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**A Necessarily Historical Materialist Moment? Feminist Reflections on  
the Need for Grounded Critique in an Age of Crisis**

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Abstract:

*Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* reminds us how particular moments and events, albeit ones produced by systemic and reiterative processes, warrant serious reflection by scholars seeking to highlight and challenge modes of oppression and inequality. In drawing attention to the 'violence of abstraction' the book creates space for reconsidering how we move beyond modes of critique that focus primarily on principles, to those more rooted in historical and sociological practices. In this regard, the book has much in common with many branches of feminist theory which have sought to undermine the violence of abstraction, instead drawing attention to the lived and gendered consequences of global capital, war and crisis. Nonetheless, although the book engages directly and productively with some branches of feminist thought, greater reflection on points of convergence and divergence would highlight more of the book's blindspots and wider contributions. Accordingly, I consider what opportunities the book offers for rethinking feminist critique after the postmodern turn and in an age of crises, and what contemporary feminist theory in turn offers historical materialism. I ultimately aim to show how the present, and the historical and sociological forces that shape it, is necessarily both a historical materialist *and* feminist moment.

The necessity of making sense of our current moment, one characterised, as Bieler and Morton suggest, by the interconnected forces of global capitalism, global war and global crisis is clear. Given the continuing body counts attributable to the prioritisation of rapid economic and industrial growth over ecology, to the expansion of expeditionary and pre-emptive warfare, and to the liberalisation and deregulation of economies that has reduced social welfare safety nets around the globe to tatters, it is pertinent to ask, as Bieler and Morton do '*what had to have happened in the past for capitalism as a mode of production to emerge and consolidate?*'<sup>i</sup>. One of Bieler and Morton's central aims in approaching this question is to revolt against the 'violence of abstraction', which drawing on Sayer's<sup>ii</sup> seminal work, they describe as eschewing the fetishization of concepts in favour of analysing specific social relations rooted in specific historical and sociological practices<sup>iii</sup>. Feminist scholars have similarly asked how patriarchy – as a set of power relations - has come about, also advocating paying very close attention to how historical social relations in different parts of the world shape people's presents. Just as Bieler and Morton argue that historical materialism 'does not relegate the "economic" or the "political" to *spatially separate spheres* but conceives of the social constitution of the economy so that relations of production are embodied in juridical-political and ideological forms'<sup>iv</sup>, so too have feminists shown how the political, economic, juridical and ideological have worked with and through each other to substantiate patriarchal social relations that often normalise the spatial separation of social spheres.

In Carol Pateman's influential work on the sexual contract for example, she examines how distinguishing men's roles from women's roles was integral to the modern conception of the state<sup>v</sup>. Focusing on Rousseau's notion of the social contract, which implies a consensus-based politics between the governed and those who govern, Pateman argues, by focusing on historically and socially embedded power relations, that as well as having been created by men, the social contract was built upon political arrangements that established and normalised men's dominance over private family life as well as in so called public life. Showing how the growth of the factory industry and the demise of home working and cottage industries in Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards meant that women began to stay in their homes whilst men went out to work, she looks at changes in the everyday material conditions for women who, no longer having access to learning craft and production skills - unlike men who went out to put these skills into practice in paid employment - became almost entirely engaged in domestic labour. The separation of home and workplace also meant that it became harder for women to juggle work and childcare<sup>vi</sup> and by the nineteenth century, the idea that a woman's place was in the home - or among the lower social classes, in other people's homes - had become entrenched in European capitalist societies.

What Pateman's work illuminates are specific conditions under which patriarchy and capitalism began to work with and through one another,

becoming institutionalised and systemic to privilege the masculinised and entrepreneurial over the feminised and communal in certain parts of the world. In so doing, she too eschews a violence of abstraction in favour of an analysis rooted in specific historical, geographic, and sociological practices as Bieler and Morton advocate. In this vein, Bieler and Morton rightly pay much attention - often by drawing on Federici's important insights on the social factory - to the contributions that women and gendered power relations make to sustaining unwaged activities of consumption and leisure that have proven to be so vital to the reproduction of the self as worker and thus to the reproduction of capitalism outside the workplace. In so doing, they acknowledge that patriarchal interests often converge with the interests of capital. Yet they stop short of expounding a theory of "capitalist patriarchy" which as Eisenstein has argued, acknowledges the historic and existing mutual dependence of patriarchy and capitalism. Their dialectical relationship, Eisenstein posits, 'must be understood if the structure of oppression is to be changed'; or, put more simply, the 'capitalist class structure *and* the hierarchical sexual structuring of society are the problem'<sup>vii</sup>.

Bieler and Morton helpfully reject a '*concordant unity*' between race, gender, ecology and sexuality in favour of holding these 'political identities' in '*combative unity*', but in identifying race, gender, ecology and sexuality as political identities, and in arguing that they are 'internally constitutive of class'<sup>viii</sup>, they ultimately limit their capacity to take the dialectical

relationship between patriarchy and capital as seriously as they should. In rejecting Gibson-Graham's non-essentialist feminist critique of political economy, Bieler and Morton elucidate the difference between capitalism and gender for them as one of capitalism having an essence and gender as socially constructed. They argue that whereas a capitalist firm would cease to exist if the essential compulsion for competition and the appropriation of surplus value at the heart of capitalism disappeared, a "woman" would still continue to exist outside of essentialist notions that have come to define womanhood, such as motherhood. Though many feminists would also reject such essentialisms, this juxtaposing of capitalism and womanhood obscures the systemic and stubborn nature of the complex web of ideas and material relations that is patriarchy<sup>ix</sup>. When patriarchy is theorised as primarily a matter of how men, capitalism or both subordinate women then it is easy to see how disrupting those logics of subordination would, in Bieler and Morton's words, enable a woman to 'continue to exist, survive and thrive...without recourse to an essential definition grounded in motherhood or gender'<sup>x</sup>. However, when viewed as a 'multidisciplinary ideology that affects everyone – men and women alike – across multiple cultures, histories, religions, economics, geographies and institutions'<sup>xi</sup>, it is far harder to discern how womanhood can become intelligible in ways that run counter to the hegemonic ideas and material conditions perpetuated by patriarchy. Patriarchy, as a power structure, not only predates capitalism but exists 'under a variety of modes of production – slavery, feudalism, capitalism', and has a clear ability to reconstitute itself to changing conditions so 'while it has a specific relationship to the household and to

capitalism’ – as illustrated by Pateman’s aforementioned historically and sociologically rooted analysis – ‘it exists outside of the household and often persists despite changes in the form and function of the household’<sup>xii</sup>.

What this also means is that it is vital to consider is how patriarchy’s relationship with capital is articulated in different parts of the world.

Pateman’s sexual contract for example, was never meant to offer a universal theory of patriarchy, though it has been utilised beyond the Anglo-American context she applied it to<sup>xiii</sup>, but as postcolonial, black and a growing body of Marxist feminists have argued, some schools of feminist thought all too readily universalise. Bieler and Morton’s *combative unity* approach has some capacity to contribute to this critique. As Salem argues of the concept of intersectionality, it ‘has now become one of the dominant ways of doing feminist research, and in that process has been stretched to include many different ontologies that are often in conflict with one another’, with the effect of representing feminism ‘as a field that is simply “diverse”, rather than (also) conflictual’<sup>xiv</sup>. As Salem suggests, the problem with this is that intersectionality becomes simply about acknowledging difference rather than inequality, undermining its radical potential. For Salem, as for Eisenstein, the answer to this is to think dialectically so that class becomes co-constitutive of race, gender and other social categories to the extent that none can be spoken about separately but at the same time, grounding our analyses of intersectionality in our contemporary context, which happens to be capitalism. Importantly, Salem argues that this grounding ‘must take



into account that capitalism articulates itself differently depending on the particular social settings, and is thus not universal; its organization and effects are not uniform<sup>xv</sup>. In so doing, her work invites us to explore *how* these categories 'are created, how they exploit and not simply oppress, and *why* they intersect<sup>xvi</sup>, and through this to a 'form of feminist solidarity through material conditions' which can take into account, among other things, how the living conditions of women in the Global North so often rely on the exploitation of men and women in the Global South<sup>xvii</sup>.

By analysing class as co-constitutive of race, gender and other social categories, and not race, gender and other social categories as constitutive of class, as Bieler and Morton advocate, we can more readily understand and thus challenge how capitalism manifests in different settings and what emerges from the particular conflicts between it and other social relations in different parts of the world. There is not one struggle but many. Patriarchy may predate capitalism but both characterise our contemporary world.

Asking ourselves what had to have happened in the past for capitalism as a mode of production, and patriarchy as a mode of social relations, to emerge and consolidate is thus vital in this necessarily historically materialist *and* feminist moment.

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- <sup>i</sup> Andreas Bieler & Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), p.11.
- <sup>ii</sup> Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytical Foundations of Historical Materialism* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
- <sup>iii</sup> Andreas Bieler & Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), p.10.
- <sup>iv</sup> Andreas Bieler & Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), p.10.
- <sup>v</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).
- <sup>vi</sup> Alice Clark, *Working life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1982).
- <sup>vii</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, 'Constructing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism', *Critical Sociology*, 5 (2-3), March 1999, pp.196-217: p.196, my emphasis.
- <sup>viii</sup> Andreas Bieler & Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), p. 133, original emphasis.
- <sup>ix</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Myriad, 2017).
- <sup>x</sup> Andreas Bieler & Adam David Morton, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018), p.138.
- <sup>xi</sup> Robert Bahlieda, 'The Legacy of Patriarchy', *Counterpoints*, 488, 2015, pp. 15-67: p. 17.
- <sup>xii</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2008), pp. 119-120.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Nirmal Puwar and Carole Pateman, 'Interview with Carole Pateman: "The Sexual Contract"', *Women in Politics, Globalization and Citizenship*, *Feminist Review*, 70, 2002, pp. 123-133.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Sara Salem, 'Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(4), 2018, pp.403-418: p.406.
- <sup>xv</sup> Sara Salem, 'Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(4), 2018, pp.403-418: pp.408-409.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sara Salem, 'Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(4), 2018, pp.403-418: p.408.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Sara Salem, 'Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(4), 2018, pp.403-418: p.411.