term “care” indicates that the good or service provided “nurtures” other people, in the sense that it provides physical and symbolic elements that allow them to survive in society. As Corina Rodríguez Enríquez argues, associating the notion of care to the notion of economy implies focusing on those aspects of these spaces that create, or contribute to create economic value. According to her, “the existence of a care economy is essential for the creation of economic value and the actual survival of the mode of accumulation.” In sum, domestic work consists in producing a set of use-goods and services with which women nurture their relatives. With this work, women contribute in fundamental ways to the reproduction of the patriarchal capitalist system, and entirely for free. Here I argue that domestic work is also the catalyst for the increase in productivity, a fact I will analyze in detail below.

Working class women’s paid work hours are usually long, as extenuating as their domestic workday, and underpaid when

compared to either equal or better tasks (Norando, 2013, 2011, 2017, 2018) *vis-à-vis* men. My case studies for working class women in the Argentine textile industry in the interwar era show wage differentials that vary between 60% to 80%, being that women textile workers' jobs were more qualified than men's. I have proven that a skilled female textile worker earned 80% less than a day laborer in some factories. (Norando, 2013) But these are not isolated cases. Lavrin (2005) has carried out studies for Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina where she arrives at the same conclusions.

In the Buenos Aires textile mills during that time, women workers were distributed by employers in strategic positions on account of their sex, in order to earn more profits, that is, the work process was based on gender differences (Norando, 2018a), in order to pay women less. For example, between 1918 and 1939, Argentine textile employers deployed a series of strategies to increase work productivity based exclusively on gender differences: they hired women massively using the full capacity already in place, that is, they did not invest in machinery, but rather in labor, as well as "management technologies." This meant that they used new knowledge about

³ More on this topic in Norando, Verónica, 2018 forthcoming.

⁴ Barrancos, Dora (1997): "La puñalada de Amelia (o cómo se extinguió la discriminación de las mujeres casadas del servicio telefónico)", CEIL-CONICET. Mimeo. Barrancos, Dora (1998): "¿Mujeres comunicadas? Las trabajadoras telefónicas en las décadas de 1930-1940", in Garri-

the scientific organization of work in order to increase women workers' performance,³ something that was replicated in many other sectors, such as telephone operators.⁴ These technologies were based on the idea of increasing the pace of work, measuring production times, increasing the number of machines per female workers, lowering wages, etc. And they did not just

affect women's wages, but rather textile workers' wages in general.

Women's wage work is blatantly reduced because that is not her "natural" place. Thus, she enters production from her own place as domestic worker, which turns her into an undervalued worker, more exposed to low wages, "feminized" jobs, subject to the trials of unemployment even more than men, and massively inserted in so-called "feminine" jobs because "having left their 'natural' sphere, women were not going to be treated as 'full right' wage worker." (Davis, 1981: 227) According to Davis, the price women pay includes long working hours, working conditions beneath normal standards, and highly insufficient wages. And needless to say, lower than men's wages. This shows that women are proletarianized *as women*, that is, in a specific gendered way. Some Marxists have noted this and stated that women worked in systematically under-skilled trades. But they perceived it as a vestige of the inequality inherited from pre-capitalist societies rather than a direct product of the situation that bourgeois society places women in. However, we have proven that this condition continues after two centuries and is quite systematic. Thus, it cannot be explained by the simple survival of inequalities prior to capitalism. Or maybe it is so, but in that survival there is something that adjusted itself and changed: its roots are embedded in the actual

do, Hilda Beatriz/Bravo, María Celia (Eds.), *Temas de Mujeres. Perspectivas de Género. IV Jornadas de Historia de las Mujeres y Estudios del Género*. Tucumán: CEHIM, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, pp. 443-457. Barrancos, Dora (1999): "Moral sexual, sexualidad y mujeres trabajadoras en el período de entreguerras," in Devoto, Fernando/Madero, Marta (Dir.), *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina. La Argentina entre multitudes y soledades. De los años treinta a la actualidad*. Buenos Aires, Taurus, pp. 198-225. Barrancos, Dora (2000): "Vida íntima, escándalo público: las telefonistas en las Décadas 1930 y 1940," in *Mujeres en escena. Actas de las Quintas Jornadas de Historia de las Mujeres y Estudios de Género*. Santa Rosa, Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional de La Pampa, pp. 487-493.

workings of the capitalist system that proletarianizes women as a distinct group vis-à-vis men.

According to Antoine Artous, although Engels rightly notices that the proletarianization of women is defined by the role they occupy in the family, he views it just in the sense that proletarianization takes place “under such conditions that if a woman fulfills her duties in the private service of the family, she is excluded from social production and cannot earn anything; and on the other hand, if she wants to participate in the public industry and earn something on her own, it is impossible for her to fulfill her familial duties.” (Artous, 1982) But Artous emphasizes that this is only one aspect of the problem. When a woman is proletarianized what defines her is not that she has to choose between staying at the private service of the family and seeking employment that includes her in social production. The definitive point is that a woman worker that spends her time outside the home is at once a proletariat and a woman, meaning she not only works in the factory—or in any other sector—and in her home, but also that the way in which she participates in social production is predefined by her sex, on the one hand, and by the gender roles imposed by capitalist patriarchy, on the other. (Artous, 1982)

A good example of this particular way to enter the labor market for women workers is how their wages are perceived by society, and how employers take advantage of that to lower them:

Women textile workers' labor power is so undervalued, that thousands of women workers who leave their homes every day to share with men the more diverse and complex tasks of the factory, receive in exchange wages that in some cases are up to 60% less than those of men (...) What was the employers argument? Women worked to spend it in make-up, so they should not earn more than 2 or 3 pesos per day.⁵

⁵ EOT, March 1941, Year VII, N.39, p.5.

If employers could justify the fact that women workers wages were 60% lower than men's because they used their salary to buy "make-up," there is a society that "believes" the same and abides it. In fact, there were strikes at the turn of the twentieth century in Argentina to kick women out of the labor market (Nari, 1994), aside from many debates between anarchists and socialists about the convenience of women working or not. Many times these arguments stemmed from the idea that women's work reduced the wages of all workers. There are many more aspects to analyze as regards gender representations, but that would take us to a different discussion. What matters is that employers justify their actions in that women spend their wages in trivial expenses, precisely because she is a woman, who is already trivialized on a social level.

I will advance now some preliminary ideas that attempt to build up a theory of the specific exploitation of men and women (although in this research I have not yet delved in depth on the case of men). In the case of women, domestic work is part of their patriarchal capitalist exploitation, as we will see below.

Class Women's Specific Exploitation in Patriarchal Capitalism.

Although briefly, I have already described the theories as regards the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, oppression and exploitation, class and gender, that have been debated from the 1960s into the late 1980s in particular.

My own standpoint as regards these debates is still in the stage of an exploration and I submit it here as a work-in-progress so that other researchers might contribute their critiques in order to shape a theoretical framework of patriarchal capitalist exploitation that transcends intersectionalities—which actually exists—and focuses on the specific unions that buttress exploitation. I believe that capitalism and patriarchy are part of the same mode of production; they are one system in which capitalism adjusted patriarchy to its convenience. And although domestic work is pre-capitalist work, it increases surplus value directly, not indirectly, as I will explain in this section. Therefore, capitalism and patriarchy form one system of exploitation that I call patriarchal capitalism.

My hypothesis is that in patriarchal capitalism, domestic work plays the central role and that it produces value and surplus value. I believe that what brought confusion among scholars is that domestic work appears to be pre-capitalist labor. Although domestic work produces use value—which in Marxist terms would mean that it cannot transcend the fact that it is concrete work and thus

become human labor—, in the abstract social sense of the word, what capitalist society considers “work,” **it does** fall under the rules that govern the capitalist mode of production (contrary to the postulates of socialist feminism, especially Artous, 1982). As I understand the theory of value, “[Labor], as any other commodity, already had a value before it was thrown into circulation, since in order to produce it, a definite amount of social work was needed”. (Marx, 2010: 209), domestic work defines something as important as the value of labor power: “the value of labor power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner. Thus, it also varies with the value of the means of subsistence, with the amount of work required for their production”. (Marx, 2010: 209) What Marx failed to see is that the means of subsistence are largely worked within the home, through the domestic work of working women.

One of my central hypotheses is that this is one of the major contradictions of the entire patriarchal capitalist social system as regards dialectical materialism: domestic work is labor that is governed by pre-capitalist rules, but it is one of the most profitable works in the system, the one that renders more surplus value directly. And not just by reproducing the labor power, as I will elaborate later. As Marx describes it very well, modes of production maintain labor formats of previous modes of production and adjust them. I believe that there is no work in the capitalist mode of production that does not create surplus value, either directly or indirectly, although maybe in some cases it is more difficult to grasp how the

mechanism of a specific exploitation that creates such surplus value works. The notion of intersectionality brings us closer, but it is time to go beyond it and focus where intersectionalities fit together and merge as one.

I will refer now to women workers. Although the literature speaks of double exploitation, or oppression and exploitation, I strongly disagree. As I see it, both notions are wrong because they divide **women's labor power** in two, an impossible feat. Labor power is one, it is working women's labor power and it is by putting it at work that they receive a wage. A woman worker appears to have two workdays, but this is not her reality. As I see it, she has a very long workday and what is important here is what she does with **her labor power**: this is what matters to capital, **how she is paid and how much**.

Wage represents the value of the labor power measured in a particular, historical time (Marx, 2010). But this notion bears an explanation, and more so in the case of working women. In his writings, Marx did not delve on what I understand is one of the foundations of capitalist exploitation —women's free work— (Federicci, 2010). This is one of my strongest critiques, even if I agree with a large part of his arguments regarding value theory and dialectical materialism as a method. But we cannot emphasize enough that a large part of a woman's workday is not compensated at all, and that women's (free) work is one of the foundations on which the entire capitalist exploitation is based on (Federicci, 2010).

Women workers are forced to sell the only thing they own to satisfy their needs: their labor power, since they lack the ownership of the means of production. Capitalists are not interested in a woman's work or in her as a woman, but in her capacity as a human being to work; this is what they buy/hire as capitalists-women's labor power to create profit. Thus, human needs force working women to work, and the means of existence that she acquires for her subsistence have a value; therefore the value of labor power is defined by the cost of the means needed to sustain the life of (male/female) workers,⁶ as well as by the value of the unpaid domestic work that women do. The monetary value of labor power is the price of the labor power, which is always much lower than what it really takes to pay for their subsistence, because it rests upon the free work women do that generates most of the subsistence goods for workers at large.

⁶ More on theoretical advances in Norando (2018), forthcoming.

Women workers spend one shift of their workday in any sector of the labor market (let us consider an 8 hour workday, using contemporary data). Then they go home and do the house chores. An estimate of the number of hours that working women devote to domestic work puts it around fifty hours a week⁷ (Girar, 1968), whereas other studies in Argentina (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2013) show that working women⁸ occupy 44.8 hours per week to unpaid domestic work. As we can see, just a small difference despite the time passed between the two studies. We also have estimates for Argentina of the average social time devoted to housework: 5.7 hours per day (INDEC, 2013).

⁷ No specification of industries or services.

⁸ No specification of industries or services.

The monetary values of this work have also been estimated: in Peru a national survey showed that the unpaid domestic work done by Peruvian women is worth USD \$31,121,000 millions of dollars per year, or \$101,621,000 millions of Peruvian soles (ENUT, 2010).

Unfortunately I do not have precise data for the interwar period, although I can estimate some variables. Women textile workers spent 10 hours in the factory; the time estimated for actual domestic work is 7 hours per day. Thus, Argentine women textile workers had a 17 hour workday divided as follows: 10 hour paid work, and 7 hours of free work per day. Based on women's labor power as my category of analysis, for this long workday only divided by space, between 1918 and 1939 women textile workers in Argentina received wages that according to official sources went from AR

⁹ The DNT explains that it is not "stating that the budget composition satisfies the needs of the type of family under consideration, but rather it reflects the real situation of workers that live under the indicated wage conditions, in such families". DNT, Boletín informativo, May/June 1936, Year XVIII, N. 196-197, Época VI, p. 40608.

¹⁰ EOT, July 1939, Year VI, N. 27, p. 4.

\$1.80 to AR \$4 pesos per day;⁹ organized labor places that on an average of AR \$2 pesos per day.¹⁰ I would like to reflect this in clear numbers in order to better understand the conditions of women textile workers. The National Department of Labor (DNT) published its cost of living statistics for April 1936 (Norando, 2013; Norando-Wertheimer Becich, 2018; and Norando 2018a forthcoming). According to this agency, the budget of a working class family (two parents and three children under 14) was AR \$133.89 pesos to cover basic expenses. The average wage for the "Head of Household" (in the survey referring to a male) was AR \$120, that is AR \$4 pesos per day. According to all sources —organized labor spoke of AR \$57 monthly; or an average

of AR \$78.3 according to official sources— based on an average of 27 workdays since Saturdays were workdays, women workers’ wages were still way below the cost of living acknowledged by the National Department of Labor: AR \$133.89 pesos. This meant that neither men nor women were able to cover the cost of living expenses, so I argue that this was possible because of women’s unpaid domestic work, though not just by itself but due to its specific exploitation mechanism for women. Even so, “domestic work creates a large amount of socially necessary production that nevertheless is not considered actual work” (Rowbotham, 1977; Artous, 1982).

Taking all this into account, for their extended workday —that allowed for Argentine textile wages to be extremely low, more so in the case of women since they were always paid less than men (as shown in previous case studies)— women textile workers were paid a ridiculous wage:

Women Textile Workers Workday in 1938: Wages & Surplus Value

Wage	Surplus Value for paid work and unpaid domestic work
4hours	13 hours.
17 hour workday	

It goes without saying that working women's wages have never been enough to subsist. Actually these wages conceal an amount of free work that allows women (and men) to make ends meet. In other others, their low wages conceal a non-wage, or a wage that remains unpaid for a work actually performed that is fundamental to capitalist exploitation. That is precisely why it can remain unpaid. Thus, in patriarchal capitalism, wages **conceal** (women's) free work, which allows the total wages of the entire working class to be increasingly lower. This is possible because there are increasingly more women entering the labor market in all sectors and more so in those that are paid the worst, therefore, women's workday is increasingly longer. This fosters an increased reduction in wages because domestic work still exists in the same proportion that women enter the labor market: it is a wheel that progressively increases production, surplus value, and capital profits.

The domestic work of working class women who do not work outside the home is done in a more relaxed manner and is better distributed throughout the week: for instance, she might not work on weekends, or she may choose not to do it. But although she works fewer hours, she still does her job with her husband's wage, which is not enough to pay for domestic work. Thus, all working class women are the ones who do the domestic work that constantly increases surplus value in general, regardless of the fact that there is not a work contract between them and capital. Women who work outside the home fare the worst, because they have a longer workday and capitalists appropriate directly from their domestic work. Women

who do not work outside their home have a shorter workday and the capitalists for whom their husbands work appropriate their labor through the wages paid to them. In sum, all working class wages conceal a non-wage for a workday or part of a workday that goes unpaid and still increases surplus value.

Domestic work is never-ending, and there are increasingly more workdays that conceal a non-wage. This is clearly a gendered class problem, so we need to keep on discussing these ideas on a theoretical level: I argue that all domestic work in society rests on working class women for the minimum wage. It is women workers who must perform it, since their income does not allow them to pay for it, aside from the fact that many of them are also “domestic workers”, meaning that they do it for a wage. Let us not forget that this is one of the worst paid jobs and among the most undervalued because domestic work is perceived by society at large, and even by women, as no actual work. Thus, the domestic work that sustains and reproduces society, and increases capital surplus value rests solely on working class women, and not all women in general, because there is a clear gendered class difference. Domestic work is not “tout court”, even if bourgeois women supervise it, the big difference is that they do not carry it on their shoulders.

The fact that the social workday is longer with the same amount of domestic work multiplying global profits is a key factor in the increase of productivity in capitalist development that was overlooked by Marx. The profit rate rises because the workday is longer, and as time passes, less is paid for it. I am not arguing that

this is the only factor that contributes to the expansion of surplus value, but I am convinced that it is a key mechanism that deserves studying and assessment. My own observations point to the fact that it is actually one of the basic factors: for instance in Peru, domestic work assessments show that it amounts to 25% of the GDP (ENUT, 2010)

As regards the use value of labor power—which is the skill that any (male/ female) worker has to create a value greater than their labor power during the work process—in the case of women textile workers in my case study, is even higher since it is the combination of what they produce at the factory and in the home. This characteristic of female labor power is precisely creating (female) surplus value and use value. Since it is part of the same workday and the same workforce, it is the same surplus value and thus a direct one. This brings us to the core of previous debates, that domestic work creates direct surplus value, because it is work performed by a (female) person, with her labor power, in the same workday and for a salary. Thus it is not created indirectly, as Sercombe argued (1974).

Capitalists benefit precisely from this set of surplus value provided by women, because through it the general surplus value is much higher than the one extracted from male workers. Therefore, this is the basis for the specific exploitation of working women, who work an entire workday—in which part of that work is performed in the public sphere and another part in the domestic sphere—for a very low salary, for unusually extended hours, and whose work in

turn contributes to the subsistence of society at large. In the case of women who do not work outside the home and just do domestic work, they receive just a tiny portion of their husbands' wage. So, I argue that in the case of working class women, their wages **conceal a non-wage** that accounts for their extended workday.

As soon as working class women have to sell their labor power to the capitalist, or when they have to do domestic work for free, once their work is in action it immediately ceases to belong to them and is appropriated by the employer/capitalist, even if there is no contract mediating with a capitalist from any sector. I have analyzed the textile case because textiles employers have taken advantage of working class women's domestic work paying them (and men) less. Thus it is not necessary for them to "sell" their domestic work with a contract in order for capitalists to appropriate it. Since the latter are the owners of (male /female) workers' labor power, they also own the goods/merchandise/values/services produced during the workday. This is why it is not individual "men" who exploit women and why there is no thing such as a class of exploited women,¹¹ but rather a specific exploitation of women by capital. Women's work at home is expropriated by capital.¹²

¹¹ As stated by Christine Delphy (1985).

¹² I am deeply grateful to my discussions with Dr. Andrea Andújar who helped me organize my writings and ideas on the subject.

What we need to understand is that capitalism is patriarchal and as such the system exploits men and women in specific ways, because it develops gender differences based on class-based sexual differences. These inequalities are used by capital to increase its profits. What I am describing here is women's specific form of

exploitation. Capital exploits women directly, and this exploitation is two-folded, not just the direct appropriation of surplus value from her work outside the home. It is not done through men, because it is women's labor power that is at stake, not where she performs it, either in the public or private spheres. Capital does not care if women are doing their work at home, even if there are domestic workers working in private homes and even if there is a contract it is a just detail. For capital it is a detail: slave workers in today's textiles industry have no contracts and this work anyway generates surplus value, in the same way that domestic work does.

Working women's workday is one, because a woman's labor power is one; it may be divided by a trip from factory to home, but the trip is part of her work and she always works for patriarchal capital. One part of a woman's workday is mediated by the market and there is (sometimes) a contract and a wage; the other part of the workday is invisibilized, there is no actual contract, no wage, it does not exist in the eyes of society and even in her own eyes. It is totally naturalized that women must do domestic work, not just working class women, but all women; the only difference is that some are qualified to earn a salary that allows them to pay another women to do it for them so they can avoid domestic work (though never entirely, since they have to become employers of domestic work). This is the state of my research today, small advances that need to go still a long way and that will only produce meaningful results as long as it remains a collective endeavor.

Closing Remarks and New Openings

All the questions that led me backwards in time, and further the debates between Marxism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, and vulgar Marxism among others, were prompted by the first question in my doctoral dissertation: what were the experiences of women textile workers in Argentina in the inter-war era like? After finishing my degree and starting my post-doctoral research, I still have many doubts and unanswered questions.

I believe that to continue empirical and theoretical studies of how exploitation mechanisms work in contemporary society from a dialectical materialism and gender studies standpoint is a fundamental task for us scholars. What goes on in other industrial sectors, where the workforce is not largely female? What about men's specific exploitation? How are these specificities, which are actually just one, combined? We need to compound ethnic intersectionalities and relate them to gendered class exploitation to see where they join and become one, since I would not argue that African, Latin America, and Asian working class women are in the same position as a (white) American woman worker. We need to study it, but analyzing the union where capital acts upon these inequalities in order to extract increasingly more surplus value. We need to relate it with the international division of labor and get into the specific fabric of patriarchal capitalist exploitation that combines old and new methodologies of exploitation. What **is sure**, at least from my conclusions so far, is that one of the foundations of the increase of

surplus value at large lies in women's specific exploitation. We may find particular degrees of that phenomenon, related to specific intersectionalities associated to ethnicity, geographical position vis-à-vis the international division of labor, and others.

There is a need to expand the research to many more case studies in order to delve deeply on these matters. As yet, the gendering of society is not rooted in intellectual consciousness and this becomes a serious problem, because social scientists see socio-historical realities through patriarchal lenses that prevent them to perceive how exploitation works today and how it has worked in the past.

Scholars need to carry out specific studies, from different regions, work sectors, etc., as well as theorize on how the system adjusts pre-capitalist work and turns it into surplus value without changing its shape. If we looked at slave work, for instance: does women-trafficking not create surplus value? Do enslaved immigrants working in clandestine workshops do not create surplus value? Is this a type of work whose characteristics are fully capitalist? Are there work contracts mediating these work relations? What role do gender differences play? What about prostitution? In every kind of work considered as pre-capitalist, where there are no labor contracts, no wage relationships, and that takes place outside the labor market, gender differences play a very important role—that of increasing surplus value—. This is my intuition, prompted by my observations in the case studies I analyzed. I am now studying the work process in the textile industry and I am able to state that it was based entirely on gender differences. (Norando, 2018)

If we want to analyze how the patriarchal capitalist system works, we need to build a solid reference framework on a theoretical conceptual level that does not disregard very valuable theories, such as Marxism and feminism, because they have provided us with the most precious tools we have to understand our societies. But we cannot do this alone; we need a collective and interdisciplinary effort. There is a lot of work to do and we are still at the beginning. Argentine scholars of the social history of work have already started although there is a long way to go yet. We have endless questions and countless paths opened: I sincerely hope that many more will walk with us in this journey.

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