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When it comes to the oppression of women, the patriarchy is usually pointed at. A necessary critique



Many new women's organizations have been founded throughout the German-speaking world in recent years. In addition to the existing queer feminist, autonomous associations, socialist groups have also recognized the need to create separate spaces for women where they can educate themselves and unite around their own situation. At least one feminist organization is now active in almost every major city in Germany. These groups are often difficult to distinguish from one another. In terms of their social media presence and the actions and demonstrations they organize, all groups are similar. Marxist groups sometimes differ in particular because they agitate using the term "women," something queer feminist associations tend to avoid. In terms of content, however, they are almost indistinguishable: They all fight against patriarchy, and many of them also describe themselves as anti-capitalist or intersectional.

As a woman and thus potentially affected, the efforts of feminist organizations are to be welcomed. At the same time, the groups' political self-image and the resulting form of

political engagement raise several questions. Why does everyone use the term "patriarchy"? What does it mean to be anti-capitalist, or even intersectional?

This society has had a problem with women long before the rise of the AfD and other right-wing organizations. That's why most women's groups—even the decidedly Marxist ones—talk about patriarchy, a seemingly eternal evil that has loomed over us and dominated us for thousands of years. Some even speak of an exploitative symbiosis of patriarchy and capitalism, which is said to have further worsened the situation of women under capitalism. But who or what actually is patriarchy?

Closing a gap

In contemporary usage, the term patriarchy describes a system in which men rule and therefore shape everything in their favor. This patriarchy, the rule of men, has existed longer than civil society and has consequently survived major social upheavals such as the French Revolution. Although patriarchy describes a relationship of domination, its use is often inverted into the subject. Thus, one frequently reads the phrase: "Patriarchy kills." But it is not actually patriarchy that kills women, but men. When the term is used in this way, the actual perpetrators, the men, disappear behind patriarchy.

Since the 1970s, the term has appeared increasingly frequently in left-wing feminist theories. It was intended to fill a gap: many theorists at the time despaired in their search for a theoretical cause of women's oppression. At the same time, the subject of feminism was questioned. Previous feminist theory was criticized for its inability to unite all women. In response, there was a desperate search for unifying elements within oppression. Thus, the movement demanding wages for housework emerged, as women were globally held responsible for housework (nowadays, caring activities more commonly understood as care work) (unlike men). Its representatives, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Silvia Federici, saw themselves as Marxist-feminists. Housework as a determining factor of the female subject, i.e., an activity that all women must perform equally, was criticized and rejected by, among others, Angela Davis: She feared that demanding wages for housework would link caring as an activity to femininity. Other Marxist-feminist theorists, such as Lise Vogel and Frigga Haug, accused the proponents of the housework debate of lacking sufficient knowledge of Marxism because they thought in terms of two systems: a private and a public sphere. With their demands, they reinforced the separation of these spheres and falsely located the oppression of women solely in the private sphere.

For these reasons, the housework movement failed. As a result of this failure, the theorists of this time distanced themselves either from Marxism or from feminism, resulting in a rift that permanently damaged Marxist feminism. In turning away from Marxism, a new left-wing feminism emerged, whose proponents embraced the concept of patriarchy as the unifying factor of all women. Psychoanalysis also gained increasing influence in feminist theory, for example with Shulamith Firestone, who also incorporated topics such as sexuality and the body into her studies. People now spoke of the pathogenesis of the subject, heteronormativity, and patriarchy as the foundation of the society in which subjects are socialized. This influence of psychoanalysis, particularly through Jacques Lacan's studies, formed the basis for Butler's work "Gender Discontents," which heralded the beginnings of queer feminist theory. Butler's conscious rejection of the mode of production as the determining factor of order towards the heterosexual matrix sealed the triumph of anti-Marxist feminism, although Butler also rejects the theory of patriarchy.

Some left-wing feminists now even claim that men also suffer from this "patriarchal socialization." Perhaps with this assertion, they hope to encourage men to rethink their own supremacy. This popular statement proves that the concept of patriarchy has continued to lose its meaning over time. If patriarchy describes a relationship of domination in which men hold the power, it is difficult to justify why the rulers should suffer comparable harm to the oppressed. To explain such mental contortions, new phenomena are resorted to that are just as poorly defined. So-called toxic masculinity is appearing increasingly frequently in debates on the political left. Its origins also lie in psychoanalysis. With his book "Männerphantasien" (Men's Fantasies) (1977), Klaus Theweleit ushered in what continues to be addressed today, even within the spirit of feminism: masculinity and the pathogenesis of the subject.

Alien to Marxism

Anyone familiar with Marxism and philosophy as a science will not have missed the point in this brief overview of the new left feminism that it is based on terms and concepts that lie outside of philosophy. Indeed, the social sciences established patriarchy as a feminist category. In Marxism and feminist theory, which originate in philosophy, the theory of patriarchy remained alien and undefined. Although Friedrich Engels, August Bebel, and Alexandra Kollontai used the term patriarchy to describe the paternal right that prevailed in tribal societies, their use differs significantly from contemporary patriarchy theory. In their treatises on the situation of women, these socialist scholars devote themselves to an extensive historical study of the organization of the family. In doing so, they encounter the patriarchal

family structure in which the man and his sons function as the heads of the family. By examining the family, they arrive at the different forms of labor organization over the centuries. Marx and Engels write of a natural division of labor and the resulting division of labor between the sexes. In these treatises, the oppression of women is assumed to occur primarily in the private sphere, within the family, and in the inheritance system regulated by it. In these explanatory approaches, the concept of patriarchy describes an actual state of affairs and is not considered the cause of the oppression of women; it serves to describe a specific family order that regulates property relations to the detriment of women. In these approaches, too, the position of women in society and the family is determined by their natural constitution.

Although the concept of patriarchy used by Marx, Engels, Bebel, and Kollontai differs significantly from patriarchy theory, the latter has now become indispensable even for decidedly Marxist groups. The fact that it was only able to establish itself in feminism as a departure from Marxism is ignored. The fact that it is an expression of the capitulation of feminist theorists in explaining the oppression of women is also ignored. The fact that it entails theoretical and practical problems in the feminist struggle is of little interest.

Patriarchy theory describes an existing state: the dominance of men over women. This neither implies overcoming male dominance nor is intended to abolish one's own oppression. After all, what would it mean to overthrow the patriarchy? The "Me Too" movement gave us a taste of the feminist struggle directed against the patriarchy: Although the men were identified by name, only a few were prosecuted; the much-described patriarchal order of Hollywood recovered too quickly and was neither significantly restructured nor overthrown.

Patriarchy theory resembles a poltergeist, whose presence is imagined whenever the phenomenon of women's oppression appears, something that cannot or should not be explained otherwise. And therein lies the real reason for its popularity: There is a lack of a theoretical, Marxist explanation for women's oppression. The search for it was abandoned several decades ago.

Nevertheless, one should not be satisfied with flimsy justifications and at least maintain the claim not to give up the search for the theoretical cause and not to replace the explanatory context with a simple diagnosis.

Theoretical mishmash

When reading popular Marxist-feminist theories, it is striking that the theorists' approaches are similar: They seek the answer to their question in the texts of Marx and Engels, find no

elaborate explanatory approach there, and then claim that Marxism has a gap regarding the women's question. They now have to close this gap. In doing so, they focus on concrete manifestations of the oppression of women, which they attempt to explain using Marxist categories.

In this way, several economic explanations for the oppression of women emerge. These are criticized because the ideological level, the cause of the concrete economic exploitation of women, is not reflected in these theoretical approaches. A rift arises between economic (supposedly Marxist) and the overarching political explanatory approaches of the new left feminism. The theory of patriarchy spread as a supposed cause of women's oppression. A circumstance that now also extends to Marxist circles: There are insights into the concrete manifestation of women's oppression that can be located in economic relations. However, the theoretical insight that could lead to an overcoming of oppression and that would shake the existing order to its very foundations is sought in vain. Instead, mixed forms arise: on the one hand, there is the economic exploitation of women by capitalism, and on the other, the oppression of women on the basis of their gender by patriarchy. The double exploitation by capital and patriarchy persists as an idea in people's minds and proves the triumph of patriarchy theory.

Closely linked to the concept of patriarchy is the claim of intersectionality, upheld by feminist organizations. Only with the notion that gender-specific oppression exists through patriarchy was capitalist exploitation replaced as the source of all forms of oppression. Likewise, racist oppression was given its own place, which was also no longer derived from the mode of production. Thus, social scientists are responsible for the regression of left-wing theory formation.

In political practice, too, the perception of simultaneous, indeterminate forms of oppression entails a number of problems. The revolutionary necessity is weakened beyond recognition. The overcoming of the capitalist social order must give way to discussions about participation in the existing order and diversity campaigns. The search for truth, the very concept of truth, is replaced by "perspectives" and "concern." This bourgeois tendency is merely countered by the claim of intersectionality. It is intended to unite what was previously falsely separated. Similar to patriarchy, intersectionality is now intended to create a unifying moment among those affected and reclaim the radicalism of one's own position. This is a self-created problem, for both racist exploitation and misogyny can be understood within the Marxist system of thought, and their overcoming is inherent in Marxism. There is therefore no need to claim to think of these phenomena of oppression as a whole, for they are

connected to the underlying mode of production and the dominant ideology. The fallacies result from the contemporary way of viewing phenomena. What all these explanatory approaches have in common is that they remain at the concrete level. The affliction, the form of oppression itself, becomes the subject of political thought. The practice derived from it merely reacts to the prevailing affliction and struggles for words to name it. This is how monstrosities of words like "classism" arise, which are intended to describe one of the many "afflictions" of humankind.

Oppression without cause

But even less ignorant Marxist-feminist theorists merely use Marxist categories, as if they were merely the color they use to smear their theory with red. Lise Vogel, a social scientist from the USA, to whom Marxist organizations refer positively, leaves the question of the cause of women's oppression unanswered. Instead, she cites women's childbearing ability as the reason for their oppression in the capitalist system. Because of this physical characteristic, from the capitalists' perspective, they are responsible for producing new workers. In order to control this, a misogynistic system prevails, or is at least maintained. From the contradiction of capital's interest in, on the one hand, integrating ever more labor into the production process, and, on the other, wanting to save as much labor as possible by increasing efficiency through the development of productive forces, Vogel derives the special situation of women who, on the one hand, function as a source of new labor due to their childbearing ability, but on the other hand, can only be integrated into the labor process with restrictions due to the phases of pregnancy and childbirth. This contradiction is resolved by transferring the short, restricted period of pregnancy to a general form of sexual division of labor in the form of the family, in which women are assigned the sphere of reproduction and men are assigned the role of supporting the family through wage labor. This separation of spheres is therefore a product of the capitalist mode of production; the fact that reproduction within the family is organized at the expense of women is due to the ruling class (and women's childbearing capacity), which, due to its conflict of interests, maintains the general oppression of women. Vogel's analysis focuses on the concrete phenomenon and an, albeit inadequate, economic justification. She abandons the search for a theoretical cause for the oppression of women and instead points to the historical dimension of the contempt for women. Here it reappears: the oppression of women in human history, which is unfounded but nevertheless exists. This also follows, for Vogel, from the underlying problem that she, too, has not understood Marxism as a system of thought.

But Marxism is a worldview. The constitution of man, nature, and the world, as well as man's access to the world, were explained by Marx and Engels. It is therefore not simply a critique of capitalism. Rather, Marxism is oriented toward realizing human freedom, that is, abolishing all conditions in which "man is a degraded, enslaved, abandoned, and contemptible being." A degraded, enslaved being—that describes the situation of women. Marxism is rooted in the liberation of man, and consequently also in the liberation of women. Is it enough to be a Marxist, then? Yes and no. Marxism as a worldview encompasses the realization of humanism, but at the same time, social scientific, anti-capitalist, left-wing radical interpretations of Marxism circulate that do not fully grasp Marxism as a system of thought. Thus, being a Marxist is only sufficient if one realizes that Marxism is not a political theory that one applies or disapplies according to whim or convenience, but rather a worldview that represents an approach to the world that makes the struggle for human liberation possible in the first place. This worldview is incompatible with, and does not depend on, patriarchy theory and other social scientific contortions.

But what, then, is the cause of women's oppression if not patriarchy? And how can the subject of feminism be unified? The question of the subject of women only appears urgent when one starts from concrete women and their immediate life situations. If one abstracts from the concrete woman, then woman can be grasped in her essence as a category, as a social phenomenon. This category is determined; the determinations of women are negative in the sense of the image of humanity that Marx and Engels constitute as free.

More nature than man

In Marxism, human freedom is based on objective activity. This defines humans as a species, and through it, humans mediate between themselves and nature. In this way, Marx and Engels resolve the contradiction between humans and nature. On the one hand, humans, as natural beings, are part of nature; on the other hand, through their capacity for activity, they are not at the mercy of nature, both external and their own. Through their work with and on nature, they change the world and themselves. This distinguishes humans from animals.

However, the contradiction is not resolved in the prevailing definitions of women. Because women are determined primarily by their biological constitution, the category of woman contains not only her human but also her natural definition. The essential definition of woman is her nature, from which other definitions are derived. Her childbearing capacity, the only essential biological difference from the body of man, entails the attribution of motherhood and caregiver and continually positions woman as nature as the other to man,

who is conceived as human and thus as the other to nature. The inferiority of her human status is already inherent in the category, but is realized in the fact that women cannot actually establish themselves as subjects and human beings in the world. Due to the categorical conception, the attribution of woman as a woman always contains the dehumanizing element, because as women, women are essentially more nature than human. Consequently, women are categorically unfree. In order to liberate women from their immanent naturalness, the category of woman must be sublated into the category of human being. In this way, women attain their human status and a free, active, self-determined life. Their nature, like all other human beings, is then subordinated to their activity and is no longer the defining factor. The theoretical cause of women's oppression lies in women's destiny as women. In women's humanization lies their freedom.