



BRILL

Situating Sexuality in Social Reproduction

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Abstract

The years since the rise of gay liberation in 1969 have seen remarkable changes in the realm of sexuality. Lesbians and gay men have won important rights and attained a cultural visibility that would have been impossible to imagine even thirty years ago. Yet these rights are limited, and apply only to specific sections of those who face exclusion, discrimination or violence on the basis of their queerness in the realm of gender and/or sexuality.

Keywords

sexuality – social reproduction – divisions of labour

The announcement that MI5 was at the top of the 2016 Stonewall list of gay-friendly employers in Britain nicely summarises the contradictions of contemporary queer sexual politics in much of the Global North.¹ On the one hand, it is a remarkable change given that the security agency banned lesbians and gays from employment up to 1991. Once cast as a Cold War security threat, lesbians and gays have become insiders in the so-called ‘war on terror.’ In much of the Global North and some parts of the Global South, lesbians and gay men have won important rights and attained a cultural visibility that would have been impossible to imagine in the 1960s. Yet these rights fall far short of the wide-ranging visions of sexual liberation that inspired activists in the 1960s and 1970s.

The impact of this regime of sexual rights has been highly uneven, disproportionately benefiting men and better-off layers of the population in

1 Norton-Taylor and Smith 2016.

metropolitan centres of the Global North. Meanwhile many women, trans people, queers of colour, younger people, migrants, people with limited incomes and Indigenous people continue to face gendered violence, sexual assault, marginalisation and sexual silencing. Yet there is little indication on the current political horizons of transformative struggles oriented around theories and practices of sexual freedom that point beyond sexual liberalism and equality rights.

The years since the 1960s have demonstrated the capacity of capitalism to absorb struggles around gender and sexuality that were once seen as revolutionary. Indeed, capitalism has proven to have a more robust sexual appetite than its opponents might have imagined. Yet, I want to argue here that anti-capitalist theory is crucial to renewing visions of sexual liberation that point beyond equality. Specifically, in this article I will work towards a theoretical approach that situates sexuality within a social-reproduction frame, showing how inequalities rooted in relations of production and reproduction shape the terrain of sexual politics in capitalist societies.

A defining condition of sexuality in capitalist societies is that members of the working class own their bodies, in contrast for example to slaves who were bound to masters, or peasants bound to lords and their estates. Yet this embodied freedom is profoundly limited, as capitalists own and control the key productive resources required to transform nature and sustain life. Members of the working class gain access to the necessities of life only through submitting themselves to capitalist exploitation when members of a household sell their capacity to work in exchange for a wage. Marx wrote that under capitalism, the 'worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, . . . he is free of all the objects needed for the realization . . . of his labour-power.'² This form of subordination frames sexuality in capitalist societies, producing an experience of embodiment marked at once by freedom and compulsion.

Social-reproduction feminism maps this contradictory freedom and compulsion in relation to processes of class formation that are gendered, racialised and sexualised. Members of the working class do not all partake of 'freedom in the double sense' in the same way, but face different forms of autonomy and coercion based on their location within dominant divisions of labour organised around differentiated processes of dispossession. Women, whether employed in wage labour or not, tend to have disproportionate responsibility for household labour and caregiving which has a great bearing on their embodied autonomy. People of colour are inserted into hierarchical

² Marx 1977, p. 273.

divisions of paid and unpaid labour in ways that reflect racist degradation, providing a very different frame of freedom and repression.

Struggles for sexual rights that neither get to the heart of the contradictory freedom and compulsion that characterise embodiment in capitalist societies nor challenge the hierarchies produced by differentiated dispossession end up constructing a limited version of sexual rights founded on existing inequalities. Specifically, struggles for sexual rights since the 1960s have been increasingly captured within an understanding of sexuality grounded in the agency of formally-equal autonomous individuals operating through contractual consent. Social-reproduction feminism casts light on the persistence of inequality and unfreedom in the realm of sexuality despite the gains of the last fifty years, as formal equality, individual autonomy and contractual relations within capitalist societies are founded upon subordination through processes of differentiated dispossession and hierarchical divisions of labour.

The Social Reproduction of the Homosexual

Social-reproduction feminism has been underused as a tool of analysis in the field of sexuality. To date, the social-reproduction frame has been used primarily to examine the specific character of women's work in capitalist societies, understood both as paid labour in employment and unpaid labour to sustain households. As the papers in this volume demonstrate, people are now using the social-reproduction frame much more broadly to understand the relationship between hierarchical divisions of labour in production and reproduction and the dynamics of inequality based on class, gender, sexuality and racialisation.

Peter Drucker pointed to the importance of the social-reproduction frame in the understanding of sexuality when he argued that historical materialism provides 'a method by which the basic matrix of gender and kinship can be understood in the context of specific modes of production and reproduction.'³ Sexuality is embedded in cycles of production and reproduction that shape experiences of embodiment, direct life-energies and frame visions of freedom and human potential. The social-reproduction frame provides powerful insights into the way divisions of labour in paid and unpaid work and processes of differentiated dispossession contribute to the organisation of sexuality and the understanding of sexual freedom.

3 Drucker 2015, p. 43.

Social-reproduction feminism is founded on Marx's understanding that human life is organised around cooperative work to transform nature in order to fulfil people's needs and wants. The social organisation of this interchange with nature, which varies tremendously through history, frames human life-activity: 'The ways people co-operate to provide for their daily and future needs, combined with the techniques and materials at their disposal, establish the framework within which all human activity takes place.'⁴ Marxist-feminists developed the social-reproduction frame in response to the dominant streams of Marxism that generally reduced the analysis of this cooperative work in capitalist societies to an exclusive focus on the sphere of social production and the relations of wage labour. This one-sided perspective missed crucial unpaid labour-processes performed primarily by women in the household that sustained and renewed the working class. Johanna Brenner argued, 'Marxists have focussed their attention almost entirely on the production of things. Marxist feminists have broadened this notion of necessary labor to include the care and nurturing of people – we use the term "social reproduction."⁵

Brenner here is using the term 'social reproduction' in the specific sense of generational reproduction, sustaining members of the working class through the life-cycle, including raising children. Social reproduction is also used in the more general sense of mapping processes of class formation through cycles of production and reproduction. Lise Vogel, for example, cast generational reproduction as a condition of social reproduction: 'Some process that meets the ongoing personal needs of the bearers of labor power as human individuals is therefore a condition of social reproduction, as is some process that replaces workers who have died or withdrawn from the active work force.'⁶ Social reproduction refers both to the whole cyclical process of class formation and to the specific moment in that process when the life-energies used up in processes of social production are restored.

Sexuality is constructed in relation to social reproduction. The emergence of homosexuality as an identity provides a powerful example of the ways in which changing relations of production and reproduction transform the field of sexuality. Same-sex sexual practices and gender non-conformity have taken many forms across the range of human societies. It is uniquely under capitalism that people were categorised in terms of sexual identities based on the specialisation of desire (homosexual or heterosexual). Gayle Rubin wrote, 'The idea of a type of person who is homosexual is a product of the nineteenth

4 Armstrong and Armstrong 1983, p. 9.

5 Brenner 2000, p. 2.

6 Vogel 1983, p. 139.

century.⁷ Only later, in response to this labelling of homosexual identities, was 'heterosexuality' developed to name the different-sex sexual formation that was presumed to be 'normal.'⁸

Sexuality is organised socially through the sex/gender system, 'the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied.'⁹ The sex/gender system is social and dynamic: 'Sex/gender systems are not ahistorical emanations of the human mind; they are products of historical human activity.'¹⁰

The social-reproduction frame provides crucial tools for examining 'the historical human activity' that produces sex/gender systems within capitalist societies. John D'Emilio did pioneering work in the analysis of gay and lesbian existence in terms of social reproduction, arguing that the distinction between private (reproduction through unpaid labour in the household) and public (wage labour in the realm of social production) created the possibility for the emergence of homosexuality as a way of life. While homosexual practices grounded in kinship relations had a long history across a spectrum of human societies, the specific relations of capitalism made possible new forms of specialised lesbian and gay identities by separating kinship from social production.

Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labour, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex.¹¹

Homosexuality emerged in the private realm, as distinguished from the space of social production. The gay-liberation movement that began with the Stonewall riot in 1969 claimed public space in new ways. This articulation of public and private derived from the character of social reproduction. Within capitalist societies, processes of social reproduction take on a specific character built around an articulation of social production as 'public' and household reproduction as 'private.'

7 Rubin 2011, p. 89.

8 Katz 1995.

9 Rubin 1975, p. 159.

10 Rubin 1975, p. 204.

11 D'Emilio 1992, p. 8.

The formally free members of the working class have the private responsibility for keeping themselves alive and raising the next generation. Marx wrote, 'The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the workers' drives for self-preservation and propagation.'¹² Working-class households use the wage (or a wage-substitute such as social assistance or other monetised activities such as 'street-vending, selling sex and independent domestic production') to sustain themselves through a variety of household labour processes that are disproportionately cast as the responsibility of women.¹³

In practice, employers and state policy-makers discovered that they could not simply privatise the responsibility for social reproduction and still get the working class they wanted and needed. State policy-makers became convinced that leaving working-class households to their own devices produced communities that were unhealthy, immoral and ultimately resistant to the regime of wage labour. Driven in part by pressure from below, as members of the working class fought for the right to reproduce themselves, states partially nationalised social reproduction through social policy, with the development of programmes ranging from public health to compulsory education and from unemployment insurance to public housing.¹⁴ The welfare state was organised around a gendered division of labour that cast women as caregivers primarily performing unpaid reproductive labour in the household. Women's access to welfare-state benefits and services came primarily through their relationships with men.¹⁵

Sexual regulation developed as part of social policy, for example through laws that made prostitution and male homosexuality illegal.¹⁶ Social policy and sexual regulation advanced into the formally private realm of the household. Thus, movements for sexual freedom under capitalism have historically included 'the right to privacy' in their demands. The Right to Privacy Committee was, for example, the key coordinating body in the militant mobilisation after the 1982 mass arrest of gay men in Toronto following a police raid on gay bathhouses.¹⁷ The configuration of public and private grounded in capitalist relations of social reproduction has played an important role in

¹² Marx 1977, p. 718.

¹³ Ferguson and McNally 2015, p. 2.

¹⁴ Sears 1999, p. 92.

¹⁵ Gordon 1994.

¹⁶ Kinsman 1996, pp. 108–11.

¹⁷ Hannon 1982, p. 281.

struggles around sexual identity and freedom. The idea of ‘coming out’ is itself a commitment to bringing homosexuality from the private realm where it developed into public space.

Social Reproduction, Sexuality and Capitalist Restructuring

The construction of the homosexual was made possible by the transformation of social reproduction brought about by the rise of capitalism, including the distinction between the public realm of social production and the private realm of the household. The subsequent history of homosexuality has been organised around changes in the matrix of production and reproduction through processes of capitalist restructuring. I cannot set out a detailed history here, but rather am using some key transformations to demonstrate the relationship between capitalist restructuring and sexual formations.

Peter Drucker showed the impact of capitalist restructuring on the field of sexuality, mapping the way sexual formations changed through a succession of regimes of accumulation.¹⁸ Drucker focuses on three regimes of accumulation: classical imperialism (1870s–1930s), Fordism (1930s–1980s) and neoliberalism (beginning in the 1980s). Each of these regimes of accumulation was organised around a set of ruling-class strategies at the level of the state and of the enterprise, a repertoire of mobilisation among the oppressed and exploited, a particular organisation of imperialist relations, and specific ways of sustaining life through household, family or other structures. There were distinctive ‘same-sex formations’ associated with each of these regimes of accumulation.

The idea of the homosexual and heterosexual identities initially developed in the era of classical imperialism, ‘as a specifically heterosexual family structure and a conception of heterosexual romance became central to social reproduction and consumption.’¹⁹ This organisation of workplace and household developed with the intensification of industrialisation, the consolidation of global imperialist projects and an increase in urbanisation. Together, these changes produced the ‘invert-dominant’ regime in which homosexual identity was largely confined to gender non-conformists, so that masculine women and feminine men were the backbone of homosexual communities while masculine men and feminine women might combine heterosexual marriage with same-sex engagements. Homosexual relationships

18 Drucker 2015.

19 Drucker 2015, p. 56.

tended to be polarised along lines of gender, race and/or class, for example between a butch lesbian and a femme.

The gender polarisation in homosexual relations was part of a broader pattern that also shaped heterosexual households. Stephanie Coontz argues that this period saw the 'sexual division of labour, inculcated and upheld in the family, extended beyond it to organize the *social* division of labor.'²⁰ Women and men tended to operate in different spheres, whether in social production or reproduction, though these varied by race, class and colonial status.

The Fordist regime (1930s–1980s), which was marked by the rise of the welfare state and new forms of imperialism based on national independence, produced the 'gay dominant' organisation of same-sex relations. In this mode, lesbian/gay identity was defined primarily by orientation of desire rather than gendered identity and relationships were less likely to be polarised along gender lines.²¹ This shift in same-sex formation was part of a more general depolarisation of gender associated with new patterns of heteronormativity that were less gendered-polarised and yet built around women's disproportionate responsibility for household reproduction.

The rise of the neoliberal regime since the 1980s has been associated with the 'homonormative-dominant' formation, in which certain same-sex relations were official sanctioned in some places, intensifying divides between those who benefitted from these rights (e.g. married lesbian and gay couples) and other queers who did not.²² The neoliberal period saw more women engaged in wage labour, driven by the reorganisation of work and the stagnation or decline in wages. Yet women continued to have the primary responsibility for household labour. The result was an extraordinary time-crunch, particularly for mothers facing an intense combination of paid and unpaid labour.²³ The neoliberal era produced a contradictory combination of formal gender equality and lesbian/gay rights with substantive inequality grounded largely in the division of unpaid labour but also including unequal pay and barriers blocking women's full participation in public life. Even in heterosexual households with relatively equitable divisions of labour, the introduction of children tends to produce gendered divisions of labour. Bonnie Fox discusses the wide range of cultural and material factors that generate gendered divisions of labour as children arrive in the household, concluding: 'So many factors push heterosexual

20 Coontz 1988, p. 330.

21 Drucker 2015.

22 Ibid.

23 Coontz 1992, p. 267.

couples to divide their work and responsibility between them that gender-based divisions seem inevitable.’²⁴

Desire, Gender and Divisions of Labour

Particular sexual regimes, each with their own normative configurations, have developed in the context of the organisation of social reproduction at given moments in the history of capitalist restructuring. Gender relations do not, in a simple way, pre-exist divisions of labour but are constituted through the differentiated work people do given dominant divisions of labour. Dorothy Smith argued that women’s focus on particular forms of embodied caregiving labour developed specific grounded ways of knowing and being. Men became associated with more abstract ways of knowing on the basis of their relative disengagement from caregiving practices: ‘Full participation in the abstract mode of action requires liberation from attending to needs in the concrete and particular.’²⁵ Specific embodied experiences of work become part of our way of knowing the world, and divisions of labour tend to create different repertoires of doing and knowing.

The construction of gender through divisions of labour creates different forms of normativity associated with particular forms of labour. Halberstram notes specifically the ways female masculinity can be constructed through work, so that ‘some rural women may be considered masculine by urban standards, and their masculinity may simply have to do with the fact that they engage in more manual labor than other women or live within a community with very different gender standards.’²⁶ A woman’s repertoire of masculinity can be ‘as much a product of her work as her desire.’²⁷

There is not, then, a simple relationship between gender non-conformity and sexual orientation. Yet the relationship between gender, sexuality and desire is so naturalised that we often fail to problematise it, even in radical analysis. Tamsin Wilton argues that it is important to trouble the naturalised relationship between sexuality and gender: ‘Given that the overwhelming majority of human sexual acts are not reproductive in intent at all, any strong erotic preference premised on the sex of one’s partner requires explanation.’²⁸

24 Fox 2009, p. 154.

25 Smith 1990, p. 18.

26 Halberstram 1998, pp. 57–8.

27 Halberstram 1998, p. 58.

28 Wilton 2004, p. 79.

The separation of sexual activity and reproduction has been an important feature of capitalist development.²⁹ There is no obvious reason, given this separation, why erotic desire should be oriented around the compass of gender duality.

It is *because* this duality, blurred and inexact as it may be in biology, has such marked social and cultural significance that it becomes almost impossible to identify with any certainty what it is about men-in-general or women-in-general that any individual would find erotically pleasing, stimulating or repugnant.³⁰

The continued primacy of gender duality in the realm of sexuality requires explanation. The social-reproduction frame contributes important dimensions to our understanding of the role of gender duality in the construction of desire in capitalist societies, highlighting the role of differentiated work and hierarchies of dispossession in constructing gender and sexuality. The character of gender relations formed around specific divisions of labour has been particularly important in shaping the contours of sexuality.

Gender normativity is not a single standard applied across the whole society over time, but varies historically and according to social location. Anne Balay found in her rich study of lesbians, gays and transgender workers in steel plants in Indiana that women were expected to assimilate to the dominant masculine norms: 'To "fit in" at work they need to be masculine, to talk about sex in ways that objectify women, and endure severe and hazardous working conditions without whining.'³¹ The rhythms and gendered patterns of work in these steel plants created a particular form of closet for many LGBTQ workers, who were caught between the dangers of disclosure in a culture of masculinity and the stress on conversation about life outside work to create fellowship in a difficult work environment and fill up the time in moments where work was slow. 'Work traditions of gossip, small talk, and cooperation in basic steel mills serve to keep queers invisible, often marginalized and isolated.'

This kind of gendered and sexualised workplace culture is not simply the result of dominant gender norms, but is at times developed deliberately as a feature of management strategies. Lewchuk examined the deliberate investment of Ford Motor Company management in a specifically masculine

29 Arruzza 2015, p. 49.

30 Wilton 2004, p. 80.

31 Balay 2014, p. 77.

workforce as the regime of mass production was being established.³² The company developed campaigns to encourage employees to associate masculine pride with an ability to endure pain, noise, dirt and monotony. Before mass production, masculinity had often been associated with pride in particular craft-skills which play only a small part in mass-production processes. The shift to mass production saw management contribute to the development of new forms of masculinity associated with the ability to care for dependents and to endure intolerable conditions of work without complaint.

Everyday working practices are important in constructing sexualised as well as gendered selves. Carolyn Steedman notes that the experience of being an elementary school teacher had a great impact on her erotic embodiment: 'My body died during those years, the little fingers that caught my hand, the warmth of a child leaning and reading her book to me somehow prevented all the other meeting of bodies.'³³ The contrast between the intimacy associated with certain forms of caring labour and the compartmentalised hardening associated with much industrial work can lead to very polarised sensibilities in terms of gendered and sexualised embodiment. Wilton reports that the heterosexual women she interviewed frequently expressed 'extraordinarily low expectations of men, of heterosex and of marriage. For many, the fact a man is neither violent nor drunk is good enough reason to marry him.'³⁴ This includes limited erotic expectations:

Expectations of male sexual proficiency were also low for many women, and there seemed to be a tendency to accept that men's physical presence – their bodies, hygiene and personal habits – was unlikely to be a source of pleasure.³⁵

The gendered codes that create a particular physical presence, including standards of hygiene and personal habits, are not eternal features of manhood, but specific patterns grounded in ways of working and living that can be understood through the social-reproduction frame. The heteronormative is, then, not simply ideological but is grounded in bodily practices that depend on one's location within particular divisions of labour organised around hierarchies of dispossession.

32 Lewchuk 1993.

33 Steedman 1985, p. 18.

34 Wilton 2004, p. 99.

35 Wilton 2004, pp. 99–100.

The heteronormative reflects racialised divisions of labour and hierarchies of dispossession. African-Americans, for example, were important innovators in the realm of sexual freedom in the early twentieth century, in part due to the historical legacy of the struggle for emancipation from slavery. The slavery regime was founded on routinised violence, sexual assault and the destruction of personal relationships. Emancipation produced a certain freedom in the personal realm, but little improvement in economic or cultural opportunity due to the persistence of racism. Angela Davis wrote, 'Sexuality thus was one of the first domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed.'³⁶

It is in part on the basis of divisions of paid and unpaid labour in the organisation of social reproduction that heteronormativity (and later, homonormativity) was racialised. Roderick Ferguson notes, 'As racial differences in how people make a living affected domestic life, producing increasingly diverse forms of family, family became an index of those differences.'³⁷ African-American family forms tended to be different from particular class-based white models that were established as normative. African-American families tended to be non-heteronormative, given the character of work, experiences of migration and forms of segregation. African-American women, for example, tended to be disproportionately engaged in paid employment in ways that did not match heteronormative expectations. Queerness in African-American communities was thus organised in relation to non-heteronormative family forms: 'Though African-American homosexuality, unlike its heterosexual counterpart, symbolised a rejection of heterosexuality, neither could claim heteronormativity.'³⁸

Migrants similarly often live in non-heteronormative families, as they frequently find themselves scattered across households in different geographic locations, sustained in part by the transfer of remittances. Sue Ferguson and David McNally remind us of 'the complex patterns by which labour migration has become central to the reproduction of hundreds of millions of working-class households, whose well-being relies on wage remittances.'³⁹

The politics of heteronormativity and homonormativity are thus grounded in divisions of labour and hierarchies of dispossession. Indeed, the very idea of sexual freedom tends to be associated with the autonomous sexual actor who is free to choose, to consent (or not), to enjoy. This depends on a specific model

36 Davis 1999, p. 5.

37 Ferguson 2004, p. 86.

38 Ferguson 2004, p. 87.

39 Ferguson and McNally 2015, p. 17.

of autonomous personhood that is historically located within gendered and racialised regimes of dispossession and divisions of labour.

Sarah Ahmed discusses this conception of sexual freedom in terms of movement, the flow that results from being untied and unencumbered. 'The idealisation of movement, or transformation of movement into a fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as *not free in the same way*.'⁴⁰ Regimes of differential dispossession and divisions of labour mean that not everyone is equally autonomous in this sense.

This vision of sexual freedom 'may exclude others, those who have attachments that are not readable as queer, or indeed those who may lack the (cultural as well as economic) capital to support the "risk" of maintaining anti-normativity as a permanent orientation.'⁴¹ This vision of sexual freedom in terms of autonomy and lack of attachments is deeply connected to masculinity, whiteness and wealth. Relative to men, women are tied to others through caregiving responsibilities that require different practices in many areas of life.

Dominant divisions of labour tend to freight lesbians and gay men with different caregiving responsibilities and to insert them differently into paid employment. As a result, lesbians and gay men tend to occupy urban spaces in different ways. In their study of lesbians and gay men in Vancouver, Lo and Healy found 'lesbians' spaces are not only different from gay men's territories, but that they are also more hidden and significantly less privileged.'⁴² There were specific reasons for this. Lesbians tend to have lower incomes, given overall earning differentials between men and women; are more likely to be raising children in their households, which will affect the choice of location; and face greater concerns about the risk of violence and assault in public spaces.⁴³

People are grounded in social relations that set a context for their sexual identities and practices of sexuality. In their historical study of lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York, Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis found that African-American women tended to be 'firmly established in their Black communities and, in the 1950s, their social lives were led within these communities.'⁴⁴ Rather than participating in the lesbian-bar scene, Black women tended to create 'lively house parties reminiscent of rent parties and

40 Ahmed 2004, p. 152.

41 Ibid.

42 Lo and Healy 2000, p. 31.

43 Adler and Brenner 1996, p. 32.

44 Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1993, p. 114.

buffet flats of the 1920 and 1930s' grounded in 'the strong Black tradition of self-activity to resist oppression.'⁴⁵

Violence, Dispossession and Sexuality

As stated earlier, capitalism is unique among class societies in that members of the working class own their own bodies, creating the basis for the conceptualisation and practice of sexuality grounded in embodied autonomy. Yet that freedom is immediately paired with dispossession, 'freedom' from control of the key productive resources expropriated by members of the capitalist class. People develop sexual identities and practices in the context of hierarchies of dispossession that alienate them from effective control over their bodies and lives.

Sexuality emerges at the fulcrum of freedom and compulsion. The struggles of the last 50 years in Canada and other places in the Global North have seen real gains in sexual freedom in the form of equality rights, cultural openness around sexual issues and improved, though highly uneven, access to educational information, contraception and abortion. Yet the real experience of sexuality is also framed by violence against women and gender non-conformists, racism, sexual assault, queer-bashing, homelessness, time-starvation, ill-health, forced separation from partners (due to employment, migration or mass imprisonment) and many other forms of unfreedom.

Dispossession crucially shapes the terrain for sexuality. Marx conceived of dispossession as a violent process of expropriation separating the working class from control over productive resources aside from their own bodies:

These new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production . . . And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.⁴⁶

Working within a social-reproduction frame, Sylvia Federici developed an account of dispossession that was a more continuous and differentiated process than Marx had suggested. Her conception of dispossession consisted not only of the expropriation of means of production by the exploiting class, but also of measures to deprive members of the working class of effective

45 Ibid.

46 Marx 1954, p. 669.

control over their own bodies. These measures were differentiated, so that women were deprived of control over their own bodies in specific ways. Federici therefore challenged the idea that the violence of primitive accumulation was a precursor to capitalism rather than an on-going feature of it.

A return of the most violent aspects of primitive accumulation has been accompanied in every phase of capitalist globalization, including the present one, demonstrating that the continuous expulsion of farmers from the land, war and plunder on a world scale, and the degradation of women are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times.⁴⁷

Federici frames dispossession as an on-going process that creates a hierarchy of subordination through differentiated regimes of violence, dislocation and divisions of labour. She argued that primitive accumulation produced 'a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force.'⁴⁸ Beyond the division of labour, this process of primitive accumulation produced 'a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged work and their subordination to men.'⁴⁹ Finally, this process produced new forms of industrial embodiment, 'the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers.'⁵⁰

One of the mechanisms of differentiated dispossession is abjection, the degradation of specific categories of human body. Rosemary Hennessey argues: 'In devaluing some bodies, abjection helps to produce subjects who are worth less – that is, subjects who forfeit more of themselves in the labor relations that produce capital.'⁵¹ One important dimension of abjection is the specific devaluation of reproductive labour, 'that is, the both paid and unpaid care work of feeding, child care, elder care and housework that enables the predication of the wage worker.'⁵² The disproportionate responsibility for caring directly contributes to the devaluation of labour of women, 'whose

47 Federici 2004, pp. 12–13.

48 Federici 2004, p. 12.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Hennessey 2013, p. 131.

52 Hennessey 2013, p. 129.

motherwork and housework have a negative bearing upon their relationship to paid labour.⁵³

Sexual consent tends to be conceived in contractual terms as an agreement among equal autonomous actors. Yet differential dispossession creates a hierarchy of actors with more or less control over their bodies through historical processes of gendering, racialising, colonising and sexualising. Racialisation, for example, complicates the historical picture of the abjection of women. Angela Davis noted that lives of African-American women were not oriented around the domestic realm as part of the 'new patriarchal order' that emerged with capitalism, but rather around relentless and brutalising labour: 'Judged by the evolving nineteenth century ideology of feminism, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies.'⁵⁴ As discussed above, this location in divisions of labour produced non-heteronormative family formations and patterns of sexuality.

Dispossession produces a regime of sexuality infused with violence and compulsion. Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith argue that: 'gender violence and heteropatriarchy fundamentally structure the conditions of possibility for settler colonialism.'⁵⁵ The first precondition for settler-colonialism has been 'dispossession of Indigenous people of their land and self-determining authority.'⁵⁶ Coulthard notes the 'enduring role that unconcealed, violent dispossession plays in the reproduction of colonial and capitalist social relations in the present.'⁵⁷

Gendered violence plays a crucial role in creating and sustaining hierarchies of dispossession. Rape culture is not exceptional, but is deep set in the routinised violence that deprives women of effective control over the bodies they formally own, deeply connected to other forms of subordination. Nahla Abdo, in her study of Palestinian women who have been political prisoners, argues that specific institutionalised processes of gendered violence are used to control women and limit their political role in freedom-struggles: 'the state targets women's bodies as a means for such control. Sexual harassment and humiliation in all forms, including attempted rape and rape, are used to deter women from participating in the struggle.'⁵⁸

53 Clement and Myles 1994, p. 175.

54 Davis 1981, p. 5.

55 Simpson and Smith 2014, p. 16.

56 Coulthard 2014, p. 56.

57 Coulthard 2014, p. 59.

58 Abdo 2014, p. 208.

Gendered and racialised violence also shaped the specific forms of dispossession aimed at African-American women: 'The pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse of Black women became so powerful that it managed to survive the abolition of slavery.'⁵⁹ Indeed, institutionalised sexual assault and abuse create an impact that goes beyond the moment of specific acts of violence to create a pervasive fear. Laurie Penny wrote about rape culture, 'It is precisely about fear, about creating a culture where women are afraid to participate in public life.'⁶⁰ Queer-bashing creates a similar closure in public, so that even 'out' people may self-regulate to avoid the kind of visibility that can bring violence.

These structures of violence get reflected in systems of categorisation. Himani Bannerji argued that stigmatising terms associated with devalued social positions, 'are in actuality congealed practices and forms of violence or relations of domination.'⁶¹ The pain of a term of abuse like 'faggot' or 'bitch' is not only the hurt of the word, but the association with acts of violence that ties language to threat.

The compulsory gender system operates as a form of dispossession, backed by violence that is rendered invisible by its normalisation. The oppression of trans people is one of the key markers of the way this normalised and coercive regime operates: 'If you are a transperson, you face horrendous social punishments – from institutionalization to gang rape, from beatings to the denial of child visitation.'⁶² The end to this violent policing of gender requires more than trans rights, though equality rights are important. Cinzia Arruzza argues, 'in order to de-construct or re-invent genders therefore you cannot avoid posing the question of which collective subject can do it, able to challenge the material bases which back up coercive heterosexual norms and the man/woman dichotomy.'⁶³ Differentiated processes of dispossession are a crucial part of the material basis for coercive norms in the areas of gender and sexuality.

59 Davis 1981, p. 175.

60 Penny 2014, p. 145.

61 Bannerji 1995, p. 24.

62 Feinberg 1998, p. 6.

63 Arruzza 2013, p. 112.

Sexuality and Embodiment

As people engage in specific forms of paid or unpaid work, they develop a specific sense of their bodies in relation to their lives. Embodiment is shaped by experiences of dispossession, ranging from forced migration to sexual assault or the commodification of necessities of life. The social-reproduction frame with its detailed analysis of cycles of life-making provides important resources for the understanding of embodiment as a historical process.

Sexual desire is often understood as a bodily drive outside of history. Tamsin Wilton challenges this view: ‘This taken for grantedness of the embodied character of “attraction” is problematic since, unlike animals, the corporeality of human beings is radically mediated by the social and the cultural (as well as the psychological).’⁶⁴ People might experience desire as the body having a mind of its own, but bodily experience can be reduced neither to biology nor to cultural knowledge, but is always a synthesis. Merleau-Ponty wrote: ‘I do not translate the “data of touch” into the “language of seeing”, or *vice versa* – I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body, itself.’⁶⁵ Sexuality is ‘present like an atmosphere’ in this synthesis.⁶⁶

The boundaries of the sexual within this synthesis are negotiated, socially and individually: ‘Certain areas of the body may be eroticised by some cultures, or even by some individuals within a culture, to the bafflement of others.’⁶⁷ The sexual culture of disabled people, for example, challenges bounds of sexuality as constructed by the dominant norms:

One the one hand, the stigma of disability may interfere with having sex. On the other hand, the sexual activities of disabled people do not necessarily follow normative assumptions about what a sex life is. Neither fact means that people with disabilities do not exist as sexual beings.⁶⁸

Liberation for disabled people involves an active challenge to the bounds of the sexual as normatively constructed. Mollow argued that the sexuality of disabled people is normatively conceived in terms of a double bind combining ‘lack (innocence, incapacity, dysfunction)’ with ‘excess (kinkiness, weirdness,

64 Wilton 2004, p. 96.

65 Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 173.

66 Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 194.

67 Wilton 2004, p. 80.

68 Seibers 2012, p. 39.

perversion):⁶⁹ The result of this double bind is, 'it seems nearly impossible for any expression of disabled sexuality to escape stigma.'⁷⁰

The bounds of the sexual are not biologically given, but historically constructed through embodied practices and social struggles. George Chauncey wrote, 'boundaries established between "sexual" and "non-sexual" relations are culturally determined, and . . . struggles over the demarcation of those boundaries are a central aspect of the history of sexuality.'⁷¹ The social-reproduction frame identifies the changing ways in which sexuality has been constructed in relation to dynamic gender relations and specific conceptions of private and public. The erotic organisation of life does not float free of other life activities, but is deeply connected to a range of everyday practices. Gendered and racialised divisions of labour aligned with hierarchies of dispossession generate particular kinds of bodily experience.

Commodification is a form of dispossession within capitalism that deprives people of control over resources, goods and services through market processes that allow access only to those who can meet the price. The deepening impact of commodification through the neoliberal period has profoundly influenced the experience of embodiment and the organisation of sexuality. Neoliberalism pushed commodification far deeper into the formally 'private' realm of personal life and household sustenance. Post-1960s sexual politics have been influenced by this intensified commodification. Queer visibility is organised around the consumption of particular commodities, ranging from drinks in particular bars to sporting specific styles including clothes and grooming.⁷² The role of consumption in raising the profile of better-off lesbians and gays renders those living in poverty invisible.⁷³ Indeed, Michael Warner argued that post-Stonewall gay culture was so deeply grounded in commodification that Marxism could not be an effective guide to understanding it or advancing freedom-struggles.⁷⁴

Commodification is one dimension of alienation, the process through which human life-activity becomes the means to an end rather than intrinsically fulfilling. The commodification of labour-power, for example, means that workers in capitalist society work for a wage rather than for the fulfilment intrinsic to creative and productive activity. This creates particular

69 Mollow 2012, p. 286.

70 Ibid.

71 Chauncey 1989, p. 317.

72 Clarke 1991.

73 Hollibaugh 2001.

74 Warner 1993, p. xxxi.

forms of mortification, in which our life energies are consumed by regimes of paid and unpaid labour: 'in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.'⁷⁵ Sexuality under capitalism is organised around mortified bodies and ruined minds.

Sexuality arises in the contradictory places where agency through ownership of one's own body meets subordination through dispossession. Commodification contributes to this process. Through commodity fetishism, agency seems to be displaced from humans onto their products in circulation. Marx described the apparent power of fetishised commodities: 'There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.'⁷⁶ Commodities seem to be the active agents, setting the conditions for human life. 'In a secret doubling of the commodification of labour, people empathize with commodities in the hopes of partaking of some of the independence, autonomy and "life" they seem to possess.'⁷⁷ In aspiring to become like commodities, people mortify themselves by aspiring to the inert over the living.

Where humans once sought power by making themselves resemble a natural world populated by spirits, demons, and gods, today cognitive processes mimic an environment composed of inert matter that is thoroughly subjected to the rule of technology, instrumental reason, and the commodity form.⁷⁸

Commodity fetishism plays out in the sphere of sexuality through processes of sexualisation, the projection of sexuality onto things and the de-eroticisation of the body. While sexual imagery is omnipresent, actual sexual activity is invisible and unspeakable, so that even intimate partners tend to lack the ability to discuss their own erotic needs and plan together how to fulfil them. As Laurie Penny wrote, 'We live in a culture that is deeply confused about its erotic impulses; it bombards us with images of airbrushed models and celebrities writhing in a sterile haze of anhedonia while abstinence is preached at the heart of government.'⁷⁹ As a result, 'the generation that grew up in this

75 Marx 1977, p. 71.

76 Marx 1954, p. 77.

77 Gunster 2011, p. 222.

78 Gunster 2011, p. 217.

79 Penny 2014, p. 105.

notionally oversexed world has no idea how to fuck, and we're not having it any more than our parents did.'⁸⁰

The intensified commodification associated with neoliberalism has pushed the projection of sexuality to the point of creating what Neferti Tadiar described as a 'libidinal new world order, in which gendered sexualities are signifiers of the organizing principles of national economies and their political status in the international community.' This new world order is organised around gendered and racialised divisions of labour as well as hierarchies of dispossession. Tadiar argues that in this libidinal order, 'the Philippines functions as a hostess nation, catering to the demands and desires of her clients – multinational capital and the U.S. government and military.'⁸¹

The projection of sexualities is so intense that people aspire to self-commodification. David McNally draws on the work of Walter Benjamin to argue, 'So significant is the eroticization of commodities... that people in capitalist society secretly want to be commodities, that is, to be objects of mass desire.'⁸² In seeking to become commodities, humans try to leave their bodies behind: 'all along the line, the body is forgotten.'⁸³ This forgetting of the body underlies the particular form of sex negativity in capitalist societies, where, '[v]irtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established.'⁸⁴

People thus seek to make their bodies into products, attempting to mimic commodities in circulation. People train in the gym, shave, perfume, tattoo, dye, diet, supplement, pierce and clothe themselves to escape the body as nature. In the early twenty-first century this flight from the body is taking the form of virtualisation, where we attempt to put ourselves in circulation through social media. David McNally describes this as a process 'in which we are promised happiness by renouncing life, by turning our bodies into means of producing and displaying commodities – indeed by becoming commodities ourselves.'⁸⁵

This forgetting of the body has important ecological implications. Our bodies are at once part of nature and a product of culture, yet people in contemporary society prize only the body as cultivated and produced. This body negativity

80 Penny 2014, p. 122.

81 Tadiar 2009, pp. 25–6.

82 McNally 2001, p. 208.

83 McNally 2001, p. 224.

84 Rubin 2011, p. 148.

85 McNally 2001, p. 224.

is projected onto nature, so that contemporary capitalist society 'has treated Nature as it has treated man – as an instrument of destructive productivity.'⁸⁶

The mortification of the body establishes a particular relationship between sexuality and objectification that is structured around regimes of gendered, racialised and sexualised dispossession. One of the pillars of contemporary masculinity is the objectification of women: 'Ritual dehumanisation of women is part of how boys learn to bond, how they prove to one another that they are men.' This leads to a society in which, 'Sex is still phrased as violence and rape as the logical extreme of that violence. The sex drive is understood as entirely male; women who pursue or demand sex are masculine and unnatural.'⁸⁷ Racism and colonialism push this even further, as reflected for example in the scale of abuse and murder of Indigenous women in Canada.

Yet the body-consciousness and sexualisation associated with capitalism do at the same time provide the basis for envisioning a process of sexual liberation in which the mortification of alienated labour, the dispossessions of class, gender, racialisation and colonialism, and fetishism of commodities is overcome. Kevin Floyd argued strongly that we must understand how the reification of sexuality is linked to emancipatory possibilities.

Like processes of industrialization, urbanization, and social migration, the reifying of sexual desire needs to be understood as a condition of possibility for a complex, variable history of sexually non-normative discourses, practices, sites, subjectivities, imaginaries, collective formations and collective aspirations.⁸⁸

Conclusion

The social-reproduction frame provides crucial tools for constructing a transformative sexual-liberation politics. Sexual liberation cannot simply consist of formal freedom from constraint in the form of official legality, but requires access to the power and resources to make real choices. Similarly, genuine sexual liberation requires that we move beyond formal-equality rights towards a transformative challenge to the differential regimes of dispossession that undermine our control over our bodies and lives.

86 Marcuse 1964, p. 240.

87 Penny 2014, p. 125.

88 Floyd 2009, pp. 74–5.

Sexuality is part of our life-making work on the world around us, realising ourselves and connecting us to others. The social-reproduction frame provides a rich account of the divisions of labour and hierarchies of racialised, gendered, sexualised dispossession that organise class-formation and life-making work in capitalist societies. Our very experience of our own bodies is grounded in these power relations and ways of organising work. The struggle for embodied and erotic freedom is not simply a question of sexual politics narrowly defined, but of collective repossession that transforms relations of class, gender, race, sexuality and colonialism.

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