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Back to Marx: reflections on the feminist crisis at the crossroads of neoliberalism and neoconservatism

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Contemporary feminism is currently at a crossroads, facing a concerted onslaught from both neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies. While these ideologies are inherently different—neoliberalism often appropriates feminist language to serve capitalist ends, and neoconservatism typically attacks feminist principles—they similarly reinforce the traditional role of families as providers of welfare. This crisis of alienation in feminism is characterized by three key factors: the gender divisions brought about by feminism’s shift to identity politics, the obscuring of feminist critique of capitalism by the spread of commercialization, and the instrumentalization of feminism in politics. These challenges have resulted in increased class antagonism and the further marginalization of lower-income women, reinforcing one another. To address this multifaceted crisis, a return to Marxist thought is deemed necessary for women’s liberation. The historical foundation of women’s issues can be traced back to class oppression, which stems from the primacy of material production over reproductive labor. In this context, gender oppression becomes an instrument that perpetuates class oppression. Only by interpreting women’s bodily autonomy and power from the perspective of material life and class reproduction, and by uniting various social forces against capitalism with practical actions, can feminism regain its vitality. Although the current global women’s movement is full of internal divisions, contradictions, and struggles, there is still hope for achieving unity. When the day comes, history will confirm that true gender equality is not merely the promotion of individual choice for a few, but the emancipation of all, and Marxism will be recorded once again in the history of human liberation. To accomplish this grand objective, the vital step is to end the marginalization of Marxist Feminism.

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Introduction

The sword of Damocles that had long been hanging over the heads of American women finally fell on June 24, 2022, when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, a landmark decision from 1973 that recognized the constitutional right to abortion, despite 80% of Americans supporting the legal right to abortion (Planned Parenthood, 2022). This event, which ended this nationwide right and marked a sharp turn in the complex trajectory of women's rights, has sparked a heated debate all over the world. Some firmly believe that the decision stripped women of the freedom to control their own bodies and that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* was another attempt by the white, heteronormative, and patriarchal government to control women's lives. Others argue that the overturning is a big victory against a society that is increasingly tolerant of actions that deliberately destroy human life.

Since the rise of neoliberalism in the late twentieth century, women have been granted greater economic autonomy through participation in the free market. Women around the world are using the language of liberalism, and the power of neoliberalism, which champions freedom and hyper-individualism, has become pervasive (Nussbaum, 2021). In this context, protecting women's physical rights seems to be the only politically correct choice. However, this is where the nuances of the struggle come to light. Anti-abortion conservatives, who have been waging war on reproductive rights for decades, have begun to appropriate aspects of feminism, thereby creating a complicated dynamic that defies simplistic labeling. Thus, today, we can see that rising conservative forces exert an unpredictable and transformative influence over women's issues.

This paper seeks to explore the implications of this intersection between neoliberalism and neoconservatism on feminism. We posit that feminism is currently at a crossroads, facing a concerted onslaught from both these ideological fronts. Thus, the central research question that guides this study is: How does this dual assault impact the struggle for gender equality, and what can be the possible strategic responses? In addressing this, we aim to explore avenues for the effective continuation of the feminist project.

Given the materialist dimensions of the issue at hand, we propose a return to the intellectual roots of historical materialism as expounded by Karl Marx. The Marxist framework, with its emphasis on power relations and socio-economic conditions, can provide a critical lens to examine the intersectional complexities and undercurrents that are shaping the contemporary feminist landscape. We assert that an understanding of women's liberation within the context of Marx's analysis of labor, capital, and their relation to social structures, will offer crucial insights for a feminist response to this crisis. This paper aims to rekindle and refocus the academic conversation surrounding the materialist origins of feminist struggles, setting the stage for a more comprehensive understanding of the current crisis and ways to navigate it.

Definition of basic concepts

Feminism. Considering the profound diversity within the theories and practices of feminism globally, significant differences exist between feminism in the Global North, feminism straddling the Global North and South, and the perspectives of marginalized women within the Global North. The Global North's feminism is often characterized by legal equality, gender neutrality, and economic autonomy. In contrast, the feminisms of the Global South may incorporate a broader focus on communal and social issues, such as collective values and anti-colonialism. Despite the invaluable perspectives and strategies offered by the feminisms of

the Global South and marginalized groups within the Global North (Hooks, 2000; Grewal, 2013), this paper will specifically focus on the feminism of the Global North. This choice of focus is dictated by the influential role that feminism from the Global North has played in shaping global agendas and policies, significantly impacting international and human rights law and driving the formation of gender equality laws and policies worldwide (Krook and True, 2012).

Neoliberalism. It is necessary to explicitly define the concept and scope of "neoliberalism" as used in this paper. This is due to the inherent complexity, multifaceted nature, and contentiousness of the term "neoliberalism", which manifests differently depending on interpretation, historical background, and practical application (Mirowski, 2015). In this paper, neoliberalism is understood as a system of thought that emphasizes the superiority of market forces and individual freedom, advocating for the application of market principles across all aspects of society. During the rise of Neoliberalism, calls for justice increasingly took the form of demands for the recognition of identity and difference (Fraser, 2009). The neoliberal theory supports minimal government intervention, emphasizes private property and free competition, and underscores individual liberties and personal responsibility (Vallier, 2022).

Within this framework, the market is seen as the most efficient means of resource allocation, and individual success or failure is attributed to personal effort and choice (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). In the context of feminism, neoliberalism often manifests itself through the emphasis on women's economic independence and professional success. It has shaped women's roles and status by promoting economic incentives and competition while sidelining or marginalizing other social and cultural factors affecting women's lives. Prügl (2015) looks at these phenomena as processes of "neoliberalisation of feminism".

Neoconservatism. Neoconservatism originated in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a response to the era's social and political changes. Initially characterized by disillusioned liberals advocating conservative approaches, neoconservatism seeks to restore traditional social values and norms, supporting strong military and assertive foreign policy (Brandon, 2009). In the context of this paper, neoconservatism refers to a resurgent political ideology that advocates for a return to traditional family and social values, often grounded in religious beliefs. It emphasizes law and order, traditional gender roles, and skepticism towards policies designed to promote social equality, such as affirmative action or abortion rights. This form of conservatism inherently challenges feminist advocacy for gender equality, reproductive rights, and the dismantling of patriarchal structures (Butler, 2013).

In the proceeding section, this paper will discuss how neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as defined above, have influenced the perception of women and shaped the feminist movement. This has led to a version of feminism that is heavily entwined with market forces and economic outcomes, positioning the struggle for gender equality within the complexities of global economic and political dynamics. This deepened perspective will provide a richer background for understanding how these concepts interact, better explaining their roles in the current crisis.

Feminism at the crossroads

Feminism hijacked by neoliberalism. The Washington Consensus, a collection of economic policy recommendations for

developing countries that were laid out in the late twentieth century, became an important symbol of neoliberal globalization. Since the 1990s, the great majority of countries across the globe have been ruled by the capitalist system. With market forces further intensifying their assault on economic, political, and cultural territories, mainstream feminism has also become the instrument of neoliberalism. The market-centered gender order born out of neoliberalism has essentially absorbed feminism, turning it into an integral cog in the capitalist wheel of production and consumption.

In neoliberal discourse, the marketization of family policy is interpreted as a source of national competitiveness. Numerous studies provide compelling evidence demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of relying on the talents and capabilities of women in achieving economic growth and fostering shared expertise (Pennings, 2022; Kabeer and Natali, 2013). Closing gender gaps in labor force participation can yield substantial benefits for economies. For instance, calculations reveal that such efforts could result in a remarkable 20% increase in GDP per capita (Halim et al., 2023). The active engagement of women in the workforce not only allows them to contribute to the functioning of the economy and society but also earns them the respect and recognition they deserve. In contrast, without their involvement, women might be perceived as a burden in some capacity. This neoliberal argument tends to overemphasize the economic value of women's participation in the workforce while neglecting the important social and cultural roles they play.

The neoliberal management of the gender order is often portrayed as being about empowering women and emphasizing their capabilities. However, in actuality, neoliberal feminism pushes women into informal labor markets and indirectly defends the withdrawal of the welfare state by using slogans such as “empower women”. On one hand, neoliberal policies have led to the proliferation of precarious work arrangements, such as temporary contracts, part-time jobs, and gig economy work. This not only restricts women's opportunities for upward mobility but also leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and economic instability. These types of employment lack job security, benefits, and legal protections, thereby exposing women to a higher risk of economic vulnerability. In lower-middle-income countries, 84.5 percent of employed women are engaged in informal employment; in low-income countries, this number reaches 92.1 percent. These women, who often live in households below the poverty line, find themselves in extremely vulnerable situations (ILO, 2018). On the other hand, the withdrawal of the welfare state further marginalizes women in low-paid, part-time, unstable, and insecure jobs. This is evident globally, where concerns about women's pensions are increasing. In developed economies like France, Germany, Greece, and Italy, women's average pensions are more than 30% lower than men's (Eurostat, 2020).

In the process of consumption, commodity activism has become a critical tool for neoliberalism to co-opt feminism, with consumption emerging as a form of civic political engagement. As noted by Jo Littler (2008), “Organizations and corporations sell us the idea that through buying their product, we can make the world a better, fairer, healthier, more just, more habitable or more equal place” (pp. 23–24). The resurgence of feminist activism over the past decade has been accompanied by the mass popularization of feminist-themed commodities (Repo, 2020). Feminists publicize their activism by purchasing and wearing shirts with slogans such as “this is what a feminist look like” and “my boyfriend is a feminist”. While this form of activism can be seen as an expression of personal identity and solidarity with the feminist movement, it also plays into neoliberal ideals of consumer choice and market-driven social change.

The dissemination of feminist images and slogans, both in traditional media and on social media as a form of self-expression, creates an illusion that feminist commodity activism is the right, appropriate way to realize feminism. In the words of American political theorist Jodi Dean, “Communicative capitalism captures our political interventions, formatting them as contributions to its circuits of effect and entertainment—we feel political, involved, like contributors who really matter” (Dean, 2009, p. 49).

Commodity activism within neoliberalism, while potentially raising awareness and facilitating discussion, often falls short of driving substantive change and can even exacerbate existing inequalities within feminism itself. A clear example of how commodity activism within neoliberalism falls short in achieving substantive change, and may even perpetuate inequalities within feminism itself, is the “Pink Ribbon” campaign for breast cancer awareness.

Since the 1990s, the pink ribbon, a globally recognized symbol of breast cancer awareness, has spurred many corporations to produce pink-branded products with the promise of contributing a portion of the profits to cancer research. This commodity activism, while raising awareness, has not substantially lowered mortality rates or improved treatment accessibility. Some corporations have even been accused of “pinkwashing”—promoting their support while selling potentially harmful products. In fact, as Wigley and Dornelles (2022) argues, “Breast cancer appears to have been utilized by both corporations and campaigns for profit, using an array of methods. It concludes that breast cancer pink is a signifier of a number of gendered discourses that are utilized by both marketeers and breast cancer organizations to increase profit and membership, respectively. This leads to an unparalleled complex web of consumerism”. Moreover, the campaign inadvertently perpetuates feminist inequalities by targeting middle-to-upper-class women and promoting a narrow, predominantly white image of breast cancer, overlooking marginalized populations and men who also suffer from the disease (O'Donnell et al., 2016).

Therefore, the communication of feminist images and slogans, in both traditional media and on social media as a form of self-expression, creates an illusion that feminist commodity activism is the truly appropriate way to realize feminism. While feminists who participate in this type of activism consider it a necessary collective effort, it is unclear how commodity activism ultimately ends the oppression of women. On the contrary, such feminists engage in feminist-themed consumption and commercialization simply because these activities cater to their concerns while neglecting other women in the “lower” classes who lack purchasing power. This results in a form of “class-blind” feminism that fails to acknowledge and address the diverse experiences and struggles of all women.

Feminism attacked by rising neoconservatism. Since Donald Trump's 2016 election as President of the United States and Britain's dramatic decision to leave the European Union, a rising trend of isolationism and protectionism has been evident globally. This rise is in part due to increasing political polarization. Particularly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, populism, and white nationalism have been incorporated into conservatism's traditional cultural and family values, forming an important feature of neoconservatism. The rise of neoconservatism has posed a serious challenge to feminism, as has been clearly illustrated by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. In fact, the global consensus on sexual and reproductive health rights has weakened significantly in recent years as a result of the rise of neoconservatism. In 2019, 32 countries, including the United

States, signed the Geneva Consensus Declaration firmly opposing women's abortion rights, claiming that abortion is not an international right and states are not obliged to cooperate with the stance of the UN Human Rights Committee on abortion. In this document, the importance of family was reiterated, and states were encouraged to protect the traditional role of women in the family.

Neoliberalism weaponizes and influences feminism in three ways.

First, it negates equal rights for women through political discourse. The effort to characterize a feminine specificity through recourse to maternity has produced a similar factionalization and even a disavowal of feminism altogether. As Butler (2013) points out, not all women are mothers; some cannot be, some are too young or too old to be, some choose not to be, and for some who are mothers, that fact is not necessarily the rallying point of their politicization in feminism. Furthermore, thoughts and propositions about equal rights for women are presented as a form of radicalism, and feminism is marginalized through reactionary anti-feminist rhetoric on gender and sexuality issues. It claims that the negative experiences of some women should not be equated with the experiences of the majority of women, who are seen to be (already) treated with equal dignity and respect by men (Gianoncelli, 2022). A stark example of this is evident in the United States during the Trump administration. In the first year of Trump's term alone, a series of actions were taken that had a significant impact on women's rights. These included reinstating the Mexico City Policy, cutting funding to the UN Population Fund, promoting the view that most reports of sexual assault on college campuses were false, scrapping a rule that would have made pay disparities more transparent, and curtailing the right to birth control (Merelli, 2017). These moves not only impeded the progress of gender equality but also had a significant side effect: they undermined the credibility of women, making them appear undeserving of trust. This in turn weakened their voices and their claims, further reinforcing gender disparities.

Second, neoliberalism suppresses the feminist movement through populism and white nationalism. For example, in the hearing on the Women's Health Protection Act (S.1696) held by the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2014, populist anti-abortion advocates demonized women who defended the right to abortion, decrying them as enemies of the people (Duffy, 2015). Additionally, white nationalists might use racist and xenophobic narratives to resist and denigrate the feminist movement. For example, they may portray the feminist movement as being led by non-white women, immigrants, or "foreign" cultures, thereby positioning it as an attack on their perceived "white culture" and "white values". Through this tactic, they can delegitimize the feminist movement among their supporters and sympathizers, thereby suppressing its influence and progression (Yingling, 2020).

Third, neoliberalism argues for restoring traditional gender roles and family values. It diverts women away from focusing on political power and issues of bodily autonomy; instead, conservative and far-right populist politics emphasize women's "unique" attributes, such as their capacity to care and their complementary partnership with men. The argument here is that women—as the motherly and feminine forces guiding the nation's ethical compass—have a feminine duty to defend life at its earliest stages. The United Nations (2020) confirms that as institutional and community childcare has not been accessible for many families during the lockdown, unpaid childcare provision has been falling more heavily on women, which has constrained their ability to work. This care work will be done more often by women than men, partly because of the persistence of traditional gender roles. There is an underlying theme of neoliberal

politics diverting women away from issues of political power and bodily autonomy, instead emphasizing their roles as caregivers and partners to men, and as guardians of traditional family values. Through these mechanisms, neoliberalism challenges mainstream feminism. Today, neoliberal feminism revolves around "family values" that emphasize women's roles as altruistic caregivers and providers of unpaid reproductive labor and claims that this type of caregiving and housework is equally valuable, socially necessary, and dignified.

The joint attack on feminism from neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are distinct political rationalities that are contradictory in many respects. In regard to women's issues, their attitudes and strategies are different. With the transformation of international and domestic power modes, neoliberalism is increasingly inclined to intensify its political influence by combining and aggregating national and political forces, including conservative groups. Neoconservatism is expanding traditional gendered morality into the public sphere by emphasizing individual rights and freedom, particularly women's "uniqueness". These rationalities find common ground in the joint attack on feminism.

On the one hand, both ideologies focus on the complementary function of families in the process of welfare state reform. Due to the restructuring of the welfare state and reduction of public expenditure, the role of families as providers of social welfare is growing. Thus, the private sphere of women's activities is encouraged by neoliberalism to extend into the labor market in response to the collapse of public provision. Under the influence of neoliberalism, policies like those of Margaret Thatcher in the UK during the 1980s led to a reduction in public services and pushed women into low-paid, part-time work. For instance, *National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990*. At the same time, women are encouraged by neoconservatism to fulfill their responsibilities as providers of reproductive labor (as mothers and carers), through which they compensate for their lack of power in the workplace. In the United States, for instance, since 1996, key figures from state legislators, members of the U.S. Congress, and President George W. Bush have consistently advocated for policies that protect monogamous, heterosexual marriage and promote marriage among poor women, in particular African American women. In locations like Syracuse, New York, where the African American prison population escalated, women significantly outnumbered men, further emphasizing the expectation for these women to serve as the primary caregivers and providers of reproductive labor. Critics argue that these marriage-promotion policies are heterosexist and unfairly place the burden of demographic shifts on African American women, who have little control over these socioeconomic trends (Lane, 2004). Although neoliberalism and neoconservatism do not share a considerable degree of common logic, with the former focused on economic issues and the latter on moral analysis, they have similar political effects in relation to the family, as they both advocate reinventing the family as a vehicle for distributing wealth and welfare, and they replace the functions of the welfare state with "the market" and "morality".

On the other hand, both neoliberalism and neoconservatism downplay or ignore structural gender inequalities in a mutually reinforcing way. As American Marxist scholar Eisenstein (2009) pointed out, "Capitalist globalization has turned working women around the world into a new generation of the proletariat because globalization is achieved by exploiting and oppressing working women more ruthlessly". To beautify capitalism and obscure structural inequality issues, neoliberalism and neoconservatism moderately encourage women's empowerment and agency with

the goal of capitalist growth but selectively ignore capitalist exploitation and the social hierarchy system. As productive labor forces, marginalized women, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, and rural workers, are often treated as cheap labor and face numerous challenges, including job instability and a lack of labor rights; As providers of reproductive labor, they often work without remuneration and are treated as having no monetizable value, despite providing the background conditions for capitalist accumulation and social life. As Chloe Cooney (2020) noted, the Covid-19 pandemic response is highlighting how problematic the existing system is for families: "It's always been a farce to think about caretaking and family responsibilities as 'personal life decisions' that get handled outside of work hours. This current situation is almost prophetically designed to showcase the farce of our societal approach to separating work and family lives". This "selective blindness" of capitalism creates a class of poor, contingent female workers who constantly oscillate between caring for a family and working for wages that are too meager to constitute a true livelihood, while the issue of gender inequality is marginalized.

The crisis of alienation in feminism

The joint suppression of feminism by neoliberalism and neo-conservatism is undermining and eroding traditional feminism. In this process, the marginalization of structural inequality has obscured the systemic disadvantages of capitalist society, resulting in the crisis of alienation in contemporary feminism.

Gender divisions brought by feminism's shift to identity politics. In recent years, feminism has undergone a significant shift toward a paradigm commonly referred to as "identity politics". This approach prioritizes and bases political activities and agenda-building on the specific social identities of individuals or groups, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. (Cressida, 2020). This shift has substantially influenced the dialog on gender issues. Scholars such as Crenshaw (2013) and McRobbie (2008) criticize this development, arguing that it exacerbates social divisions by overlooking the shared adversities experienced by all genders in a capitalist society. Specifically, this approach has been criticized for neglecting the unique forms of oppression faced by working-class men, such as societal expectations to undertake physically demanding labor and to suppress emotional vulnerability. According to Hearn (1993), the contemporary men's movement in English-speaking countries displays a range of views, encompassing both pro- and anti-feminist sentiments. However, since the 1990s, it is the anti-feminist or masculinist strands that have dominated mainstream discourse, reflecting the growing feelings of exclusion and alienation among many men.

This development has paradoxically intensified social divisions and undermined social solidarity, rather than promoting inclusivity, as one might expect from a movement rooted in the struggle for equal rights. A stark manifestation of this dynamic is the Men's Rights Activist (MRA) movement in the United States and the United Kingdom. Despite its varied subgroups, the common thread in the MRA movement is the perception that men, specifically white, heterosexual men, are disadvantaged by modern gender politics (Messner, 2016).

Simultaneously, capitalism has found a way to capitalize on these divisions. Fraser (2009) posits that capitalism cleverly co-opts feminist rhetoric for its own benefit, fostering a brand of feminism that inadvertently supports, rather than challenges, the status quo. This phenomenon is often termed "corporate feminism", which ostensibly promotes gender equality while conveniently aligning with capitalist ideals of individual success and competition. Sandberg's "Lean In" movement is a prime

example of this, encouraging women to climb the corporate ladder without addressing the structural inequalities that create significant obstacles for many women (Eddy and Ward, 2015).

Thus, if the feminist movement fails to recognize and critically address this increasingly serious divide and does not return to a more inclusive approach, it cannot truly address the shared struggle of all genders under capitalism. Ignoring this will only further deepen social divisions, exacerbate gender inequality, and undermine the cause that feminism seeks to champion.

Obscuring feminist critique of capitalism by the spread of commercialization.

To meet the equality requirements of feminism, capitalism disguises itself as the marriage partner of feminism, covering up the existence and realities of capitalist exploitation through commercialization propaganda. This approach substitutes "citizens" with "consumers". In this context, phrases such as "Women's Rights Are Human Rights", "My Body, My Choice" and "Girl Power" have been trending. While these slogans promote necessary ideals of autonomy and empowerment, in a capitalistic framework, they often get co-opted and divorced from their original feminist political connotations. As a result, these phrases can contribute to concealing the social reality that female workers are the objects of capitalist exploitation.

For instance, the "Girl Power" slogan, frequently used in advertisements and media to encourage women to purchase certain products as an expression of their strength and independence, can unintentionally overshadow the exploitation and inequality female workers face within global production chains. Similarly, the phrase "My Body, My Choice", when used to market beauty or cosmetic products, emphasizes women's control over their appearance, but can divert attention from the exploitation women endure in workplaces and production lines, and the violation of their bodily rights.

As a result, the possibilities of identity rights and forms of resistance shaped by capital have increased, which are "managed and controlled more precisely in consumption and commodification to avoid opposition to capital" (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012). As the British scholar Andrew Brooks argued convincingly, morality and markets are contradictory: "capitalist social relations are fundamentally ill-suited to resolving the problems of uneven development and environmental degradation" (Brooks, 2015, p. 215).

Take the global garment industry as an example. The poverty-stricken faces of female garment workers are being masked by those of feminists who set fashion trends. This phenomenon not only intensifies capitalist exploitation, but also "receives" enthusiastic support from feminists. It was reported that the world's lowest-paid female garment worker earns only \$26 a month, far lower than the global monthly average of \$470. As one of the world's largest garment exporters, nearly 90 percent of garment workers in Bangladesh are women, whose wages are less than \$55 a month, far from covering living necessities (Lu, 2020). These female workers are chronically overworked in dangerous conditions, deprived of free time, and often abused by their employers. The global capitalist accumulation system, based on the impoverishment of women from low-income backgrounds, clearly shows the close relationship between the gendered division of labor and oppressive forms of exploitation.

However, feminism has not sufficiently addressed the material power relations that impact the lives of female garment workers. Rather, its critique of capitalism has been obscured by the spread of commercialization. This constitutes another form of feminism's alienation in a society where the economy and politics are increasingly defined by market rationality. Indeed, whether feminism can truly eradicate the conflict between capital and

female labor is questionable, as it often glosses over or masks the exploitation inherent in the process of surplus value production.

The instrumentalization of feminism in politics. In recent years, feminism has become politically instrumented. This is manifested when political powers manipulate feminist discourse and weaponize the women's movement to justify their own self-interests.

On the one hand, feminism is used in the domestic political struggle, which is clearly indicated in the transformation of political attitudes toward feminism in Europe and America. In Britain, the women's movement has largely been associated with the Labor Party since the Dagenham women's strike of 1968. However, after entering into the twenty-first century, British conservative and right-wing parties have shifted from refusing dialog with feminists to striving for cooperation with them. That said, the relationship between British parties and the women's movement is more complex than a linear historical narrative. More than 100 years ago, the British Labor Party denied Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the women's movement, the right to join the Labor Party. Equally surprising is the fact that Mary Astell, known as "Britain's first feminist", was a typical conservative. The changing attitudes of political parties on women's movements in Britain show that the core of attacks between political parties lies in the conflicts of interests, rather than a principled struggle over whether or not they believe in feminism.

In the United States, a "housewife" is an important symbol of traditional family values, reflecting the preservation of the heterosexual nuclear family. To win political influence, feminist candidates may adopt the image of a traditional housewife as a strategic choice to appeal to a broader voter base that values traditional gender roles and family values. Hillary Clinton, during her time as First Lady and her subsequent political campaigns, serves as an example of this phenomenon. Despite being a renowned advocate for women's rights and having a successful law career prior to her husband's presidency, Clinton often adopted the persona of a dedicated wife and mother, showcasing her baking skills and discussing family life in interviews (Swinth, 2012). This strategic approach enabled her to navigate the complex expectations of women in the political landscape, appealing to voters who valued traditional gender roles, while also advocating for feminist issues. This paradoxical portrayal of an elite woman engaging in public activism while also embodying the temperament of a "housewife" can be seen as a calculated attempt to navigate the complexities of gender expectations within the political landscape.

On the other hand, feminism is politically instrumented by capitalism to maintain the international order. The negative stereotypes about how developing countries treat the rights and interests of women often lead to the paternalistic attitude of feminist cooperation, which is especially common in the discourse system of white-dominated elite feminism (Smith, 2011). Some developed countries with a nationalistic stance routinely use post-colonialism to construct themselves as inherently superior societies to developing countries, which are then portrayed as barbaric societies that are fundamentally violent and disrespectful to women. For example, many people in Jordan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and other developing countries believe that feminism is a form of neocolonialism in the system of western-centered discourse, and it is often perceived as an inappropriate intervention into the locals' way of life (Rajan and Thornhill, 2019). This is why feminist cooperation between low- and high-income countries often leads to difficulties, failures, and other unexpected negative consequences. Indeed, a growing

concern is that feminism in the Global North, in some contexts, can be co-opted as a political instrument that serves to promote the cultural supremacy of Western civilization. This is evident when feminist rhetoric is used to underscore the elegance, sophistication, and modernity of Western societies, thereby inadvertently undermining the cultural confidence of non-Western countries.

The cause of gender inequality: capitalism or patriarchy?

An exploration of the origins of women's issues and the roles of capital and gender in these issues is a critical undertaking. By elucidating these connections, we can deepen our understanding of why the quest for women's liberation should be seen as a confrontation against capitalism, and why solidarity between men and women is imperative. This analysis ultimately enables us to navigate towards a sustainable path for women's liberation within the context of feminism's ongoing existential and alienation crises.

The historical foundation of women's issues: class oppression stemming from the primacy of material production over reproductive labor.

In any given society, production encompasses both reproductive labor and material production. In primary societies predicted on kinship relationships, reproductive labor held a paramount role due, and women of high held high status within such societies. This is well-documented by Leacock (1981) in "Myths of Male Dominance: Collected Articles on Women Cross-Culturally", where she challenged the mainstream notion of male superiority across all societies through her analyses of numerous indigenous communities.

The societal structure of certain indigenous societies in the Amazon rainforest serves as an illustrative example. These kinship-based societies traditionally held reproductive labor (e.g., childbirth and childcare) in high regard, granting women a correspondingly elevated societal status. However, with the encroachment of external influences, such as modern agricultural technology and commodity-based economies, material production has gained prominence, overshadowing reproductive labor. This societal evolution has led to men's increased focus on material production and subsequent accrual of economic power. Conversely, women have found themselves progressively relegated to the domestic sphere, resulting in their socio-economic marginalization. These shifts highlight a concerning trend: the ascendancy of material production is eclipsing the significance of reproductive labor, fueling gender inequality and precipitating a decline in women's status.

The devaluation and marginalization of women's primary labor—childbirth and child-rearing—within new economic structures signify a distressing societal transition. As material production has surpassed reproductive labor in societal importance, wealth accumulation has become the primary objective of social production. Friedrich Engels asserted that, "the first division of labor is that between man and woman for child breeding", "the first class antithesis which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamy was a great historical advance, but at the same time, it inaugurated, along with slavery and private wealth, that epoch, surviving to this day" (Engels, 1990, p. 173). Engels' assertion highlights how societal structures and economic conditions have historically marginalized women, a trend that continues today.

In the contemporary era, this gender oppression takes the form of economic inequality under capitalism. Engels argued that the inequality between men and women before the law, which is a

legacy of previous social conditions, is not the cause but the effect of the economic oppression of women (Engels, 1990, p. 181). This is corroborated by numerous studies which show that biological differences between the sexes do not drive gender inequality. Instead, social relations—shaping preferences, behaviors, and skills—are the primary contributors to gender inequality (Fernandez, 2013).

Under capitalism, these adverse social relations manifest in the labor market. Women, often seen as a source of cheap labor, become a readily exploitable resource for the appropriation of surplus value. However, gender is only one axis of oppression under capitalism. Other forms of discrimination based on factors like age, race, and immigration status also facilitate capital accumulation (UN Women, 2020). The intersection of these multiple identities exacerbates women's vulnerability and increases their risk of exploitation. Therefore, women's liberation is inseparable from broader efforts toward labor liberation and universal human liberation.

Gender oppression: an instrument serving class oppression. To understand the intricate relationship between gender oppression and class rule throughout human history, it is essential to recognize that patriarchy serves as a tool for class oppression, emerging as a superstructure stemming from private ownership and not as an independent entity in a capitalist society. Furthermore, its subjection to class oppression varied in different social forms, as seen in feudal societies where patriarchy was under the dominion of the landlord class (Dahlerup, 2018). The feudal system entailed strict control over marriage and property inheritance, which further solidified the position of women as property or commodities to be exchanged between families. Women's subordination and limited rights allowed the landlord class to exert greater control over the population, reinforcing their dominance and authority.

As private ownership evolved into capitalist expansion, the nature of patriarchy also transformed. The private form of patriarchy, practiced within households, gave way to capitalist patriarchy, which now operates in both public and private spheres. Capitalists, through the reconstruction of labor–capital relations, have achieved a two-fold goal. For instance, the phenomenon of the “flexible labor market” serves as a concrete example of this manipulation. This strategy involves increasing part-time, temporary, and informal work, often disproportionately filled by women. This flexibility allows capitalists to adjust the labor force according to market demand and to reduce costs associated with full-time, permanent employees, such as health insurance and pensions (Standing, 1989; Levitt, 2021). On one hand, they have shaped a more disciplined army of industrial reserve workers. On the other hand, they have increased the reproductive labor cost borne by the family. This mechanism subordinates a woman's choice between “working” and “returning home” to the needs of capital accumulation.

However, the value of women's unpaid labor remains hidden within the confines of private labor, preventing it from being recognized as essential social labor. This concealment contributes to the perpetuation of class oppression caused by capitalism, which often goes uncriticized. In this context, patriarchy becomes the primary target of attack for the women's movement, sometimes overshadowing the broader implications of capitalist exploitation. A prime example of this phenomenon is the #MeToo movement, which rightfully exposed and challenged patriarchal power structures enabling sexual misconduct and abuse, resonating globally (Mendes et al., 2019). However, the #MeToo movement is not immune to criticism; it has been characterized by inherent ambiguity and an individual-centric

focus, which at times obscured its grassroots origins in the work of Tarana Burke, an African–American civil rights activist, due to overwhelming media attention on its high-profile supporters (Rottenberg, 2019).

Moreover, the transformative societal impact of the #MeToo movement is susceptible to political forces, hindering its ability to comprehensively address the intersecting issues faced by working-class women, who often experience compounded forms of discrimination and exploitation. For instance, scholarly analysis of U.S. media coverage revealed a shift in the portrayal of the #MeToo movement as politicized and polarized following the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court. Consequently, media attention shifted away from acknowledging the tensions of race and class within the #MeToo movement, focusing instead on its perceived polarization along political party lines (Earle, 2019).

In conclusion, the interweaving of patriarchal norms and power dynamics in different social forms highlights the close relationship between gender oppression and class rule throughout human history. As Marx and Engels (1976) aptly stated in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (p.482). By recognizing these interconnected aspects, we gain a better understanding of how patriarchy, capitalism, and feminism movements intersect to shape the struggle for gender equality and social justice. It is crucial for the women's movement to address not only patriarchal power dynamics but also the underlying economic structures perpetuating gender oppression and exploitation. Doing so will facilitate a more comprehensive and lasting societal transformation.

Back to Marx: where do we go from the crossroads?

The double-bind by which feminism today is confronted essentially oscillates between two key issues in feminist theory and politics: production and reproduction (Payne & Tornhill, 2023). In general, the modern women's movement leads to two totally different social visions. The first vision depicts an exploitative world centered on individualism, where a few elite women oppress the vast majority of proletarian women by utilizing capital. The second vision heralds a world made up of free individuals who enjoy gender liberation, the elimination of exploitation, and social solidarity. The need for a comprehensive and in-depth analysis is crucial to understanding the complex interactions between patriarchy, capitalism, and the women's movement.

At the present social crossroads, faced with the complex interplay of capitalism and the feminist movement, returning to Marx's analysis becomes a key to repositioning and guiding the movement. Marx's views not only delve into the roots of class oppression but also emphasize the role of the capitalist system in shaping gender roles and inequalities. By revisiting the nature of capitalism and its influence on social structure, we can reassess the challenges and opportunities of modern feminism and find potential paths for alliance with labor and other social movements. The return to Marxist analysis helps to ensure that the feminist movement is not misled by superficial reforms of capitalism but is committed to achieving deeper social transformation.

As we delve into the complexities of gender oppression and its intersection with class rule throughout human history, it becomes imperative to heed Marx's insight that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Marx and Engels, 1974, p.64). This fundamental tenet of Marxist analysis highlights how the prevailing

ideology in society, shaped by the ruling class, influences and reinforces existing power structures.

We believe that the way to achieve the second social vision is by returning to the Marxist critique of capitalism. As our analysis shows, capitalism not only perpetuates gender oppression but also undermines the goals of feminism. The prevailing capitalist ideology not only fails to address the root causes of women's issues but also directly contributes to the oppression and exploitation of gender. In capitalist societies, women's unpaid reproductive labor, such as childcare and domestic work, is often devalued and marginalized, leading to gender inequality and relegating women to a secondary position in the labor market (Levitt, 2021). Neoliberalism and neoconservatism, both superstructures constructed by capitalism, serve to dismantle the power of social solidarity and narrow feminism to representatives of a small elite, further exacerbating gender inequality and economic exploitation (Molyneux et al., 2021).

Marxist analysis provides valuable insights into the intersectionality of gender and class. "Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e., as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will" (Marx and Engels, 1974, pp. 46–47). Thus, the material conditions of capitalism directly influence and shape the relations between men and women. The subordination of women is not inherent to their biological attributes but rather a result of the specific economic arrangements within capitalist society (Fernandez, 2013). In this context, Nancy Fraser's critique adds another layer of complexity, arguing that feminist valorizations of waged labor have at times "provided a key ingredient" in legitimizing capitalist value accumulation (Fraser, 2009). This underscores the nuanced interplay between feminism and capitalist structures.

The problem is that, as contemporary feminism turns to "embrace" neoliberalism or "retreat" to neoconservatism, the focus of women's issues has shifted from "why women are oppressed and how to end this oppression" to "what it means to be a woman". The emphasis on female autonomy and agency overlooks the complexities of the relationship between social/cultural and psychic dimensions (Gill, 2007). As a result, structural gender inequality and appeals for women's liberation have been obscured and marginalized. The co-optation of feminism by capitalist forces has led to the fragmentation of the women's movement and the dilution of its transformative potential. To realize women's liberation together with labor and human liberation, all possible social forces must be united in eradicating gender exploitation and other forms of exploitation perpetuated by capitalism.

Contemporary feminism must recognize the importance of a united front against capitalism and seek alliances with other social movements advocating for labor justice, environmental justice, and anti-racism. By building solidarities across various struggles, feminists can effectively challenge the systemic roots of gender oppression and create meaningful change. As capitalism continues to adapt and co-opt dissenting voices, it becomes even more essential for feminists to reorient their struggle towards a class-conscious approach.

In Marx's time, the development of capitalism increased industry and created a large number of closely united and powerful proletariat. However, contemporary capitalism has made various adaptive adjustments to the system of ownership,

labor-capital relations, and the mechanisms of economic regulation in order to ease labor-capital conflicts and eliminate various forms of protests. Against this background, internal conflicts of interest within exploited groups have been created and intensified. As a result, the fighting forces against capitalism have been diluted and divided. Therefore, the unification of diverse struggles under a common cause is essential to challenge the multifaceted structures of oppression perpetuated by capitalism.

In conclusion, by picking up Marx's critique and analysis of capitalism again, we can find a way out of the current social crossroads. This return does not mean simply replicating past theories but flexibly applying Marx's insights to today's gender issues and social challenges. As Marx pointed out, the capitalist system is complex and changeable, but its fundamental impact on labor and gender relations remains. Only by thoroughly understanding these impacts can we find the path to truly liberate women and all oppressed people. This path requires us to go beyond reforms within the capitalist system and seek fundamental social change. At this crucial historical moment, returning to Marx is not only a re-identification of theory but also a strategic direction, guiding us towards real liberation and social justice.

End the marginalization of Marxist feminism

Marxist feminism in general had for decades fallen off the radar of feminist activism and scholarship (Carbin, 2021). Despite offering profound insights into how capitalism shapes and maintains gender inequality, it's often seen as overly theoretical and difficult to popularize. For instance, since the 1980s, under the push of capitalist globalization, many feminist movements have preferred to work with solutions within the capitalist system rather than questioning the entire system. Feminism must rise to the occasion of the current crisis that capitalism can, at best, displace but cannot solve. "A true resolution requires nothing less than an entirely new form of social organization" (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 80). Specifically, some third-wave feminists have advocated implementing gender equality measures in corporate settings, such as promoting boardroom gender diversity or collaborating with governments to formulate female-friendly policies, rather than directly challenging the fundamental structure of capitalism. As Budgeon (2015) criticized, choice feminism overlooks the complexity of feminism's relationship with individual choice in the context of late capitalism, leading to an individuated neoliberal feminist subject that supports the reproduction of neoliberal governmentality. This has confined the influence of Marxist feminism in mainstream politics and academia.

Although the reasons for the marginalization of Marxist feminism are complex and multifaceted, generally speaking, as Marx and Engels (1974) insightfully described, "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (p. 64).

On the one hand, the power structures within the capitalist system may resist any theory that might threaten the status quo, making it difficult to gain support and spread. Compared to mainstream feminism, like liberal feminism, Marxist feminist positions might be seen as too radical and theoretical, not meeting the practical needs of the current political climate. For

example, many governments and corporations might favor more moderate feminist theories compatible with the existing economic system (Kantola and Squires, 2012). On the other hand, ideological conflicts and divisions within the feminist movement are also significant factors. Different factions might have diverging ideas and goals, with some more inclined to pursue individual freedom and choice, ignoring the fundamental inequality under capitalism (Butler, 2013). This split might lead to the marginalization of Marxist feminist perspectives.

As pointed out in *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, this iteration of capitalism has raised the stakes for every social struggle, transforming some efforts to win model reforms into pitched battles for survival. Under such conditions, the time for fence-sitting is past (Arruzza et al., 2019, pp. 3–4). Ending the marginalization of Marxist feminism requires concerted efforts. Firstly, strengthening education and promotion of Marxist feminism needs to be more than just spreading its core ideas. It's about re-imagining and implementing it in today's globalized capitalist world. The active participation of scholars and activists is vital in promoting Marxist feminism. This involvement is crucial to ensure its place in academia and social movements, and to emphasize the connection between theory and practice. The work of renowned Marxist feminist scholars and the success of grassroots campaigns can provide deep insights into how theory translates into real-world change. Furthermore, Marxist feminism can't stand alone. It should be applied flexibly and creatively to different cultural and political contexts. This adaptability will make it a global tool for tackling current challenges. Building alliances with other social justice movements, such as labor, environmental, and anti-racist groups, is essential. By doing so, we can underscore its global perspective and promote cooperation and innovation across cultures and borders. Additionally, we must pay attention to how new technologies and media intertwine with Marxist feminism, and how these tools can be leveraged to broaden its impact and promote its wider acceptance.

In summary, to advance Marxist feminism onto a broader stage, it must be integrated with reality, actively cooperate with other social forces, adapt flexibly to different cultural and political environments, and effectively utilize modern tools to foster its education and promotion. Only through such means can Marxist feminism truly become a potent tool for promoting global change.

Conclusion

Based on our analysis, we assert that contemporary feminism is at a crossroads, being influenced by both neoliberalism and neo-conservatism and that it has, to a certain extent, aligned itself with the mainstream discourse of capitalism. This alignment risks causing feminism to increasingly deviate from the original goal of women's liberation, and to become immersed in the discourse on self-construction, power, and confrontation. With a lessened focus on the critique against capitalism, structural gender inequality may be obscured, and the needs of the majority of women for survival and development could be ignored. Within the bounds of capitalism, whether by "working" or "returning home", women are often used for internal accumulation and the external expansion of capital. The uneasy relationship between feminism and capitalism reveals inherent contradictions that challenge the ideals of both. It will be challenging for human society to alter the capitalist-led gender oppression system without a deep understanding of the plight, alienation, and limitations of contemporary feminism. To realize this goal, we must go back to Marx. Only by interpreting women's bodily autonomy and power from the perspective of material life and class reproduction, and by uniting various social forces against capitalism with

practical actions, can feminism regain its strength. When the day comes, history will confirm that true gender equality is not merely the promotion of individual choice for a few, but the emancipation of all, and Marxism will be recorded once again in the history of human liberation.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analyzed.

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Author contributions

LJ conceived the idea for the present study, as well as the original draft preparation, and was responsible for the conception and design of the work. Both LJ and YW drafted the manuscript and revised it critically for essential intellectual content. Both authors have approved the final version to be published and ensured that questions related to the accuracy and integrity of any part of the work were appropriately investigated and resolved.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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