

Women's Oppression Today Barrett

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Women's Oppression Today

The Marxist/Feminist Encounter



MICHÈLE BARRETT

New Edition

Foreword by Kathi Weeks



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Women's Oppression Today

For Mary McIntosh (1936–2013)

Foreword: Re-encountering Marxist Feminism

Kathi Weeks

This is a remarkably opportune time for the reissue of Michèle Barrett's classic work of 1970s feminist theory. Originally published in 1980, *Women's Oppression Today* represents one of the best examples of the project of Anglo-American Marxist feminist scholarship that peaked in that period. For the last few decades, however, the 1970s has been remembered by feminists as the time when we 'made mistakes', as a perhaps necessary, but by many accounts, distressingly naïve point on the road to our more enlightened and sophisticated present. In this respect, feminist theory would seem to have a rather exceptional relationship to its historical traditions. It is as if the clocks in the world of feminist theory run at a faster rate than those in other theoretical domains. Some theorists today treat Marx, or even Machiavelli, as if he were our contemporary, taking for granted that his work has some bearing on the present. In feminist theory, by contrast, the 1970s has been more typically treated – whether this is celebrated or mourned – as if it were the distant past, over and done. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the period. Many scholars now seem more willing to revisit the feminist 1970s in general, and what Barrett names in her revised subtitle *The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* in particular, in ways that are better able to acknowledge both their insights and their blind spots, their wealth of possibilities for informing new feminist work together with the inevitable limits of their relevance.

The dominant narratives of the relationship between the feminist past and present, although they do yield significant insights, have served to block other potentially powerful ways of staging this encounter. In an important critical study of these historiographical practices, Clare Hemmings identifies two especially familiar models, one a story of decline and the other of progress. The former documents the shift from the supposed political unity and materialist commitments of the 1970s to the apolitical and often 'merely cultural' high theory of the 1990s and beyond. The latter documents the presumed progress of feminism's expanding diversification from the essentialism of the 1970s, to the awareness of racial and sexual difference in the 1980s, to the post-structuralist feminist celebrations of multiplicity in the 1990s.¹ In her preface to the revised 1988 edition, Barrett herself repeats part of this second narrative in the form of a self-criticism. There, Barrett wonders whether had she been able to write the book in 1988 instead, she would have begun not with the effort to synthesize socialism and feminism, but with the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, which she rightly predicted would come to dominate feminist theoretical work in the future.² To be sure, each of these familiar narratives provides valuable critical purchase on aspects of this particular artefact of the 1970s, helping us to discern some of its achievements and failures, strides and missteps. The loss narrative usefully highlights the value of Barrett's contribution to the project of feminist political economy that flourished at that time and later fell out of favour; the progress narrative effectively exposes the relative lack of attention in the analysis to the impacts of race, ethnicity and citizenship as intersecting axes of inequality.

While I recognize the value of these specific critical interventions, the conception of the relations between the feminist past, present and future that inform the two historical frameworks are limited by their tendencies toward a relentless linearity. With their teleologies of progress or loss that presume to foretell the past's future, and their schematic reduction of a diversity of work

1. See Clare Hemmings, 'Telling Feminist Stories,' *Feminist Theory*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2005, pp. 115–39.
2. See p. xl.

to a serviceable plotline in a grander narrative, these models risk foreclosing the potential of the untimely or unexpected that could emerge from our rereadings. I am interested in temporalities that encourage us to actively engage the past rather than merely sit in judgment on it, whereby the effects of the encounter are less a matter of remembering than remaking. Rather than archives of claims to accept or reject, these historical artefacts might be more usefully approached on other affective and cognitive registers as disruptions and challenges, irritants and enticements, intensifications and inspirations. Instead of a static and continuist ordering of time, wherein history is fixed and contained, the past could be rendered more on the model of the future, as less stable and determinant, something that emerges out of every present differently in relation both to the changing horizon of a potential future and to the forces and events that shape its terms of possibility. My hope is that we can continue to develop alternative orientations to the feminist archive that can enable a more open set of possibilities for what our different encounters with it might produce, for what we might find troubling or generative in our return to the 1970s in this moment.

If, as I have suggested, we are now at a point when the standard critiques of 1970s feminism can be approached as orthodoxies of their own in need of unsettling, the reissue of Barrett's text presents an excellent opportunity since, by my reading at least, it more often confounds than conforms to the conventional readings of texts guided by the historiographical accounts rehearsed above. There are four closely related aspects of the text that I find at once especially compelling and easily misconstrued. These are not exactly what I would describe as the prescient, anticipatory, or untimely elements of the argument – gems of insight that require hindsight to appreciate. Rather, what attracts me most are what could be seen as some of the more dated dimensions of the text, or at least features of the analysis that might be judged harshly by the dominant narratives. In an attempt to follow Barrett's example in her ability to work across so many different levels of abstraction, from the philosophical to the historical and empirical, I will try to present these points in a descending order of abstraction from the more general contours to the more specific

elements of her contribution to the Marxist feminist theoretical project. For the sake of simplicity, these discussions will be organized around four of the categories under which important debates among Marxist feminists were organized: theory, totality, materialism and reproduction. Released from their consignment to the historical dustbin, with some of their nuance and complexity restored, each of the categories, as Barrett approaches them, has much to offer the contemporary reader.

PRACTISING THEORY: ANALYSIS AND ACTIVISM

One of the reasons why *Women's Oppression Today* is such an instructive example for thinking about the relationship between the multiple archives of the feminist past and its variable presents is that, in keeping with the Marxist feminist ethos of the time, it is crafted as both a political intervention and a theoretical construction. By one reading, the text could be mistakenly taken as representative of feminism's so-called better days, when theory was properly subservient to practice. And it is true, Barrett's interest in concrete political problems and in questions of tactics and strategy are clear; analysis and activism are tightly interwoven in ways not uncommon for the period. But contrary to this story about the political virtues of the Marxist feminist past, Barrett is equally committed to the project of what some describe disparagingly as 'high theory'. Thus, in the original preface, she cautions readers about the reflective style, analytical focus, and 'studied calm' they will encounter.³ Yet she apologizes neither for the political agendas she entertains, grand though they may be, nor for her commitment to theory, in all its cold abstraction. In fact the text offers a far more complicated example of the relationship that every form of theory and practice alike negotiates between the abstract and the concrete, critical diagnosis and political prescription, and knowledge and action. For example, Barrett's very practical closing advice that feminists enter into an alliance with the left is derived from her highly theoretical treatment of the intimate historical connection between capitalism

3. See p. 5.

and women's oppression that she articulates over the course of the book. The relationship between what we might delimit as 'theory' and as 'practice' in feminist studies is sometimes more immediate, sometimes more estranged; in some cases it is more intentional and in others less conscious. But it is worth attending to the possibility that any activist text can produce theoretical insights and that any given theoretical text can generate practical implications. In this regard, neither Marxist feminism in general nor *Women's Oppression Today* is exceptional.

MAPPING TOTALITY: THEORY AND HISTORY

The model of 'grand theory' more typical of 1970s feminism and on display in *Women's Oppression Today* was one casualty of feminism's subsequent misgivings about the category of totality. Although the critique of totality yields many valuable insights and cautions, the problem is that systematizing analyses of social forces are often cast aside along with – as if they were necessarily part and parcel of – totalizing metanarratives that reduce subjects to functional effects of a coherent set of monolithic structures. Here too it is worth reconsidering Barrett's intentions and re-evaluating her efforts.

Posed at what is still a rather high level of abstraction, the larger project to which Barrett contributes was that of mapping, in order to target for collective political action, the system of social forces that sustain gender hierarchy. Barrett's commitment to relate and connect – to map the relations among social structures, and also between these structures and the gendered subjectivities situated in their midst – runs counter to the forces of fragmentation, privatization, fetishization and individuation that are endemic to liberal democracies and capitalist economies. Of course, as situated and partial, these mappings are necessarily provisional and incomplete; the project of totality, to draw on Fredric Jameson's formulation, names a methodological aspiration and interpretive horizon rather than a goal to be realized.⁴ Barrett's more specific interest was in how to construct models

4. See Fredric Jameson, 'History and Class Consciousness as an "Unfinished Project"', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1988, p. 60.

of systematicity open to the forces of difference and antagonism, in which different social fields are not denuded of their complexity, contingency and relative autonomy.

One way Barrett tries to disrupt tendencies toward more totalizing models of seamless systems is by insisting that social phenomena such as the oppression of women must be approached at once on theoretical and historical registers. Barrett seeks to attend to both continuities and discontinuities not only between analysis and activism but also between the abstract logics of theory and the eventfulness of history. Thus the relationship of capitalism to women's oppression must be understood as an empirical development rather than a logical prerequisite; Marxist feminist analysis requires not the simple application of a theoretical formula but instead historical inquiry. The aim is to construct more complex accounts of the relations among analysis, history and activism, so that neither theory nor political practice are subsumed by our desire for their relationship, nor are historical contingency and specificity sacrificed to the comforts of theoretical coherence.

A similar interest in finding connections among seemingly disparate phenomena in order to understand the forces that perpetuate them informs Barrett's efforts throughout the text to find points of articulation among sex, gender, class and sexuality (the text's most consistent points of focus), as well as to highlight their discontinuities. For example, while she is interested in the connections between gender identity and sexuality, she warns against their conflation, as when the latter is reduced to an effect or expression of the former. Disaggregation is also, she reminds us, a feminist method – as illustrated by feminism's early struggle to differentiate gender from sex and her own insistence on the distinction between childbearing and child care.⁵ Thus while she is committed to exploring the linkages among sex, gender, class and sexuality, she is also adamant that the incommensurabilities across and multiplicities within each of the categories are not rendered forfeit in the process.

5. See p. 76.

FEMINIST MATERIALISMS: CAPITALISM AND PATRIARCHY, STRUCTURES AND SUBJECTS

As I noted earlier, *Women's Oppression Today* marks a high point in the brief upsurge of Anglo-American Marxist feminist theory in the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Described by Barrett in 1980 as an urgent matter that the left was just beginning to theorize, the question of how to combine Marxism and feminism soon faded into obscurity. By the time Barrett's preface to the revised edition was written some eight years later, as she explains, socialist feminism was already in decline, the project having been by and large abandoned.⁶ The different subtitles of the two editions are telling: the first, *Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, offers a modest contribution to a larger effort; the second, *The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*, evokes a completed event that we can now look back on. Although it is hard to remember, let alone feel, the heat and intensity of the debate about the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, since it came and went so quickly, the recent increase in anticapitalist activism – the alterglobalization and Occupy movements offer two visible examples – lends new relevance to the Marxist feminist project. For those today seeking ways to bring feminist analysis and practice to anticapitalist struggles, Barrett's text is an excellent resource.

Marxist feminism's theoretical and political centre of gravity is the relationship between processes of capitalist accumulation on the one hand and patriarchy or gender hierarchy on the other. Suspicious of the sometimes ahistorical presentation of patriarchy, Barrett usually prefers the language of women's oppression. Although I would not want to resurrect today such a limited feminist framework focused only on patriarchy, let alone one focused only on women, it was a rubric within which many still-crucial questions were posed about the intersections of gender and class, the contradiction between capital accumulation and social reproduction, the relationship between the gendered divisions of waged and unwaged work, and the possibilities and limits of the alliance between feminist and anticapitalist politics.

6. See p. xxxviii.

Barrett's approach to these key questions is especially valuable to the extent that her overriding concern was to move Marxist feminism not only beyond the limitations of dual systems theory and the conundrums of the domestic labour debates, but more important, beyond reductive, mechanistic and functionalist accounts of the relationship between capitalism and the oppression of women. Her primary targets throughout the book are analyses that routinely reduce gender to a function by tracing the origin and maintenance of gendered phenomena back to the presupposed exigencies of capitalist accumulation.

The concept of ideology is central to Barrett's analysis of the production and reproduction of women's oppression under capitalism. By her account the category of ideology offers not a formula to apply but rather poses questions to ask about the relationship between culture and economy, reality and representation, the social and the psychic. Whatever the problems with the concept of ideology, she later explains, it does succeed in foregrounding the relationships between economy and culture and between subjectivity and structure as areas to explore.⁷ Her more specific focus is on the links between gendered ideological processes – particularly the ideologies of femininity, masculinity and heterosexual familialism – and economic practices and relations, although she also recognizes the instability of this simple categorical distinction between the ideal and the material. A post-Althusserian concept of ideology, understood as a force of gendered subject construction, offers Barrett a way to think not only about the relationship between economic relations and culture and consciousness, but also between structure and agency, a pair of interests that can also explain her analysis of how to read gender ideology in literary texts and her discussions scattered throughout the text of the possibilities and limits of psychoanalysis for Marxist feminism.

7. See pp. xxxiii–xxxiv.

THE PRODUCTION OF REPRODUCTION: THE FAMILY AND THE HOUSEHOLD SYSTEM

The family figures prominently in Barrett's analysis of the connections between gendered labouring practices and the social, political and economic relations within which they are situated. But in this instance as well an important focus of radical and Marxist feminist critique in the 1970s quickly fell from favour as feminists backed away not only from the generalities, exclusions and complicities of some of these analyses of the family, but too often from the critical project itself. Here too Barrett's approach to this terrain defies or at least exceeds the familiar assessments of the period, and once again I find timely what the standard narratives portray as dated.

Why single out the family then, and why now? Because as an important locus of gender difference and hierarchy, and a linchpin in the relationship between the gender divisions of waged and unwaged work, the institution of the family and familial ideology continue to play critical roles in the organization and legitimation of the larger system of social production and reproduction. But in this case as well, Barrett is critical not only of accounts that reduce the family to a functional effect of capitalist logics, but of the ways that deployments of the concept of the family, even in the service of a critique, can contribute to the category's reification. Here too she prefers a historical account more attentive to empirical diversity. But even in some of these historically nuanced investigations one can find some notion of an essential family undergirding the apparent diversity of its forms over time and across space. To avoid its naturalization and mystification Barrett's analysis centres not on the 'the family' but on households, family ideologies and the complex and variable links between them.

TIME AND TODAY

The animating concern of Barrett's book, then, is to think about how we may have failed, but also might still succeed, to map the relations between different fields of Marxist feminist

inquiry – analysis and activism; theory and history; sex, gender, class and sexuality; capitalism and patriarchy; economy and culture; structure and subjectivity; production and reproduction; waged and unwaged labour; family and household – in ways that are attentive to both their convergences and their disjunctions, so that we do not mistake specific connections for either equivalences or continuities. When forced to fit into the standard narratives about the feminist 1970s, too many of these textures risk being smoothed out, the text's complexities flattened and its nuances sacrificed.

How, then, might we re-encounter this historical text in ways that are at once critical and open, both historically informed and engaged with today's feminist issues? Clearly it is a text that was produced in a very different time. Not only is it written in a social-scientific theoretical style that is now out of fashion, but there are, of course, any number of insights, concepts, questions and problems from later feminist work that were not available to Barrett when she first wrote the text. So how do we read the past as past, but not for that reason sealed off from but rather porous in its connections to the present and its possible futures?

Women's Oppression Today presents an interesting case. Because it was crafted as both a particular intervention into very local events and a general contribution to Marxist feminist theory, it offers an instructive example of some of the broader dilemmas involved in taking a text out of the time of its emergence. On one hand, it is a book that is so clearly of its time: it was, as Barrett emphasized, narrowly focused on women's oppression in contemporary Britain and firmly located in current debates among a fairly small set of authors. On the other hand, it also strives toward broader generalizations and fields of significance; it also harbours ambitions to travel beyond those borders and to reach out to other interlocutors. As a text that is both bounded and unbounded, it might serve to remind us of the importance of approaching all feminist theory as potentially more than a punctual event, though not a timeless artefact, as neither anchored to its time nor untethered from it. Can we, to borrow Victoria Hesford's formulation, approach the archive of 1970s feminism

as both possibility and legacy,⁸ so that we sacrifice neither attention to the historical conditions of its creation nor its potential relevance to other times and places? Can we imagine theory as at once a historical artefact and a time machine? I would like to consider it an open question whether the *Today* of the book's title refers only to 1980 or if it could also refer to other times, even some that are yet to come.

8. Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, Durham, NC, 2013, p. 14.

Introduction to the 1988 Edition

Of the original title to this book, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, perhaps only the word 'problems' can now be used without some reservation. The innocent little word 'today', intended to indicate that this was to be a contemporary rather than a historical analysis, also served to occlude the geographical and ethnic boundaries of the book's scope. The confident combination of 'Marxist Feminist', a common phrase in the late 1970s when the book was written, uncomfortably reminds us of an attempt to bring together two world-views that have continued to go their separate ways in spite of our efforts at marriage guidance. 'Oppression', too, looks rather crude in terms of current feminist work: does sexual difference *necessarily* mean oppression? Are there no distinctively female moralities or vocations that we would want to value more positively? Are women only victims? As for the term 'Women', it contains the kernel of a dispute that has problematized the politics of contemporary feminism and come to dominate theoretical polemic.

Criticism of the idea of 'women' will seem like theoreticism, or just downright silliness, to many people. For feminists it is even more difficult for, however you choose to define feminism, it is impossible not to centre its political project on some idea of a better position for women in the future. Feminism is very hard to conceive without the experiential dimensions of women's sense of oppression and without a vision of change. This is not to say that feminism is only concerned with women – on the contrary – but it cannot dispense with them as an organizing political focus.