

# A feminist critique of social reproduction theory<sup>1</sup>

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I first started reading Christine Delphy's work in early 2014, a few months after moving to France and determined to improve my French while also pursuing my interest in feminism<sup>2</sup>. I found *L'ennemi principal* Tome I dense and difficult to follow, but I spent hours poring over it, making copious pages of hand-written notes. It was enthralling and immensely rewarding. A few years later, I have discovered various points of difference with Delphy, but the rigour, consistency, clarity, and integrity of her writing still leaves me as excited as when I first discovered it. Her writing has had a profound influence on me, both as a researcher and as an activist.

For example, Delphy's work has been of great help in my recent research on social reproduction theory (SRT). This theory was originally developed by Marxist feminists in the 1970s and is currently in vogue in many feminist academic and activist circles, especially in the Anglophone world. The central concern of SRT is the analysis of the 'daily' and 'intergenerational' reproduction of labour power (that is, workers). 'Daily' reproduction refers to the activities that keep people alive and healthy, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, the sick and elderly; and 'intergenerational' reproduction refers to the activities that keep the population of workers alive across generations, such as gestation and childbirth. Consequently, SRT focuses on the work that is generally assigned to women and its central role in society's functioning. It argues that this work is central to capitalism because women's intergenerational reproduction produces new generations of workers, and our daily reproduction maintains existing workers. If women did not do this work, SRT argues, capitalism would have to pay for it. Women's free labour therefore facilitates the extraction of value.

I was, and am, intrigued by this branch of feminist thought, which often seems to be used in ways that are useful to feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist organising. However, revisiting Delphy's critiques of various related Marxist and socialist feminist arguments led me to question my initial positive impressions.

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<sup>1</sup> La version française de ce texte a paru dans « Faire avec Delphy », *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* (41/2, 2022) sous le titre « Une critique féministe de la théorie de la reproduction sociale ».

<sup>2</sup> I thank Yasmine G. and Sarrah Kassem for their feedback on this article and Sarah for her help with the French translation.

Firstly, Delphy argues, the argument that capitalism would be forced to pay for the reproduction of workers if women did not do it is false<sup>3</sup>. It is not true that, if women stopped this work, capitalism would have to step in to fill the gap. Instead, each worker could simply reproduce him- or herself. Indeed, even under the current system many people reproduce themselves: single men do, and so do women, married or not. Delphy's argument draws attention to the fact that SRT does not explain why it is specifically *women's* unpaid work that must reproduce workers. In this way, SRT ignores the inequality between men and women that leads to large differences in the amount of work undertaken within couples.

A second problem is that SRT does not explain the oppression of women across social classes. If women are oppressed due to the work that we do to reproduce workers whose labour is then exploited by capitalism, what of those women who are not in relationships with workers, but with business owners, academics, or CEOs? SRT would seem to imply that these women are not oppressed because their partners are not exploited by capitalism. It is certainly true that such women are likely to live in material comfort, but they are still vulnerable to domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment both within and outside their relationship. They also almost certainly carry a greater burden of household labour (i.e. daily reproduction), though they have the option of outsourcing parts of this labour to working class women. Finally, many are vulnerable to rapid downward class mobility if their relationship ends, particularly if they have children. If we follow the logic of SRT, it would seem that a woman can only be considered oppressed if her male partner is oppressed due to his class. As Delphy points out, this shows that while SRT understands marriage to distinguish between women of different classes, marriage is in fact what unites us: dependence is a common characteristic of most women regardless of our class<sup>4</sup>. Thus, in SRT, women's oppression is not understood as existing in its own right, and large parts of this oppression—shared across classes—are ignored.

A third way in which Delphy's work reveals problems with SRT is in her critique of "naturalism", which she shares with other French materialist feminists such as Colette Guillaumin and Nicole-Claude Mathieu. This term refers to the understanding that inequality between men and women is caused by natural differences. Often these differences are understood to be biological, located in genes and hormones for example. Perhaps most

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<sup>3</sup> See Christine Delphy and Louis Astre, 2013. "Le patriarcat : une oppression spécifique", in *L'ennemi principal 2. Penser le genre*. Paris: Syllepse, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Delphy, 2016 [1977]. "Our friends and ourselves". In *Close to home: a materialist analysis of women's oppression*. London, New York: Verso, pp. 91–92.

commonly, naturalism understands the inequality between men and women to arise from the fact that women give birth. This is the case in SRT.

The naturalism of SRT arises from the link made between daily and generational reproduction. This link implies that women undertake daily reproduction because we undertake intergenerational reproduction, that is, because we give birth. It could be argued that women undertake intergenerational reproduction and daily reproduction and that there is no inherent link between the two, but few social reproduction theorists make this argument. Instead, they leave the implied link between generational and daily reproduction unquestioned. However, the work of Delphy and others shows us that there is no necessary link between giving birth and the tasks of daily reproduction.

Pregnancy and childbirth are usually portrayed as a natural, spontaneous and biological acts. In reality, however, they are closely controlled, and governed by male domination. For example, pregnancy can be prevented by contraception, halted by abortion, or brought into being by the acts of wanting a child and engaging in penis-in-vagina sex. After birth, as Delphy has shown throughout her work, there is nothing natural about women doing the majority of child-rearing and household work (daily reproduction)—instead, this constitutes the appropriation of women's labour and it is part of the basis of patriarchy. As these arguments demonstrate, nothing about daily and generational reproduction is “natural”—from sex to conception to birth to the multitude of tasks associated with daily reproduction, these tasks and their assignment to women are entirely social.

In contrast to this social understanding of daily and intergenerational reproduction, the idea implied by social reproduction theorists that women undertake daily reproduction because we give birth leaves out a great deal. Hiding behind this easy conflation of daily and intergenerational reproduction is a complex array of relations of domination between the sexes. Social reproduction theorists systematically fail to fill in this gap. They also fail to explain that daily reproduction does not stem naturally from intergenerational reproduction, and moreover that the imposition of daily and intergenerational reproduction on women is a social phenomenon governed by male domination. This means that readers are likely to fall back on dominant ideas linking daily reproduction to intergenerational reproduction, which imply on some level that women are simply naturally different to men and that this difference is the root cause of our oppression. Such differentialist arguments have been used to justify women's oppression for centuries, and continue to be so used today.

In contrast, Delphy calls for a more profound investigation of the nature of women's oppression. She states: "...any conception that is not resolutely and radically antinaturalist is naturalist and differentialist, differentialist because it is naturalist and naturalist because it is differentialist"<sup>5</sup>. SRT fails to meet this standard of resolute and radical antinaturalism, instead falling back on a naturalist conception of women's oppression which itself forms part of the basis of that oppression.

Despite my critique of SRT, I still often find the discussion and use of this theory intriguing, and the way it has been taken up by activists and theorists exciting. It is a theory that easily incorporates discussion of the intersection of gender with class and race, illuminating various forms of low- or unpaid work in poor conditions and its disproportionate assignation to women, particularly working class, racialised and migrant women<sup>6</sup>. I feel like a killjoy when I raise issues of theoretical consistency when SRT appears to be so useful. This raises the question of the relationship between theory and politics—if activists are taking up this theory in ways that advance feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle, do its underlying problems really matter?

Once again, Delphy helps to answer this question, this time through her discussion of 'parity' in French politics. This term refers to a 1999 law mandating that women must constitute 50% of electoral lists in certain circumstances. While most feminists would argue that more women in politics is uncontroversially good, Delphy and other materialists critiqued the naturalist and differentialist arguments that certain feminists made in favour of parity. Instead, the materialists argued for an anti-naturalist approach based on affirmative action. The parity arguments won the day, and as a result, the idea that women should be equally represented in politics because of their differences and complementarity to men was enshrined in French law. Delphy argues that although the outcome—more women in politics—appears the same, it is actually a different outcome because of the means by which it was achieved. As she writes: "The means cannot be differentiated from the ends. It is not... a discussion about alternative means to arrive at the same end, but a discussion about the end itself"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Delphy. 2015. *Pour une théorie générale de l'exploitation. Des différentes formes d'extorsion de travail aujourd'hui*, p. 28. Paris: Syllepse.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the essays at <https://www.societyandspace.org/forums/beyond-binaries-and-boundaries-in-social-reproduction> (last consulted April 23, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Christine Delphy. 2015. *Pour une théorie générale de l'exploitation. Des différentes formes d'extorsion de travail aujourd'hui*, p. 38. Paris : Syllepse.

The issue of SRT is obviously very different to that of parity, but Delphy's reasoning helped me better understand my discomfort with the problems with this theory. SRT may be productively used to achieve certain short-term goals for women, such as improved working conditions in certain industries. But perhaps those short-term improvements would look different if they were driven by a different logic, one that more fully captured and took seriously women's oppression. And what will happen if the logic of SRT is pursued further, beyond short-term to long-term goals? It is of course impossible to predict, but I do not think that a theory that ignores large parts of women's oppression while severely misrepresenting its nature can lead us to genuine liberation.

### **Postscript**

Aside from her intellectual rigour and unflinching pursuit of theory to underpin women's liberation, there is another reason why I so value Christine Delphy's work. As is also the case in other social movements, many feminists tend to focus exclusively on the oppression of women, while being apparently unaware of or uninterested in other systems of oppression. Being a racialised woman who has never experienced sexism alone, I frequently find myself attempting to convince other—mostly white—feminists that racism (and classism, and ableism, and speciesism...) also exist and are also important. Further, it is a major conviction of mine that feminists should avoid being instrumentalised by and certainly should not actively work with the wide range of conservatives and proto-fascists who would like to piggy-back off our work for their own ends, which are freedom-destroying for large groups of people, including women. All of which in no way negates the importance of theorising and fighting against women's oppression as a distinct system of oppression, as I hope the rest of this article has demonstrated. It is however not uncommon for me to discover that a feminist whose work I admire holds views on racism that I find abhorrent. I then spend far too much energy trying to decide whether this is the sad result of simple ignorance or indifference to racism on their part, or a more generalised problem which should call into question the entirety of their work—and whether it is politically coherent for me to like their feminist work at all. All of which is to say that Christine Delphy's sustained and consistent commitment to anti-racism (at least up until now) and her application to it of a similar rigour and clarity as to her feminist work, makes reading and building with and from her work profoundly *restful* in a way that is true of few other white feminists. Delphy's work—along with that of a small number of other white women—allows me to believe that an anti-racist feminist movement is possible.