



The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries by Kathi Weeks

Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate by Ann E. Cudd and Nancy Holmstrom
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Signs, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Spring 2013), pp. 769-777

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/668554>

Accessed: 29/06/2014 19:25

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ber of essays (Mollow's, Chris Bell's, and Abby Wilkerson's stand out) argue that because the social relations that produce disability and queerness have salient commonalities, they can be read analogously. I am not sure that they can. Specifically, I think we cannot say that because two ways of being—being queer and being disabled, say—oppose certain normalizing social forces they are the same. Transgender and intersex subject formations are not, in my book, the same as disabilities, although they do similarly oppose normate social relations.³ “Conjunction” (185) and “structural similarities” (287) are not enough to build a politics of solidarity.

As a political intellectual project, *Sex and Disability* aims toward a queer disability refusal of the normalization of our bodies, desires, spaces, imaginations. This refusal is an opening: what might happen to queer theories and practices of sexuality if we centered disability? Some readers will find, though, that there is too much emphasis on queering disability and not enough on disabling queerness. The productive tensions evident in how contributors engage these issues speak to the volume's capacity to raise questions central to the field, though it does not finally resolve them. Of course, this is a deliciously queer move: the editors have set the stage for future conversations, political action, and, really, hotter sex. ■

The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Post-work Imaginaries. By Kathi Weeks. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate. By Ann E. Cudd and Nancy Holmstrom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

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In the wake of the economic crisis that began in the United States in 2008 and today is manifesting most seriously in the European Union, a number of books and articles have been published that constitute a return to materialist feminism after the cultural turn that was represented, especially, by post-structuralist feminism. The books being reviewed here are part of this return to materialist feminism and must be understood and judged in relation to the global historical context of intensifying eco-

³ The term “normate” is Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's. See her *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

nomic and social crises that have necessitated this theoretical return. The first of these books is Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Weeks's aim is two-fold: to intervene in the "inattention to work in political theory" (3) and to enable the reinvigoration of "work-based activism" (4), particularly in the US context.

Weeks constructs her book not only as an intervention into political theory for its lack of attention to work but also as an intervention into the Marxist and feminist traditions within which she situates her theorizations. According to Weeks, what she understands as the traditional Marxist view has focused its critique on the structures of labor's exploitation and alienation and excluded any critique of the ethical overvaluation of work in capitalist society—or, "work society" (5). Second-wave, or "1970s," feminism (21), in Weeks's view, may have made a key contribution to the denaturalization and politicization of women's unwaged domestic work, but it did not break with Marxism's "productivist tendencies" (25), which is to say that it did not provide critical distance from the dominant work ethic, which Weeks sees as crucial to reproducing the unfreedom of work in capitalist work society. This unfreedom, according to Weeks, is exemplified by the overvaluation of work and leads, relatedly, to too much work (overwork, in terms of the high number of working hours) and too little development of life outside work. In her text, Weeks identifies two specific demands—a guaranteed basic income and a thirty-hour workweek (with no reduction in pay)—that she thinks can contribute to energizing work-based activism, which has been in decline in the United States. The purpose of her book is not only to provide the theoretical basis for a reinvigoration of this form of activism, marked by the concept of "the refusal of work" (79), but also to argue more generally for what she calls the "performative" demand as a form of resistance to capitalism and its work ethic (145, 225), which as such is part of a broader (anti-)work politics.

According to Weeks, her book can be divided into two parts, with the first (chaps. 1–2), "concentrat[ing] on the diagnostic and deconstructive dimensions of the critical theory of work" and the second (chaps. 3–5) "focus[ing] on the prescriptive and reconstructive aspects of the project" (31). Chapter 1 engages Max Weber's theory of the work ethic as presented in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this chapter, perhaps the most effective of the book, Weeks approaches Weber's theory not as a causal account of the rise of capitalism but as a complex set of ideas that enable defamiliarizing "an all too familiar formulation of the nature and value of work" that is still effective today (41). In

her second chapter, Weeks draws on the theoretical resources of autonomist Marxism as well as Jean Baudrillard's postmodern theory in order to intervene in what she sees as the "productivism" (79) of traditional Marxism, which does not sufficiently challenge the cultural values and elevation of work in the work society, and to open up her theorization of the "refusal of work" (79) as a political and theoretical stance. As I discuss below, that chapter provides the theoretical core of her book and thus sets the limits of its theoretical interventions.

In chapter 3, the opening chapter of the second part of her book, Weeks provides a critical rereading of the domestic labor debate, particularly the strand that advocated wages for housework. While she arguably does not give enough attention to the other, more orthodox (Marxist) thread of that debate, Weeks does provide a useful critical rereading of the possibilities and limits of the strand of the debate she does take up. She is particularly interested in using this strand, led by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, not only to forge but also to explain the effectiveness of her demand for guaranteed basic income. Weeks argues that the demand for housework functioned, like all effective demands, as a perspective and a provocation rather than merely as a local reform in itself; thus, it worked as a "force of demystification, an instrument of denaturalization, and a tool for cognitive mapping" (129). At the same time, the demand for wages for housework involved limits, including the problem of reinforcing the gender division of labor. Weeks advocates guaranteed basic income on the principle that it incorporates the possibilities of wages for housework and simultaneously transcends its limits. In the last two chapters of her book, Weeks develops her demand for the thirty-hour workweek and, perhaps most interestingly, develops her argument for why this demand is both part of the utopian tradition and more effective than the other genres in this tradition, including the literary utopia and the manifesto. She argues, following a postmodernist logic, that the demand is effective because it is "partial" (176) and a kind of "utopian fragment" (213)—and thus most opposed to a totalizing concept—as well as because it is performative. By "performative," Weeks means that the demand works to produce the subjects it may seem to presuppose. It is in its performative aspect that Weeks understands the demand to be effective for developing worker-based activism.

While Weeks's book is in many ways expansive and ambitious, it is limited, as I have suggested above, in that its core theoretical framework is based on autonomist Marxism and in the way it reads post-Fordism as the end of capitalism and its exploitative relations of production. This reading of post-Fordism is evident when Weeks writes about the contemporary

moment as a matter of a “collective capacity for autonomy vis-à-vis capital” (95). Workers, in this view, are capable of “self-valorization” (95), which is to say that they are able to produce (and to produce economic or exchange value) separately or autonomously from capitalists. In consequence, capitalists no longer monopolize ownership of the means of production, because “attitudes are productive” (77), meaning that in post-Fordism, attitudes constitute a means of production. In this new situation, the basis for capitalist exploitation of labor has evaporated, and workers need merely to realize this—to get a new attitude, so to speak—and they will be able to control their own labor and realize the potential that has been developed in the existing forces of production to radically reduce their work time. For Weeks, it is this theory of post-Fordism as a break in capitalism that accounts for why the end of private-property relations, and the exploitation of workers it enables, is seen as a mere reform while a shift in values (away from the ethical valuing of work implied by the work ethic) is seen as revolutionary.

In essence, Weeks presents a value theory of labor rather than a labor theory of value. She displaces the Marxist theory that labor is the source of (economic) value when she argues that in post-Fordism “attitudes are productive.” To be clear, there is no doubt that the idea that labor is the source of value—particularly when it comes to determining the line between productive and unproductive labor—has been a source of contestation within feminism. However, Weeks does not (and I believe cannot) explain why the current trend in the United States and beyond is toward increased work hours (and I believe that this limit is an effect of Weeks’s displacement of the labor theory of value). As I have argued elsewhere, we can understand, on the basis of the labor theory of value, the cause of increased exploitation of workers, manifested in increased hours of labor and in the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which leads capitalists to counteract this tendency by increasing the exploitation of workers.¹ In other words, although Weeks raises important issues, the theoretical resources she draws on do not enable her to explain the very experiences that she finds most oppressive to workers—and, in particular, to women workers, who are subjected to the double burden of waged and unwaged labor.

Whereas Weeks posits a break in capitalism as an economic system and in effect posits socialism (as an end of private-property relations) as already in existence in post-Fordism, Ann E. Cudd and Nancy Holmstrom’s *Capitalism, For and Against* explicitly debates whether capitalism or socialism

¹ See Julie P. Torrant, *The Material Family* (Rotterdam and Boston: Sense, 2011).

is the best economic system from a feminist perspective. The authors thus address the question of which system can best meet the needs and wants of women, among other groups of people. That Cudd and Holmstrom take up this debate after its long suppression (since the 1970s) in feminist and other critical theories is itself noteworthy—certainly both important and timely given the depth of the global crisis of capitalism today. Another contrast to Weeks's book is that both Cudd and Holmstrom address capitalism as a global economic system, and in this respect also their book is an advance over Weeks's text, because it works to account for the global South as well as the developed North in its discussions of contemporary society.

Cudd and Holmstrom's book is structured in four parts—each author develops her position and argument (Cudd's for capitalism, and Holmstrom's against), and then each author responds to the other's argument. Both Cudd and Holmstrom take up the debate from the perspective of political philosophy, and on the whole their text is a useful introduction to the debate over economic systems at the intersection of feminism and political philosophy. For instance, the book's discussion of the question of freedom as a contested concept is very important and is one of the strongest aspects of the text as a contribution to feminism. The authors' debate over whether and how to use the concept of patriarchy is also instructive. Useful too is the fact that each author clearly defines capitalism at the outset of her section of the text, giving readers a good sense of the two theoretical stances from the beginning.

Cudd's argument for capitalism as an economic system that has served and can continue to serve women's interests opens the volume. The strongest aspect of Cudd's argument is the case she makes for capitalism as a historically progressive system for women—for instance, in terms of life expectancy, lower infant mortality, lower fertility for women, and increased political participation. This historical argument for capitalism is part of what Cudd calls "the empirical case for capitalism as an actually existing system" (29). The other part of this "empirical case" is Cudd's claim that contemporary capitalist societies are better for women (and others) than are "noncapitalist societies" (54); this part of the argument has some significant weaknesses. For instance, as Holmstrom points out, Cudd basically "stack[s] the deck" by including "non-discrimination" (292) as one of the definitional attributes of capitalism. It is important to note that Cudd includes in the category of noncapitalist societies what she calls "traditionalist" countries (56). An example of such a country, according to Cudd, is Saudi Arabia. As Holmstrom points out, this is problematic because it means that Cudd makes it definitionally impossible to include countries

such as Saudi Arabia, with its poor record of rights for women, in the capitalist category (292); thus, capitalism cannot not look good from this perspective. In addition, her brief argument about socialist countries—specifically, Cuba—is problematic. The main criterion Cudd uses to judge countries is rankings such as the Human Development Index. She acknowledges that Cuba “does very well for its income level because of its excellent health and educational systems” but goes on to assert that “it should also be remembered that Cuba’s human rights record is very poor in terms of negative freedoms of assembly, speech, and property rights” (57). Leaving aside the selective discussion of poor human rights records—given that Cudd does not, for instance, note that the United States has a poor record on human rights (e.g., the Guantanamo Bay detention camp)—a problem with this articulation as a matter of empirical fact is that what counts as freedom is very much a point of contestation. Exemplary of procapitalist arguments, the only kind of freedom Cudd recognizes is market freedom. She does not recognize, as those critiquing capitalism and arguing for socialism do, that another understanding of freedom is economic freedom, or freedom from exploitation. From this vantage point, Cuba’s “lack” of private-property rights is a condition of economic freedom.

An additional limit to Cudd’s argument is that while she formally acknowledges that capitalism is a global system, she does not account for the significance of this. For instance, there are several countries in Africa that she lists as “traditionalist” countries and that rank very low on the Human Development Index, which is part of the empirical evidence she uses to support her argument for capitalism. This leaves out the fact that capitalism is a global economic structure that has a historical legacy of colonialism and a current record of neocolonialism (through such interventions as the International Monetary Fund’s structural adjustment programs) that have blocked many countries in the global South from developing. This aporia marks the most serious limit of Cudd’s argument for capitalism as a progressive force, not only historically but today and for the future. That is, she does not judge capitalism, as Holmstrom does, in relation to the potential it has developed—the potential to meet people’s needs and wants based on the forces of production that have been developed within it. This limit in turn points to the fundamental limit of Cudd’s argument, which is that her theory does not grasp capitalism as a historically developing and dynamic system. This is because she leaves out of her definition and discussion of capitalism the fact that capitalism revolves around production for profit. It is this profit motive, embedded in capitalism’s class relations, that accounts for why capitalism reaches a limit and is unable to enable further development.

Holmstrom's contribution to the volume is in many ways an advance over Cudd's contribution because Holmstrom presents a more historically informed and explanatory understanding of capitalism. Holmstrom writes, for instance, that "capitalism creates the potential for genuine human liberation . . . at the same time [that] it puts systemic barriers to its realization" (289). She argues, further, that "while capitalism *was* a progressive force in human history, it is so no longer. Indeed, it threatens the future of humankind [given the destruction of the natural environment that capitalism is causing]. Women need a society organized on a very different basis—one oriented to the satisfaction of human needs as democratically determined, rather than the maximization of profit" (289). Holmstrom's contribution is most effective when she not only critiques the limits of Cudd's argument from her perspective but also forcefully critiques contemporary capitalism itself, as she does in the above quotations.

Among the important contributions Holmstrom makes to the volume is her discussion of the relation between capitalism as an economic system and the interests of women. For instance, she thoughtfully addresses some "methodological difficulties" (141), including counterarguments put forward by postmodern thinkers, in the idea of determining women's interests (141–43). She also draws on Maxine Molyneux's work to define strategic versus practical gender interests of women. Holmstrom's argument is strongest, though, when she responds to Cudd. For instance, she provides an incisive critique of Cudd's use of the concept of patriarchy and further develops her own argument about the relation between capitalism and the oppression of women in her response. She argues that while capitalism is not the cause of sexism *per se*, "there are causal relationships between sexism and capitalism," and she explains that "it is in the interests of capitalism to take advantage (even sometimes to create or augment) any divisions, prejudices, and vulnerabilities within the working class in order to maximize profit" (297). This is an important theorization of the relationship between sexism and capitalism that has largely been suppressed in recent decades during the cultural turn, and it is an essential starting point for a reinvigorated materialist feminism.

As I have suggested, Holmstrom's contribution is often strongest when she is critiquing Cudd's argument. Central to Holmstrom's critique is what she calls a problem in "methodology" (290). Specifically, Holmstrom argues that Cudd puts forward an "abstract idealized model of capitalism" and that such models "function to justify the structures of domination" (290). An example of this abstract idealized model of capitalism is the "perfectly competitive market" (290) that Cudd uses as her starting point. This model includes, for instance, Cudd's premise that "there are

many buyers and sellers, and entry and exit to the market is free" (66). This implies that anyone can be on the market to sell goods, when in actuality the only good that most people can possibly sell on the market is their labor. In other words, this is not simply a problematic premise but a false one, particularly in the age of monopoly capitalism, when there are companies such as Walmart whose gross annual profits are greater than the gross domestic product of many countries. As Holmstrom argues, this use of abstract ideal theory is "a serious weakness" in Cudd's argument (290). Central to Cudd's case is that, as feminists, we should be aiming for an "enlightened capitalism" (129). However, as Holmstrom points out, there is a fundamental weakness in the argument for such a reformed capitalism (which is an argument that enlightened capitalism is possible) when one starts with a theory that abstracts from historical reality in an idealist—and ultimately false—way.

In contrast to Cudd's abstract idealized theory, Holmstrom argues that "to see the possibilities capitalism might have to offer, we have to examine both its ideals, on the one hand, and the fundamental structure and tendencies inherent in capitalism in all its manifestations, on the other" (137–38). A key limit of Holmstrom's position, however, is that while she goes into great detail about specific issues regarding debates that are somewhat relevant to her argument, such as whether it is effective to theorize "self-ownership" (155), she does not, in the end, theorize "the fundamental structure and tendencies inherent in capitalism." In other words, Holmstrom not only rejects the abstract idealized theory of capitalism, to some extent she also rejects the theory of capitalism *tout court*. A key instance of this is that although she does explain that capitalism is a system revolving around profit maximization and although she also understands capitalism to be crisis ridden, she does not make the connection between these two. In order to do so, Holmstrom would need to draw on the resources of classical Marxism in a more sustained way and, in particular, to explain that the tendency of the profit rate to fall is central to capitalism's inability to realize the potential that has been developed within it. That is, because profit is surplus labor and because increases in productivity due to technological innovations are also labor-saving technologies, the profit motive ultimately becomes a limit on capitalist production and capitalist development. This tendency explains why capitalism is not only subject to cycles of boom and bust, as Cudd represents it, but also subject to deepening crises, as we see in global capitalism today. Thus, although Holmstrom's argument is an advance over both Weeks's and Cudd's in some important ways, Holmstrom's failure to actually explain "the fundamental structure and tendencies inherent in capital-

ism” leaves her, like Weeks and Cudd, limited in the end to a moral criticism of capitalism. Capitalism is bad, in this moral view, because it has bad effects on people, not because it has bad effects that are inherent in its fundamental structures and tendencies—bad effects that could be superseded based on the possibilities inherent in the current development of the forces of production.

Put another way, *The Problem with Work* and *Capitalism, For and Against* raise key issues for feminism, including the question of whether capitalism can serve the interests of women today and in the future, but they do not provide the full range of theoretical resources necessary to address these questions. These books should be widely read, discussed, and debated, but classical Marxist arguments should also be included in order to reinvigorate materialist feminism in the ways that are necessary today.² ■

² See, e.g., Chris Harman, *Explaining the Crisis: A Marxist Re-Appraisal* (London: Bookmarks, 1999), and *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010).