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The Marxist Feminism as a Historiographical Framework in the Second Wave of Feminism: A Critical Analysis

Di Hu ^{1,*}

¹ University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

* Correspondence: Di Hu, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom



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Abstract: Emerging in the 1960s alongside civil rights and anti-capitalist movements, the Second Wave of Feminism marked a turning point in feminist theory and activism. This paper critically analyzes the role of Marxist feminism as a historiographical framework during the Second Wave of Feminism, particularly in modern British feminist historical writing. It explores how Marxist feminism integrated gender and class analysis to expose the structural roots of women's oppression under capitalism. Drawing on the works of Engels, Sheila Rowbotham, Juliet Mitchell, Catherine Hall, and others, the study demonstrates how Marxist feminists challenged dominant historical narratives, deconstructed the private/public divide, and reconceptualized domestic labor as economically essential yet undervalued. The paper also assesses the limitations of traditional Marxist theory and how feminist scholars expanded it through interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of non-traditional sources in reconstructing marginalized women's histories. Ultimately, the paper argues that Marxist feminism not only reshaped feminist historiography but also laid foundational groundwork for intersectional and materialist feminist theories. Its continued relevance lies in its ability to critically address gender, race, and class within capitalist societies, making it an enduring influence in feminist thought and activism.

Keywords: Marxist feminism; second wave feminism; feminist historiography; intersectionality; domestic labor

1. Introduction

The Second Wave of Feminism, which began in the 1960s, arose in tandem with the civil rights movement, anti-racism efforts, anti-war protests in the United States, and various social movements in Europe. During this wave, feminists grew dissatisfied with merely achieving equality in rights with men. They recognized that attaining legal equality alone was insufficient to eliminate the oppression of women. Consequently, feminist thought turned to analyzing the systemic and cultural roots of female oppression. Theorists sought new frameworks to guide societal progress, leading many historians to explore Marxism as a potential solution for understanding and addressing the social inequities of Western societies.

Within feminism, debates over the roots of women's oppression and the pathways to liberation gave rise to various theoretical schools of thought. In these, three main theories emerged as the most influential: liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism. As Lorna Finlayson in *An Introduction to Feminism*, socialist feminism tied wom-

en's liberation to the broader socialist revolution, while radical feminism prioritized sexual revolution [1]. These perspectives were based by theories of class domination (socialist feminism) and sexual domination (radical feminism). Marxism conceptualized this historical form of class domination in modern industrial society as "capitalism". Same, feminists in the Second Wave identified "patriarchy" as the historical form of sexual domination, inherent in the bourgeois, monogamous family structure. They also argued that patriarchy and gender relations were central to understanding women's oppression.

In the historiography, Marxist feminism integrated Marxist economic analysis with gendered critique, challenging traditional feminist theories. This approach offered a new framework to the structures of oppression in modern industrial society, emphasizing the complementary necessity of both Marxism and feminism. These ideas were transformative for feminism preceding the Second Wave, introducing innovative and disruptive perspectives. In the Second Wave, historians have continuously debated, transformed, and reshaped the ways how history is written. Sue Morgan, in her "Theorising Feminist History: A Thirty-Year Retrospective", described this development as producing a rich feminist historiography [2].

As Marxist feminism argues that the oppression of women had deep class-based roots. First, it argued that women's oppression was not simply a matter of male domination over women but a manifestation of class exploitation by the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. Second, it recognized that the vast majority of women, compelled to work for their livelihood, faced the same forms of exploitation, oppression, and limitations on life choices. Finally, it highlighted that in capitalist society, women not only experienced oppression by men but also instances of women oppressing other women.

Marxist feminist research and development provided scholars of the Second Wave of Feminism with a robust analytical framework. Feminists sought to incorporate Marxist principles into the feminist movement, introducing a new dimension to understanding gender inequality. This approach underscored the dual oppression women faced under capitalism — as laborers in the public sphere and as unpaid caregivers in the private sphere. Reconceptualizing the family as a component of the capitalist system, rather than merely a private domain, marked a significant departure from traditional feminist thought [3].

This perspective challenged conventional views of gender roles and family structures, providing new insights into debates around domestic labor and economic dependency. It also emphasized the necessity of recognizing intersectionality within the women's movement, where gender oppression intersects with race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, influencing the lived experiences of women [4,5].

The ability of Marxist feminism to reshape modern British historiography lies in its deconstruction and reinterpretation of marriage, labor, and family within the capitalist system. Marxist revealed marriage as an exploitative way same as slavery, which offered modern British feminist historians' new methodologies and lenses to study the gendered history of the Second Wave of Feminism.

This paper aims to critically examines how modern British historians have employed Marxist feminist frameworks to understand the Second Wave of Feminism. It will explore the importance of Marxist feminist thought in shaping historiographical approaches to this pivotal era, emphasizing its lasting impact on contemporary feminist studies. It will include a literature review, a historical analysis of the study of Marxist feminism in the Second Wave, and a critical assessment of its interactions with broader feminist historiography.

2. Literature Review: The Importance of Marxist Feminist Theory in Historiography of the Second Wave of Feminism in Britain

To demonstrate the significance of Marxist feminist theory in the historiography of the second wave of feminism in Britain, this paper conducts a comprehensive review of

foundational texts and classic works, situating them within both British and global contexts.

So, then the article will explore the evolution of Marxist feminist historiography, from its theoretical origins, development to the wide discussions, and to examine how Marxist feminism has shaped modern British feminist historical writing broader social transformations.

2.1. Theoretical Roots of Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism emerged from Marxist theoretical explorations of the "woman question", particularly through the works of Friedrich Engels and later feminist scholars who expanded on his ideas. Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, argued that the emergence of private property marked the beginning of women's oppression. He contended that the material basis of women's subjugation stemmed from the gendered division of labor, wherein under capitalism, women's labor became confined to the private sphere. This relegated women to domestic tasks such as household management and childcare, deemed "private domestic labor". To break free from this oppressive state, Engels advocated for women to leave the home, join the workforce, and participate in public labour:

"As long as women are excluded from public production and restricted to private domestic labor, their liberation and equality with men, both now and in the future, remain improbable. Women's liberation becomes possible only when they can participate extensively and socially in production, with household labor consuming only minimal time." [6].

Engels argued that genuine gender equality could only be achieved through the abolition of capitalist exploitation and the transformation of domestic labor into a publicly organized industry, thereby challenging the gendered division of labour [7].

2.2. Limitations of Traditional Marxist Theory on Women's Labor

While Marxist theory provides a robust framework for analyzing the oppressive structures of modern industrial society, its focus on the "market" often neglects the complexities of the "family" as a site of gendered oppression. This division between the public and private spheres meant that labor within the private domain, often framed as "natural" or "instinctual", received little attention [7].

Feminist historians of the second wave recognized that women were promised "freedom" and "equality" during both bourgeois revolutions and socialist revolutions. However, these promises ultimately served male emancipation, leaving women with unfulfilled aspirations. Beyond identity and class, the theorization of "sex" as an independent variable became an urgent task.

2.3. Second Wave Feminism and Marxist Perspectives

In response, the late 1960s saw the emergence of feminist socialist historians who embarked on a large-scale rewriting of second wave feminist history. Sheila Rowbotham, in her seminal work *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, offered a Marxist feminist perspective. Rowbotham emphasized how capitalism historically marginalized women by confining them to domestic labor, particularly during industrialization. By analyzing women's roles in labor divisions — such as domestic work and caregiving — she exposed how capitalism relied on gendered divisions of labor to sustain its economic order. Rowbotham critically pointed out that domestic labor was deemed "natural" and "valueless", obscuring its essential role in the reproduction of capitalist production [8].

2.4. Influence on Feminist Historiography of Marriage and the Private Sphere

As discussed earlier, Marxist theory played a pivotal role in guiding feminist historians of the second wave in deconstructing marriage systems. For instance, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a cornerstone of liberal feminist thought during the second wave, introduced the concept of the "problem that has no name" to describe the plight of women trapped in domestic and marital lives [9]. Friedan argued:

"When society rarely inquires about women, each woman must listen to her own voice to find herself in this changing world. She must create a new blueprint for her life based on her needs and abilities, balancing love, children, and family — factors traditionally limiting women — with ambitious, future-oriented work." [10].

However, like many predecessors in liberal feminism, Friedan's work was criticized for conflating the experiences of white, middle-class women with those of all women. By overlooking the realities of other groups, her approach faced substantial critiques and accusations of exclusionary bias.

2.5. Contributions and Challenges of Marxist Feminist Historiography

Marxist feminism provided a new lens for feminist historiography, integrating gender issues with economic structures and class oppression. It highlighted the historical construction of women's roles and critiqued the gendered divisions of labor under capitalism. However, its application also revealed tensions within Marxist theory, particularly in addressing the complexities of the private sphere and the intersections of gender, class, and race.

The historiography of the second wave of feminism in Britain has been deeply enriched by Marxist feminist theory, which offers critical insights into the material and structural bases of women's oppression. By analyzing gender, labor, and class through a Marxist lens, feminist historians have reshaped our understanding of women's roles in history and highlighted the systemic roots of gender inequality. While challenges remain, particularly in addressing intersectionality and the diversity of women's experiences, Marxist feminist theory continues to provide a foundational framework for feminist historiography.

Hooks once remarked:

"Friedan's famous term 'the problem that has no name' is often cited to describe women's condition in this society. More precisely, it refers to the condition of a carefully selected group of college-educated, middle and upper-class, married white women — housewives bored with leisure, children, and shopping, who wanted more out of life." [11].

In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone argued that the most fundamental distinction is that of sex, rather than class division. She pointed out that women's reproductive function imposes the responsibilities of caring for and raising children within the family. However, Firestone proposed that the oppressive domination of women's sexual and reproductive roles could be overturned through revolutionary new technologies, such as birth control and artificial reproduction [12].

Additionally, seminal works such as Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Alexander's *Becoming a Woman: And Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, Taylor Barbara's *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, stand as defining contributions to Marxist feminist theory in modern British feminist historiography [2,9,13,14].

3. Transformational Role of Marxist Feminism in Second-Wave Feminist Historiography

The contribution of Marxist feminism to the second wave of feminism in Britain lies primarily in its theoretical deepening and methodological innovations.

3.1. *New Directions: From Class Analysis to the Intersection of Gender and Class*

In the historiographical study of the second wave of feminism, Marxist feminism introduced a paradigm shift that significantly influenced strategies and policies surrounding family, labor, and women's roles. This shift was characterized by a critical reevaluation of traditional family structures, emphasizing the family's role as an integral component of the capitalist system, and redefining domestic labor and its economic value.

1) Capitalism and Gender Inequality

Marxist feminism highlighted that gender inequality is rooted in the capitalist economic system, closely linking women's oppression with relations of production. This provided second-wave feminist research with a framework for situating gender oppression within broader socio-economic structures. While Marxist theory initially analyzed economic systems and class struggle as key factors, feminist scholars adapted and critiqued these mechanisms, asserting that gender oppression cannot be fully understood through materialist frameworks alone.

2) Critique and Expansion of Traditional Marxist Theory

Scholars recognized that traditional Marxist perspectives focused on material bases as a superstructural foundation, often overlooking the complex interplay of ideology and consciousness. This led to the incorporation of psychoanalysis into feminist theory, challenging both Marxist materialism and Freud's unconscious theory. Feminist historians sought to detach feminist theory from the naturalized and biological assumptions about gender roles [7].

3.2. *Key Contributions of Juliet Mitchell*

One of the most influential figures in this intellectual shift was Juliet Mitchell, a prominent Marxist feminist scholar. In her seminal work *Woman's Estate*, Mitchell critically analyzed family structures using structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks. She argued that women's liberation requires revolutionary change in four key areas: production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children [15].

Mitchell emphasized the importance of analyzing production and reproduction together for a materialist understanding of women's oppression. She asserted:

"Our connection with socialism will never be a question, as we can use scientific socialism as a method to analyze our specific oppression and thereby understand our revolutionary tasks." [16].

3.3. *Marxist Feminism as a Foundation for Second-Wave Feminist Historiography*

Marxist feminism provided fertile theoretical ground for the historical study of the second wave of feminism. Scholars within the movement expanded upon the critical and self-critical dialectical thinking inherent in Marxism. Feminist historians like Sue Morgan argued that feminist historical studies do not aim for a unified ideology but instead embrace critical self-reflection as a source of creativity and analytical vigor:

"The consistently self-critical stance so characteristic of feminist historical practice has been, in my experience, a source of tremendous creativity, optimism, and analytical momentum." [17].

3.4. *Materialist Feminism and Multidisciplinary Integration*

The publication of *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, edited by Rosemary Hennessy and Cheryl L. Cole, marked a critical moment in the development of Marxist feminist theory. This work combined Marxist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist perspectives to emphasize the economic conditions and class struggles underlying gender oppression. While tracing the roots of Marxist theory, the authors also critiqued cultural discourses for oversimplifying gender issues [18].

Hennessy's work placed significant emphasis on understanding patriarchy, ideology, and subjectivity within feminist discourse. She critiqued the individualistic tendencies in

mainstream feminist studies and reexamined the interaction of material and cultural factors within the framework of Marxist feminism. This provided a more nuanced understanding of how gender oppression operates in capitalist societies.

The transformational role of Marxist feminism in the historiography of the second wave of feminism lies in its ability to integrate and expand theoretical perspectives, moving beyond class analysis to explore the intersectionality of gender and class. By incorporating psychoanalysis, structuralism, and postmodernist insights, Marxist feminism not only deepened theoretical approaches but also introduced innovative methodologies that redefined how feminist historians analyzed family, labor, and ideology. This critical self-reflective approach continues to inspire creativity and analytical momentum in feminist historiography.

Unlike 19th-century historians and theorists, Marxist feminist scholars of this period avoided adherence to a single theoretical position or methodological framework. Instead, they embraced interdisciplinary approaches, integrating insights from various fields to develop a distinctive style of intersectional analysis.

3.5. Interdisciplinary Approaches: Expanding Historical Analysis

Catherine Hall, for instance, applied Marxist feminist perspectives to the study of British imperial history. By analyzing the gendered division of labor within colonial families, Hall revealed the dual mechanisms of racial and gender oppression that structured imperial systems [19].

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her influential work *Feminism Without Borders*, expanded Marxist feminist historiography by adopting an internationalist lens. Mohanty's approach transcended the Western-centric focus of earlier feminist movements, incorporating the struggles of women in the Global South. By highlighting both the universality and diversity of gender oppression across geopolitical contexts, Mohanty made significant contributions to feminist discourse. This interdisciplinary and intersectional richness is evident in the variety of approaches that continue to shape feminist historiography, including socialist, Marxist, Black, radical, liberal, lesbian, post-structuralist, post-colonial, and transnational perspectives [17].

4. Gender and Class: An Intersectional Framework

Marxist feminism traditionally emphasized class oppression. However, during the second wave, Marxist feminist historians broadened this framework to address the interplay of gender and class oppression. They recognized gender as a critical category of analysis, linking it with economic structures and power relations.

1) Domestic Labor and Capitalism

Historians began examining women's unique positions within the capitalist system, including the historical role of unpaid domestic labor and its implications for economic and social change. This dual analysis of gender and class emphasized how women, particularly in the working class, navigated the dual burdens of economic and familial exploitation. As Jackie West aptly observed, "the family exists outside the purview of class analysis." [20].

2) Reconstructing Women's Histories

Marxist feminist historians sought to reconstruct more inclusive historical narratives by documenting the daily lives, labor experiences, and histories of resistance of ordinary women. The narratives highlighted how traditional historical accounts marginalized women, particularly working-class women and homemakers, in favor of elite male-centric perspectives.

4.1. Sheila Rowbotham's "From Margin to Center" Approach

An important example is a key figure Sheila Rowbotham whose masterpiece *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* with a Marxist

feminist lens. Rowbotham challenged traditional historiography for ignore women's contributions, particularly the political resistance and struggles of working-class women [8].

Her "from margin to center" narrative approach brought these marginalized experiences into focus, presenting critical to male-dominated historical accounts. From a Marxist perspective, Rowbotham positioned women's history within a framework of class analysis, revealing how women faced dual oppression: gender-based and class-based. She also analyzed the historical marginalization of women within capitalist economic structures, arguing how industrialization confined women to domestic labour [8].

4.2. Contributions to Feminist Movements and Intersectional Analysis

Rowbotham's work also shows women's roles in broader class struggles, such as labour movements, demonstrating that women were key actors in revolutionary political transformations, despite being ignored in mainstream historical accounts [4,8]. She also pointed out that women's political actions were important to revolutionary change and called for their inclusion in historical narratives in her arguments.

By combining gender and class analysis, Marxist feminist historiography moved beyond the limitations of single-category frameworks, and offered insights into how capitalist systems differentially oppressed women across social strata. Is the intersectional approach provided theoretical support for the diversity within feminist movements, it emphasizing how oppression manifests differently for women depending on their class, race, and geographic context.

The second-wave Marxist feminist historiography, also marked by its interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches in the meantime, it expanded the theoretical and methodological horizons of feminist history a lot. By combining analyses of gender and class, Marxist feminists challenged traditional narratives, reconstructed marginalized histories, and highlighted the diverse forms of oppression faced by women under capitalism. This approach not only enriched feminist historiography but also built up the theoretical foundation for understanding the complexity and diversity of feminist struggles.

5. Interaction between Marxist Feminism and the Second Wave of Feminism

Marxist feminism also shaped and reflected the historical scholarship of the Second Wave of feminism, influencing research directions and way of knowledge production across multiple dimensions.

5.1. Transforming Historical Research Methodologies

One of the key contributions of Marxist feminism was its methodological shift in historiography, it emphasizing intersectional and structural analyses. This encouraged historians to examine social structures and historical change through multiple dimensions, such as gender, class, race, and culture. For example, Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination* explored the relationship between 19th-century Britain and its colonies, particularly Jamaica. Hall demonstrated the important role of race and gender as a perspective in the imperialist ideologies of the British Empire. She argued that colonial women were positioned as both "beneficiaries of civilization" and "symbols of primitiveness", subjected to both racial oppression by colonizers and gender inequality within colonial societies [19]. With a Marxist feminist framework, Hall analyzed how colonial women's labour, such as plant work, and their familial responsibilities were exploited by the capitalist economy. Despite their important contributions, these efforts were ignored in the historiography of imperial narratives. This analysis shows how capitalist systems marginalized women's roles, not only economically but also ideologically.

5.2. *Incorporating Poststructuralist and Postmodernist Critiques*

The combination of poststructuralist and postmodernist methods also further diversified feminist critiques. These approaches emphasized the role of discourse, culture, and ideology in shaping women's experiences and identities, stressing how gender inequality is perpetuated not only through economic systems but also through cultural and social norms.

Patricia Connelly, in *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, combined Marxist and psychological analyses to explore how capitalist economies exploit and devalue women's labor. Simultaneously, she examined how cultural and ideological systems reinforce patriarchal values and norms. This synthesis offered a more nuanced understanding of how economic exploitation intersects with cultural and ideological oppression to sustain patriarchal structures.

5.3. *Expanding the Scope of Feminist Critique*

By addressing the multifaceted nature of gender oppression, Marxist feminism enabled a broader critique of the systems sustaining inequality. For instance, the framework provided a lens to study, highlighting how capitalist economies benefit from the unpaid and undervalued labor of women, particularly in domestic and caregiving roles, examining how patriarchal ideologies are reproduced through cultural norms and discourses, sustaining systemic inequality across generations, analyzing how imperial systems imposed intersecting forms of racial and gendered oppression, as seen in Hall's and Connelly's works [19].

Secondly, Marxist feminist research has promoted the use of non-traditional sources. Marxist feminism encourages historians to explore diaries, letters, factory records, community archives, and other non-traditional materials to fill the gaps in women's experiences often missing from conventional historical archives.

Sally Alexander, a distinguished Marxist feminist historian, is renowned for her studies on the lives and cultures of working-class women in the 19th and 20th centuries. She excelled in utilizing non-traditional sources, such as oral histories and personal documents, to reveal the everyday experiences of ordinary women and the impacts of capitalism on their lives. In *Becoming a Woman: And Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, Alexander extensively employed non-traditional sources, including factory records and trade union documents, to analyze women's labor conditions. Private letters of working women, to uncover their perceptions of labor, family, and society. Community archives and local records, to highlight women's roles in community organizations [2].

In *Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London: A Study in Historical Continuity*, Alexander explored the labor patterns of working-class women in 19th-century London by examining diaries, household account books, and charity records. She focused on women's roles in the household and informal economies, arguing that their labor, though often overlooked by mainstream history, was foundational to the capitalist economy. Additionally, she integrated oral histories to explore how women used community networks and trade unions to resist oppression [2].

At the same time, Marxist feminism begins as a challenge to the academic authority and epistemological framework of Marxist scholarship itself. Rooted in a critical development of Marxism, this period's Marxist feminism boosted an inward-to-outward transformation of historical knowledge production in historiography. Its focus on Third World women, colonial women, and individual female experiences questioned traditional history's emphasis on grand narratives. This shift prompted the scholarly community to reevaluate the gendered and class-based power dynamics within knowledge production processes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of Marxist feminism during the second wave of feminism underscores a transformative period in feminist thought and activism, offering critical insights into the intersections of gender, class, and race. During this time, the field of historiography underwent profound transformations, with scholars critically analyzing the core principles of Marxist feminism, particularly the intersections of race, class, and gender.

- 1) **Enriching the Feminist Narrative:** The feminist narrative was significantly enriched, paving the way for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to understanding women's experiences. The dialectical relationship between Marxist feminism and emerging feminist paradigms, especially materialist feminism, stimulated fundamental changes in the understanding and methodology of feminist history.
- 2) **Expanding Feminist Discourse and Activism:** This transformation expanded and enriched feminist discourse, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of gender oppression and extending its implications to include the formulation of intersectional policies and the advancement of feminist activism. These developments have enabled a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of, and efforts to dismantle, the complex systems perpetuating gender disparities.
- 3) **The Enduring Importance of Marxist Feminism:** While modern British historians of the second wave often offered critical reflections on Marxist feminism — arguing that Marxism sometimes prioritized class over gender issues — its importance cannot be denied. Marxism not only provided theoretical guidance for the second wave feminist movement but also offered feminist historians a political framework to analyze women's oppression under capitalism.
- 4) **Open Engagement with Marxist Theory:** Feminists adopted an open attitude towards Marxist theory, exploring the causes of women's oppression under capitalism from economic, political, historical, cultural, and even biological perspectives, and proposed many practical strategies for women's liberation. This contributed significantly to the historiography of feminism.
- 5) **Marxist Feminism's Continued Relevance:** Whether during the height of the feminist movement in the 1970s or in the 1990s when postmodern feminism became dominant, contemporary Marxist feminists have continued to provide incisive and sustained analyses of women's oppression through a Marxist lens. Thus, the study of Marxist feminism by historians not only represents one of the most significant developments of the second wave but also holds great contemporary relevance for the study of gender history in British academia.

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