

# Francophone materialist feminism, the missing link: Towards a Marxist feminism that accounts for the interlockedness of sex, race and class

Capital &amp; Class

1–21

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DOI: 10.1177/03098168241234090

[journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc)**Jules Falquet**

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the Marxist-Feminist Theses III and VIII. It is based on the 'French-speaking materialist feminist' theoretical perspective that has been developed at the end of the 1970s by Colette Guillaumin (with the concept of 'sexage'), Monique Wittig (with the concept of 'straight mind'), Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Christine Delphy and other members of the *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* journal's board. The article first presents this theorization, which is too unknown to many English-speaking theorists. It then shows how 'French-speaking materialist feminist' theoretical perspective fully demonstrated that 'sex' was a structural social relation as much as class is (Gender relations are relations of production). The article also analyses how this theoretical perspective enables us to pay a deep attention to the 'race question'. Therefore, it appears as the missing link that can help bridging at least two important theoretical and political gaps: first, between Marxist feminism and lesbian theory, and, second, between Black feminism and Marxist feminism.

**Keywords**

materialist feminism, French feminism, marxist feminism, lesbian feminism, intersectionality

Sociologically, I am a French White upper middle-class woman in her 1950s. Politically, I define myself as a 'Francophone materialist feminist' who tries to take seriously into account the interlocking character sex, race and class. It is both from this 'objective' and 'subjective' standpoint that I will here discuss Thesis III (Gender relations *are* relations of

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production)<sup>1</sup> and Thesis VIII (what appears as ‘race question’ in each society and culture *is to be related* to class and sex, though *contextually*).<sup>2</sup>

I will first present Francophone materialist feminism that is quite unknown in the English-speaking world: its herstory and first thinker Christine Delphy, its diversity, and then its common bases and how they are linked to the (French) possibility to differentiate daily social relations, from structural social relations of power. Then, I will insist on the central contribution of Colette Guillaumin: the idea that women and men (i.e. sex) are created by a structural social relation of power, that they conceptualized as of appropriation or ‘sexage’. Thanks to this concept, we will see and explain how Francophone materialist feminism has convincingly demonstrated the existence of a structural social relation that existed before (and continue existing in the midst of) capitalist structural social relations of exploitation (Thesis III). I will also explain how this concept helps to analyse ‘race’ as another central structural social relation of power, allowing us to understand the logics of what I will call: *interlocked structural relations of power* (Thesis VIII).

In this sense, I will show here that Francophone materialist feminism (later sometimes referred as FMF) is the missing link that can help bridging at least two important gaps that are actually linked: the first is between Marxist feminism and lesbian theory. Just as Marx thought that the ‘sexual act’ was totally natural and could be taken as the strong base of sexual division of labour, nowadays Marxist feminism weak analysis of heterosexuality explains its difficulty to fully admit that sex is a relation of production. The second is between Black feminist and Marxist feminism. More than 40 years after socialist Black feminist proposed the first insights about interlocking systems of oppression, it is a good signal that Marxist feminism affirms that the question of ‘intersectionality’ should be ‘taken further’. We will see here how to give some steps forward, thanks to this new/old bridge called FMF.

## French-speaking materialist feminism: key elements

Francophone<sup>3</sup> materialist feminism is a poorly known internationally, though deeply interesting, trend of feminism. For more than 30 years now, I have done many efforts to contribute to its translation to Spanish, Portuguese and to its diffusion. This work is a new intent towards people who do not understand any of these languages.<sup>4</sup> I will present here its common theoretical ground, differentiate it from other trends it is frequently mixed up with<sup>5</sup> and present Colette Guillaumin’s (2016 (1992)) theoretical proposal of structural social relations of *sexage*, or direct physical appropriation, that constitutes its core contribution.<sup>6</sup>

### Herstory

Christine Delphy is internationally the best known contributor (and almost the only one) to what is now called ‘francophone materialist feminism’, and first developed in France from 1968 onwards under the name of ‘radical feminism’. It crystallized theoretically between 1977 and 1980, around the eight issues of the journal *Questions Féministes*.

In addition to Simone de Beauvoir and Christine Delphy, its editorial board also gathered Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Colette Capitan, Colette Guillaumin, Monique Plaza, Emmanuelle de Lesseps and, later on, Monique Wittig.

Delphy published in 1970 a famous article in which, studying the ‘domestic work question’, she argued that the point was not its lack of value *per se*, but the fact that the institutions of marriage and broadly, the family, prevented (married) women (or daughters) to sell their domestic work into the labour market *for not being the owners of their own labour force* (Delphy 1970). Delphy highlighted the existence of what she called a ‘Domestic mode of production’ and explained how it was articulated to the better studied ‘Industrial mode of production’. A collection of Delphy’s (1977) essays was soon translated into English.

After being sharply criticized by the English Marxists, Barrett and McIntosh (1979) and Delphy (1982) vigorously answered in a much red article published in *Questions Féministes*, called ‘A materialist feminism is possible’. That’s why, retrospectively, the whole *Questions Féministes*’ group and trend became known as ‘materialist feminism’.

The group progressively took theoretical distance from the US and Anglosaxon ‘radical feminism’ in general, as it tended to turn into a rather culturalist-essentialist trend, centring on male’s sexuality as violence. And even though in France, their main enemy soon became the essentialist trend of *Psyképo*, they also opposed the ‘doble militants’ of the leftist parties. As Delphy’s article clearly explained, they strongly disagreed with the various Marxist feminists trends that developed during the 1970s and 1980s and pretended to solve women’s question by situating it only at an ideological level (cultural stereotypes, backwardness, oppression and *machismo*) – without accepting any displacement of the centrality of class and (wage) exploitation.

### *Common grounds: anti-naturalism, heterosexuality as a political system*

Francophone materialist feminist theories hold in common at least the following three elements: first, their radical, constant and total anti-naturalism. For them, as Beauvoir boldly wrote, women are not born, but socially produced. In their view, the problem is not at all ‘what’ they are born. Popularized in 1972 by the British socialist Ann Oakley (1972)<sup>7</sup> the ‘sex-gender system’ scheme prompted innumerable feminists to understand that the cause of the problem was a biological difference (immemorially called ‘sex’) that was used to construct a social inequality (that they started calling ‘gender’).

On the materialist side on the contrary, the French socio-anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1976 (1971)) proposed in a brilliant article published in 1971 in French, 1 year before the British sociologist’s Ann Oakley (1972), to *sociologically* understand sex categories. That is, as purely social. In her proposal, instead of resulting from a mysteriously unequal ‘socialization’ of males and females, women as a social group are created by men as their antagonist social group, through and because of a *structural social relation of power* that produces both (we will later discuss which relation). Mathieu defines therefore men and women with no reference to any supposed biological difference (Mathieu NC (1979 [1977])).

This echoes Delphy's theorization of domestic mode of production. She had concretely studied French rural families of the 1960s and highlighted that in those families, the un-married young brothers of a male farmer who inherited the father's farm, if they stayed on the farm and only earned food and housing for their farm work, could be considered as '(social) women' just as the farmer's wife. Mathieu's radically sociological definition of sex (not *the sexes* in plural, but *sex* in the sense of the women's and men's categories) spares us the problematic divide between sex and gender, and mainly, the resulting naturalization of sex that Butler (1990) criticized much later.

In 1980, *Questions Féministes* published two articles of Monique Wittig that would have a long-lasting echo: 'One is not born woman' and 'The Straight mind'.<sup>8</sup> In them, Wittig (1992 (1980)) also insisted on the social creation (deformation) of women. For her, individual women are bended to correspond with *The Woman* myth, which concentrates all the properties of 'the Other Different' that men need to create as a group of power. Women are 'othered', produced through forced feminization – which Wittig defined as a plain synonymous of heterosexualization. Feminization, again, is not produced by a progressive socialization built on biology but is rather the body's and mind's deforming result of a structural social relation. In Wittig's (1992 (1980)) words,

*What actually produces a woman, is a special, particular social relation to a man, relation that we before called serfdom,<sup>9</sup> relation that implicates personal and physical obligations, as well as economical obligations (forced residency,<sup>10</sup> domestic work, conjugal duty [devoir conjugal], illimited children production, etc), relation to which lesbians escape while refusing to turn or to keep on being heterosexual.*

Central to materialist feminism and its deep anti-naturalism is the analysis of heterosexuality, not as a sexual practice or attraction, but as a political system. Parallel to revealing its material logics, Wittig was the first to shed a crude light on its never questioned ideology, the so-called universal 'sexual difference'. She explained that this supposed difference was indeed the result of a permanent social and frequently violent process of sexual *differentiation* of women.<sup>11</sup> Guillaumin (2016 (1992)) also proposed a detailed analysis of this process, studying the creation of women's bodies and bodies abilities, as well as of their individual and collective psychological skills, in comparison to men's. Indeed, with FMF, we have advanced quite a few steps from Marx's quick affirmation that the natural 'sexual act' was the base for the first ever division of work. Heterosexuality, as a system, appears now to be the core of the social production of sex classes.<sup>12</sup> FMF analysis of heterosexuality helps understanding that the oppression of women's sex class is due to the interests of its antagonist class: men. *Men* as a class are the primary beneficiaries of women's oppression, before any other class – even if bourgeoisie also benefits from women's oppression, as White people also do, because of the interlocking character of social relations, as we will see later.

In the absence of any natural cause for men's and women's existence and their respective situation, FMF's second common base is the search for historical, material and social explanations for the social/sexual organization. This in turn drives them to their third and main common affirmation: social organization is due to *structural social relations* of power and production.

## *Rapports sociaux de sexe/rerelations sociales entre les sexes: French language's specificity*

We need here to offer a brief idiomatic explanation. Central to the proper understanding of Francophone materialist feminist theorization is the possibility to separate and distinguish two concepts in French language: 'rapports sociaux' and 'relations sociales'. This capital distinction between these two concepts in French needs to be explained, as it is difficult to render in English (as much as in Spanish or Portuguese).

*Relations sociales* can be translated as *social relations* and refers to inter-personal, daily, micro-level relationships between people. They are concrete, people can experiment them and change them rather easily at their individual level. Yet, *rapports sociaux* (that should be translated as *structural social relation of power*) is an abstract concept. It comes from the Marxian tradition and refers to collective, structural power relations that go across the whole social formations and deeply vertebrate them. They organize (create) antagonist social groups (classes) around a common though opposed interest – the social division of labour, in the Marxian perspective. The *rapports sociaux* cannot be easily transformed: transforming them requires long-term collective action. Alias, their (radical) transformation corresponds to the historical process of changing from one mode of production to another.

The difficulty to differentiate these two terms in other languages, and to translate them without long periphrases, many times resulted in their indiscriminated and confused use, creating a lot of disarray. It produced both a regrettable erasing of the specific FMF contribution and a general mix-up between the micro and the macro level of the social world. It contributed, for instance, to the problematic belief that individual, micro-level changes (as, for instance, wearing dresses instead of trousers or allowing men to express their emotions) could be enough to change social organization at large.

Now that we clearly understand the idea of structural social relation of power, let us go deeper into the core of materialist French feminists' central concept. I will now present how they conceived the *structural social power relations of sex* (and not 'between the sexes', as neither females nor males as separate and clearly defined universal entities, pre-exist under any natural form to these relations. On the contrary, they are produced by these relations, as social sex classes of women and men).

## **Sexage: Guillaumin's proposal of structural social relation of appropriation**

We will now present and discuss the French sociologist Colette Guillaumin's proposal of '*rapports sociaux de sexe*' (*structural power social relations of sexes*) that she calls *sexage*. As we will see, *sexage* is based on direct physical appropriation of women as a sex class, by men as their antagonist sex class.

## *An historical and global perspective on various forms of appropriation*

Colette Guillaumin first worked on racism, namely, on racist ideology, in her PhD work (defended in 1968, published in 1972). In it, she completely shifted the previously

dominant understanding of race, demonstrating that racism was not an unfair treatment towards a specific racial group that existed naturally, inflicted by another racial group previously existing. On the contrary, (modern) racism must be understood as the ideological face of the colonial plantation mode of production that materially created social groups of enslaved people and of enslavers, and then ideologically pretended they were 'racially' different. In other words, racism creates race (instead of believing that pre-existing racial differences between natural pre-existing groups sadly produce racism). Guillaumin showed how the transformation of Biology as a political discourse during the 19th century went parallel to the raise of the idea of Nature and opened to the present period of naturalization of the structural social power relations.

Let us now focus on her 1978 foundational article published in *Question Féministes* (Guillaumin 2016 (1992)), in which, concentrating on women, as a sex class, she laid the bases for the later French-speaking materialist feminists' collective theorization.

Her argumentation stems from the observation of daily and banal phenomena (corporal customs, verbal habits) that reveal the specific nature of oppression that women face, which at the time it is omnipresent, is widely denied and projected towards 'other societies': far away, long before. The only thing that almost everybody and every political trend recognize in 1970's France is that women are exploited: when they exert a paid job, their salary is two thirds of men's, and domestic work is realized by all women for free, whether or not they also exert paid work. But actually, for Guillaumin, the phrase 'the only thing that the worker possesses and can sell, is his capacity to work' does not apply to women, as a sex class.<sup>13</sup> Indeed,

a whole class, almost half of the population, not only suffer workforce grabbing, but a social relation of direct physical appropriation: women. (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 18)

She knows that this type of relation of appropriation is not specific to sex (structural social) relations:

in recent history, it also characterized plantation slavery, that disappeared from industrial world only since one century (USA 1865, Brazil 1890), which does not mean that slavery has totally disappeared. Another form of physical appropriation, serfdom, that characterized feudal land property, disappeared at the end of the XVIII century in France (last serfs emancipated around 1770, abolition of serfdom in 1789) but subsisted still for almost one century in some countries in Europe. (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 18)

Guillaumin wants to analyse specifically the physical appropriation that occurs in sex structural social relations. What distinguishes appropriation from simple workforce grabbing is that it excludes any measuring of the workforce grabbing, which is a common point with slavery and serfdom. Let us note here that Guillaumin distinguishes and refers to many historical forms of enslavement. She is, therefore, not drawing a too quick or politically problematic parallel with colonial plantation slavery, or between women and Black people.<sup>14</sup> Rather, she envisions a broader picture:

Physical appropriation existed in the majority of known forms of enslavement: for instance, Rome's slavery (in which, by the way, all master's slaves were called *familia*), those of XVIII and

XIX centuries in northern America and the Caribbean. In change, some forms of enslavement that limited its duration (X years of service for instance, as it happened in Hebrew society, Athenian City to some extent, or in the United States during the XVII century. . .), and certain forms of enslavement that also established some limits to the use of serfs (in terms of amount of days a week, for instance), are transitional forms between physical appropriation and work grabbing. (p. 19)

In fact, Guillaumin's focus is, in this article,

physical appropriation itself, the structural social relation where it is the material unity that produces workforce that is at stake, and not only the work force. Called 'slavery' [esclavage] and 'serfdom' [servage] in agrarian economy, this kind of structural social relation could be called 'sexage' in the modern domestic economy, when it comes to sex-classes structural social relation. (p. 19)

Guillaumin wants to analyse, precisely, this social structural relation of *sexage* – women's physical appropriation by men in the modern domestic economy.

### *What matters? 'Body as workforce-machine'*

Appropriation, as Guillaumin defines it, is a structural social relation in which some actors are not considered as simple workforce holders but are *reduced to a material unity* that is appropriated. It is their body, and not only something called workforce, what is appropriated, without any measuring:

workforce grabbing is not at all measured in this relation. The workforce, which only limits are those of an individual material body, is taken as a whole, without any evaluation. The body is a workforce reservoir, and it is such that it is appropriated. What is grabbed is not workforce, distinct from its support/producer and that can be measured in quantities (of time, of money, of tasks), but it's origin: work-force-machine. (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 18)

Guillaumin proposes a very interesting concept, that of 'body as workforce-machine', which highlights the idea of objectification: appropriated people are not only handled, owned [*prises en mains*], but are considered as the equivalent of an object.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the concept of 'body as workforce-machine' allows to understand women's body as more than breasts, buttocks and vagina (sexualized bodies, as some 'radical' and cultural feminist argue), and more than only wombs (procreative bodies, as other feminists, anthropologists and some Marxists believe). Rather, they appear as multi-purpose Bodies/work-machines that also have arms, legs and brain that can be used in multiple ways.

Going a bit further than Guillaumin herself, let us suggest that in Marxian terms, women's bodies as workforce-machines could actually be considered somehow as means of production, at the same time that they also function as workforce. Moreover, in certain conditions, through pregnancy, these bodies-machines are able to produce other bodies-machines and/or workforce. The already mentioned very important materialist feminists Nicole-Claude Mathieu<sup>16</sup> and Paola Tabet demonstrated that 'having babies' was far from being a simple natural process. The French socio-anthropologist Mathieu



(2013 (1991)) was the first to prove through a deep anthropological and sociological scrutiny that ‘maternity’ was totally social (and dialectically, that paternity was also a biological responsibility). Some years after, her close friend, the Italian anthropologist Paola Tabet (1985), in a brilliant and very precise article, showed that procreation could be considered fully as *work*. And the two of them insisted that after having given birth, taking care of babies and children is no natural consequence of natural childbirth, but another kind of work deriving from the former.

I myself suggested, to analyse this central point, both historically and in each society (diachronically and synchronically), the concept of ‘straight bind’ (Falquet 2016). Straight bind designates the whole set of institutions and rules that organize simultaneously matrimonial arrangements (for procreation and the global disposal of women’s body as workforce-machines) and filiation arrangements (defining who owns the bodies produced by women), depending on the sex, race and class position of the people involved, in each period and place. In other terms, straight bind designates the whole organization of who has the right to marry with who, what kind of matrimonial unions are highly desired, which are only tolerated and which are impossible or forbidden. Depending on that, straight bind also predicts to which lineage (if any) the different children who have been produced by each woman will belong. Some will be considered as very valuable, some will not be recognized by anybody and will be exposed to death, given into adoption, left alone in the streets, captured by State for the army, or by religious institutions to work for them. In other terms, straight bind organizes women’s procreative work, as well as the distribution and possession of women’s work products, that can either be considered as children or quickly turn into new bodies-as-workforce-machines.

### *Concrete expressions and means of sexage, private and collective appropriation*

In her 1978 article, Guillaumin first distinguished four *concrete expressions* of women’s appropriation by men. The appropriation of *time*, also known as permanent availability for other’s necessities, means 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no holidays nor pensioning. The appropriation of the *body and body’s products* means availability for any kind of function, including waged or domestic work, decorating or disposal, and includes babies but also milk, hair and any ‘separable’ part of the body. The *sexual obligation* seems to be self-understandable, though it would deserve a further reflection. Last but not least, the *physical charge of the group’s members* (including its healthy male members) is a frequently forgotten burden. It is in fact central to understand much deeper and in a much less romantic way, the whole discussion around ‘*care*’. This is also a central point of social reproduction theory that I started to address in another work (Moujoud & Falquet 2010).

Guillaumin then describes five *means* of this appropriation: first, the labour market, in which women ‘alone’ never obtain a salary that could allow them to live decently with the children, elderly and sick people they are generally in charge of; second, spatial confinement: be it at home or in the village or the country, it is enforced on women thanks to all kinds of moral and material mobility’s restrictions (from lack of vehicle to unpractical shoes, from moral chantage towards children education to romanticization of the



home's queen); third, the display of force (physical violence): this point also seems easy to understand though it could be widely developed; fourth, the sexual constraint (though Guillaumin did not use the concept of heterosexuality, Wittig brightly theorized it, as we said, in close discussion with Guillaumin's analysis); and, fifth, the arsenal of both positive law and customary law that permanently place women in a disadvantaged position in every field.

Last but not least, Guillaumin differentiated two dimensions of appropriation: *private-individual* and *collective*. Private-individual appropriation takes place through marriage's institution or its equivalents. In contrast, prostitutes and nuns are examples of collective appropriation. Guillaumin warned us about focusing the analysis only on the institution of marriage, that is, generally the main target of criticism. Marriage only represents one of the possible institutional aspects of the global logics of appropriation – just as heterosexuality goes much beyond the question of the 'couple', sexual practices and inter-individual desire. Collective appropriation, which constitutes the core of appropriation, is much broader. It precedes logically and chronologically, private or individual appropriation. Collective appropriation is the ground that permits to men to 'take a spouse', without having to wage a war or to rob them at night from hostile families or villages: it is already commonly admitted that women are available for marriage.

Nevertheless, Guillaumin identified a contradiction between private and collective appropriation: marrying a woman is taking her away from collective appropriation. Theoretically speaking, this contradiction is an important element that gives flexibility to the whole analysis. In other terms, far from presenting a monolithic and an-historic 'Patriarchal System' as FMF is sometimes accused of, as a truly Marxian thinker, Guillaumin's highlighted the *contradictory* and therefore *dynamic* character of *sexage*. Actually, Guillaumin highlighted two main contradictions of *sexage*. The first, that we just mentioned, is internal and takes place between individual appropriation and collective appropriation. The second happens between *sexage* and the wage system:

These two contradictions govern all analyses of the relations of sex classes, or, if you prefer, of the relations of *sexage*. Collective appropriation of women (the one that is the most 'invisible' today) is manifested by and through private appropriation (marriage), which contradicts it. Social appropriation (collective and private) is manifested through the free sale (only recently) of labour force, which contradicts it. (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 46)

To sum up, Guillaumin's proposal is broader than Delphy's domestic mode of production: first, because *sexage* perspective goes beyond the domestic-family sphere and its problems – the frequent confusion between family as an institution, and empirical families, and their subsequent restriction to White middle-class or *bourgeois* families, so frequently denounced by racialized and proletarianized feminists. Second, it is to note that when Delphy affirms that (married) women's work cannot be exchanged on the (paid) labour market because it is already alienated to the husband, Guillaumin points out that it's women's workforce reservoir that is already appropriated, that is, themselves, as bodies as workforce-machines. *Sexage* allows to go one step further and to firmly establish that sex is another structural social relation: appropriation, which differs from capitalist exploitation and corresponds to another way of obtaining labour.

## The missing link: discussing nowadays Marxist feminist's theses III and VIII, bridging the gap between Marx, French-speaking materialist feminism and Black feminism

Now that we have a clear idea of the bases of French-speaking materialist feminist concepts and proposal, it is time to discuss how this theoretical trend can be considered as the missing link between Marxist feminism and Black and of colour feminism that could help bridging some gaps, and how it allows us to further discuss Theses III and VIII.

### *About Thesis III: sex relations are structural social relations, contemporary and connected to class relations*

Let us first sum up the situation at the end of the 1970s, when in a context of Marxism's hegemony, two main 'advanced positions' on 'women' emerged. In the Marxist camp, some got to imagine a kind of derivation from class logics, to sex logics: women would be male proletarians' proletarians. In the feminist camp, others got to affirm a kind of parallel between sex and class: women would be to men, what proletarians are to bourgeois. Guillaumin aimed to go further.

As we saw, stemming from the commonly admitted idea that women were (also) exploited, she visibilized another kind of structural social relation that characterized women's situation beyond their exploitation: *appropriation*. With her, FMF firmly established the concept of *sexage*, as a general *class relation of private and collective direct physical appropriation* where the whole of one class (women) is at the disposition of the other (men) (Guillaumin 2016 (1992)). *Sexage* produces women and dialectically, men, as antagonist sex classes, organized around some sort of sexual division of labour.<sup>17</sup> This does not occur based on any previous biological bases<sup>18</sup> but on the contrary, naturalizing retrospectively each group through a powerful naturalist discourse that Guillaumin analysed both in the case of sexist and racist logics, and that Wittig brilliantly exposed, in the case of sex classes, as 'straight mind', that is, the ideology of sexual difference, that is, heterosexuality as a political system.

In the terms of Thesis III, French-speaking materialist feminism demonstrated almost 45 years ago that gender relations could fully be considered as 'relation of production', clearly elucidating their material as well as ideological instances, placing them at the same level as class relations. The fundamental difference between sex relations (appropriation) and class relations (exploitation) is the absence of any measurement in the first case: instead of workforce that can be counted in hours or days and paid in money, with appropriation, we are talking about the whole body as workforce-machine that is handled in its totality, without counting or evaluating in any way neither the tasks that are performed nor their retribution.

Furthermore, as Thesis III does, Guillaumin insists on the *contemporaneity* of the structural social relations of appropriation, with those of exploitation. Moreover, when she names women's appropriation by men as 'sexage', she draws a parallel in name with two other important forms of appropriation, colonial XVIII and XIXth centuries slavery

[esclavage] and european middleage serfdom [servage]. By doing this, she turns the supposedly old and distant slavery and serfdom more present, more contemporaneous. In the same movement, she stresses that appropriation exists here and now. The contemporaneous existence of appropriation, she says, is manifest today at least in women's case, but it could also exist in 'non-manifest' way, under racialized of feudal forms:

social appropriation, the fact, for members of a class, to be material properties, is a specific form of the structural social relations. It is manifest *today and here, only between sex classes.* (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 37)

Let us repeat that for Guillaumin, the fact that women constitute a sex class regarding to men, does not mean that this class is monolithic. Just as she never tried to picture an 'a-historic universal Patriarchal system', she does not imagine any rigid normative women's class. She perfectly knows that historically, part of the women has been (and still can be) appropriated as serfs or as enslaved persons. She straightforwardly remembers that because of their position in the racist logics, part of the women is still specifically assigned to 'service/domestic/reproductive/sex-work' jobs, as it can be the case of part of men's sex class:

More than 80% of the personal of service is composed by women in France, these workers in the United States are Afro-Americans, women and men, in India, pariahs, men and women. . . Here, today, almost all cleaners [femmes de ménage] are women, almost every nurse are women, the same for social assistants, the same for prostitutes, three quarters of the primary teachers are women, etc. (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 45)

We can see here that Guillaumin's reflection does account for people who are at the same time racialized and feminized. Actually, she explicitly refers to different kind of racialized women's situations, in her book and in the numerous short texts she wrote for activist anti-racist journals she regularly contributed to. She mentions from enslaved women in the colonial plantation system, to contemporary US Black women, passing through racialized migrants in France – both from Portugal and the Maghreb, that were the two main migrant-racialized groups in France at the time (Guillaumin 2016 (1992)). Moreover, in one of her last texts, still, she precisely analysed how racism was creating deep differences, not so much between women, but between their political strategies (Guillaumin 2017). In this sense, again, her theoretical perspective corresponds to Thesis III's preoccupation for *contemporaneity* and *connectedness* with what Marxist feminism calls 'global relations' and that I prefer to simply name 'class relations', as long as they are no more global than others. We will come back to the connectedness, but let us before go deeper still in the question of contemporaneity. Actually, Guillaumin does not only note this contemporaneity, but analyzes it.

As we saw before, for her, slavery and serfdom disappeared only from the industrial countries, while sexage happens precisely not 'long ago' nor 'far away' but at the core of what she calls industrial countries. In other terms, appropriation still exists in different ways in the midst of the capitalist mode of production. Thanks to the two contradictions she identified, between private and collective forms of sexage, and mainly between

appropriation and exploitation, *sexage* is characterized by constant transformation. She offers a dynamic, historical perspective on *sexage*, and proposes, for instance, an interesting parallel between the ‘communes’ movement during the European feudal middle age, and the movement

. . . which today lets a small but increasing number of women escape from patriarchal and sexist institutions (from marriage, from the father, from religion, which are the obligations of their sex class). (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 37)

Workforce grabbing occurs in appropriation, but appropriation is a kind of social relation that is previous to simple workforce grabbing, and much previous to exploitation, which is a special and restrictive form of workforce grabbing:

Even if structural social relations of appropriation in general imply workforce grabbing, they are logically anterior [to exploitation]. They are also historically anterior to it. It is the result of a long and hard process, to have become able to sell only one’s workforce and not to be appropriated. (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 18)

Even if it might seem that appropriation in its different forms is decreasing (in the case of women’s appropriation, thanks to the feminist movement), Guillaumin does not affirm that it will necessarily disappear in the capitalist mode of production. Going further than Delphy’s suggestion to add a ‘domestic mode of production’ to the Marxist capitalist mode of production, and contrary to Marx’s linear description of the historical evolution (predicating the formal and then the real subsumption of other logics in the capitalist logics of exploitation), Guillaumin’s actual brainwave is to point out that this process, because of its deeply contradictory nature, could be something else than linear. Capitalist mode of production *can coexist with an array of others mode of production that all have in common to be organized around appropriation rather than exploitation.*

The following table provides a provisional intent to sum up Guillaumin’s analysis. Please note that there is no historical movement from one column to the other and rather that different modes of production can coexist in different periods of time:

Physical appropriation of the body	Physical appropriation of the body	Physical appropriation of the body	Physical appropriation of the body	Work grabbing	Exploitation of labour force
Direct (body-as-workforce-machine) Sexage	Direct (body-as-workforce-machine) Slavery	Indirect (through the land) Serfdom	Direct (body-as-workforce-machine) Slavery		Labour power only Wage system
Patriarchal mode of production sex	Antique slavery non-western slavery caste	Feudal mode of production order	Colonial plantation mode of production race	Transitional forms	Capitalist mode of production class

## About Thesis VIII, intersectionality or interlocking structural social relations

Let us now examine the question of the heterogeneity of women's oppression in historically concrete cases that is (rightly) pointed out by Thesis III. I suggest that it relates to Thesis VIII about the necessity to answer 'the 'race question' and to take further the 'controversy over race, and sex/gender (intersectionality)'. First, it is important to take very seriously the racialized and proletarianized feminists' considerable and quite old theoretical and political production.

Among the precursors, is the well-known US Combahee River Collective (CRC). Composed of Black feminists of popular origins, of socialist perspective and for most of them, lesbians, the CRC published in 1979 its 'Black Feminist Statement' – contemporary to Guillaumin's here commented article. In this ground-breaking text, they explicitly denounced four 'interlocking systems of oppression': racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and heterosexuality (CRC 1979). They affirmed that these systems acted simultaneously and that it was problematic trying to separate them, even for analytical purpose, because they functioned tightly together and affected them all at once as a whole heavy block. More important even, they refused to keep on *hierarchizing* them, as each and every social movement in which they actively participated, asked them to do. Negating the existence of hierarchy between capitalism, racism and heterosexism is a very bold theoretical and political stand. It radically contradicts the whole logics of Marxism and all the class-orientated movements. It also and simultaneously overthrows the whole logics of feminism and sex-orientated movements, and of Black, anti-racist and race-orientated movements.

Significantly enough, this radical and innovative stand came from an activist collective, and moreover, from a group of persons who were at the same time appropriated in race and in sex social structural relations, and exploited in the class social structural relations. Epistemologically and politically, this is a capital point.

Let us now try to join Guillaumin and CRC's perspectives. On the one hand, we have *interlocking systems of oppression*: (hetero)sex, race and class. On the other hand, we have two main contradictory though dialectically united ways of obtaining work through *historically simultaneous structural social relations*: appropriation (private and collective) and exploitation. Exploitation, as it has been firmly established, creates what we know as social class. Appropriation, as understood by Guillaumin, has historically concerned different social formations and defined different social groups: cast (in feudalism as well as in various ancient systems with transitional forms of appropriation or old enslavement logics), race (in colonial plantation modern western slavery) and sex (in industrial western systems). In the *contemporary western world*, appropriation produces and defines both sex classes and race classes, meanwhile exploitation produces and defines social classes.

As a synthesis of the Combahee's and Guillaumin's proposals, I propose to reflect on how *structural social relations* (Guillaumin) concretely *interlock* (Combahee), depending on the historical and geographical context, in a nonlinear, dynamic way that I proposed in previous empirical and theoretical works, to approach through the image of '*communicating vessels*' (Falquet 2014).

## *The proposal of the 'communicating vessels' to understand the constant back and forth between appropriation and/or exploitation*

Until here, we have seen that different ways of obtaining labour can *coexist*: through exploitation or through appropriation. This produces different types of 'classes', respectively, women and men, racialized people and racializers,<sup>19</sup> proletarians and bourgeoisie. It is now time to analyse the last point: that the existence of the contradiction between appropriation and exploitation means that it can also go the other way around. It is theoretically possible to transit from exploitation to appropriation – and it actually does happen concretely, for instance, when women are sent off the labour market, back to domestic work in their family's house. We can now examine *connectedness* further. For this purpose, I proposed the image of 'communicating vessels' (Falquet 2014). This image aims at showing that, at least in the short time, any change in the organization of work attributed to one type of class will affect the other two types of class (the type of tasks each class is supposed to perform, but also its empirical composition and even, to some degree, its existence as such).

More precisely, in the absence of any technical, cultural or political revolution that would modify the total type and amount of labour to be realized, I call '*communicating vessels*' the logics of work's organization. Work (understood in a broad, anthropological sense) can be attributed to different groups of people, either/or through (private or collective) appropriation or exploitation. The image of *communicating vessels* highlights the permanent movement of the double contradiction (internal, between private and collective appropriation, and external, between appropriation and exploitation). It allows us to study, at each moment and place, how work is enforced on racialized, either/or sexualized, either/or proletarianized individual and groups. In other terms, it helps analysing the shifting logics of work's organization under sex-race (appropriative) and/or class (exploitative) structural social relations.<sup>20</sup>

The *communicating vessels* proposal can be used at least in two ways. I developed it first to better understand, synchronically, nowadays neoliberal globalization's transformation of work and then resistances that it provoked. But it could also help, in a diachronic perspective, to analyse the development of the 'capitalist modern world-system'.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, I intensively studied neoliberal international restructuring of labour (in English: Falquet 2011). I focused on feminization of migration and the global transformation of the so-called 'reproductive labour' (its internationalization and informalization). I concentrated on paid domestic labour and, more broadly, on 'service women', including sex workers and surrogate pregnancy. On the one hand, I studied how health, education and elderly care that had been first conceptualized as 'social reproduction work' by the Marxist scholars (Kofman et al. 2001) transformed into the 'catchall' concept of 'care work' (Moujoud & Falquet 2010), parallel to their trespassing from the 'welfare' State's policies and institutions,<sup>21</sup> to a private responsibility (corporate and familial) (Walby 1997). This process, mentioned in Theses IX and X,<sup>22</sup> meant shifting from waged, qualified, formal and stable workforce (proletarianized and exploited) to supposedly low-skilled or un-skilled informalized, very low paid or free, workforce of spouses and migrant women (womanized, racialized and appropriated).

In this case, the ‘communicating vessels’ image can help understand what is at stake, in an interlocking perspective, and why and how different social groups (racialized, sexualized and proletarianized) and collective actors (social movement, political groups) and institutions (States) struggle and compete, for instance, to reduce waged activities, transform them in unpaid work and enforce on others, appropriated group, these tasks.

One example is the strategy of many States that brutally dismantled public service and did not want to enforce autochthonous men to sex equality, neither to put all the burden on qualified autochthonous women that were needed for other jobs, to import migrants-racialized-proletarianized people, mainly women, to the global cities (Sassen 1991) and the global North, to do the major part of reproductive work.<sup>23</sup> ‘Communicating vessels’ can also explain why right-wing political parties sometimes claim that national-white women should quit paid labour market to make space for national-white male proletarians and, in other moments, argue that migrants and/or racialized people of both sexes should quit these jobs to leave room for national-white proletarians of both sexes. Then, it explains the tendency of many white bourgeois, and even proletarianized, women to accept State’s or right wing’s organizations’ attacks towards racialized men of the average same social position as hers and against whom there are competing for similar jobs. It also sheds light on why some racialized proletarianized men occasionally join forces and ally with white men of all sorts to criticize sex equality that jeopardizes their access to the labour market and their well-being at home. Communicating vessels is the key to explain – though not to agree with – what Sarah Farris (2017) called femonationalism, or what I analysed as lesbonationalism in other cases (Falquet 2019b).

Then, the *communicating vessels* logics can also be used in a diachronic perspective, to shed some light on the development of the capitalist modern world-system. But as Thesis VIII somehow suggests, we first have to account for the apparition of sex and race, as we know them today: as long as they do not correspond to any natural reality, they have historically come to an existence (see G. and D in this issue). For this purpose, decolonial thinking from Abya Yala is key, as it describes how it has been from 1492 onwards, that the modern categories and logics of race (according to Aníbal Quijano 2008) and gender (according to María Lugones 2007) have been enforced on colonized people of the invaded continent and then of Africa, by the Portuguese, Spanish and other invaders, that in turn progressively became Europeans and White. From this moment on, entire groups of people have been racialized (Quijano 2008) and force to work in a clear appropriative logic, while some of them were simultaneously sexualized for the same purpose, inheriting the burden of the ‘dark side’ of gender (Lugones 2007), paving the way for a capitalist’s development that can be read both with materialist and (anti)colonial feminist lenses (Falquet 2020; see also D&V in this issue).

Concerning the European pre-1492 women, pushing them into appropriation, though on what Lugones called the ‘light side’ of gender, had been quite brutal also, as shown in Silvia Federici’s (2021 (2004)) work about ‘witches’ hunting and its relation to creation a domestic sphere in which relatively independent peasant women (they were collectively appropriated by the landlord as serfs) were brutally enforced, becoming the husband’s private workforce-machine. Then, from the 19th-century Africa’s new colonization onward, Marie Mies’ (1986) analysis of the ‘housewifification’ of colonized African women constitutes another example of this transiting from collective to private



appropriation – in this case, many of these women also passed from African appropriators to European ones, either collective as colonizers, or private, through informal marital arrangements.

Along the centuries, parallel to this process of entering appropriation or shifting from one form to another, millions of sexualized and/or racialized people have struggled in many ways to escape their private and collective appropriation. Some succeeded in entering exploitation, generally in a partial way, but the vast majority seems to never have been fully admitted into the ‘normal’ (white, male) proletarian class. For, as we already said, ‘It is the result of a long and hard process, to have become able to sell only one’s workforce and not to be appropriated’ (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 18).

To paraphrase Beauvoir and Wittig anew, one is not born exploitable . . . and sometimes do not get to it. Actually, when used to analyse diachronic transformations, the image of the ‘communicating vessels’ is a significant alternative to the idea of subsumption of the different modes of production. It can describe *formal subsumption*, but assuming that this formal subsumption can always go backwards and therefore not produce *real subsumption*. Instead, it helps understanding that capitalist’s logics is based on maintaining, though with constant re-arrangements, the interlocking dynamics of sex, race and class. The slow apparition of ‘free’ workers coming from the ranks of racialized and/or sexualized groups can be reversed – and is, actually, frequently reversed. In the empirical reality, neither women’s nor racialized people’s appropriation have fully come to an end. Moreover, these groups clearly did not disappear as distinct groups in the midst of a global, indistinct proletarian group.

As a final consideration about the communicating vessels image, I want to insist again on a very important point: all these oppositions, struggles and alliances between different sectors depend on the empirical reality that at each specific moment in a specific society, the amount and kind of work is more or less constant. The reasoning could deeply change if the global type and quantity of labour to be realized suddenly changed, either for technological reason or any motive due to economical logics, or if something changed at a political-ideological level. For instance, as the diachronic perspective shows, technological changes as well as collective struggles progressively transformed race class and sex class shapes and situation. And the synchronic perspective, some political groups suggested to change the recipe instead of struggling for a better part of the cake. One of the first was the CRC, proposing to struggle all together in a coordinated way to radically and simultaneously abolish both exploitation and appropriation – or to put it in their terms, to finish for once with capitalism, racism and hetero-patriarchy. This is why developing an interlocking perspective is so vital, not only as a ‘political correctness’, but as a very concrete key of understanding theoretically, and of organizing politically for social justice and transformation.

## Conclusion

At the end of this article, I hope to have shown that the perspective of ‘interlocking structural social relations’, that I draw as a synthesis of CRC and other US radical-socialist Black feminists and of Guillaumin and the French-speaking materialist feminists, indeed helped going further with Theses III and VIII, as well as apporthing some

elements for Theses IX and X. In this sense, concepts as sex and race as classes, historically created by structural social relations of sex and race, and their interlockedness, in the global theoretical perspective of 'sexage', constitutes the missing link to complete and renew Marxist-feminist theory.

Thanks to FMF, I have been trying to propose a global theorization, somehow on the same direction as Vogel's (2013 (1983)) 'unitary theory'. This, at least in the sense I think we should stop trying to theoretically 'articulate' what is already, empirically, fully articulated—actually, interlocking. But differently to Vogel's proposal, I suggest to analyse sex, race and class as they have developed *in the last five centuries and around the Atlantic world* with the same analytic tools and, therefore, the same theoretical weight level. This does not mean to decontextualize things, nor to universalize each of these structural social relations – on the contrary. First, precisely because by showing how they mutually transform one another, I show how 'relative' these structural social relations are to a period and place, and, second, because I fully acknowledge that they cannot necessarily be used to describe previous periods, nor for other parts of the world. But at least, for the last five centuries and around the Atlantic world, a part of the world that has been pivotal to produce the present neoliberal globalization, I hope the FMF framework will contribute to the understanding of the complex heteropatriarchal-racist-colonial neoliberal capitalism we live in, and mainly, will help struggling against it more successfully.

## Notes

1. Thesis III. It is clear that gender relations are relations of production, not an addition to them. All practices, norms, values, authorities, institutions, language, culture, and so on are coded in gender relations. This assumption makes feminist Marxist research as prolific as it is necessary. The contemporaneity and connectedness within global relations, and the Special Issue Proposal: The 13 theses on Marxist Feminism simultaneous heterogeneity of historically concrete kinds of women's oppression require international activists bring together their knowledge and experiences.
2. Thesis VIII. The controversy over race, and sex/gender (intersectionality) should be taken further. The connection between class and sex in all societies seized by capitalism is to be investigated in detail; what appears as 'race question' is to be answered concretely for each society and culture separately and to be related to the two other kinds of oppression. Nonlinear thinking is necessary.
3. As we will see, this trend does not only include French feminists and certainly does not defend any nationalist perspective. Nevertheless, the question of language and, namely, the possibilities of French language, are central to it.
4. I tried as much as possible to mention in the bibliography both the French originals and the English translation of their works. Therefore, some articles have four references: the first French version, in sociological and/or anthropological and/or feminist journals at the end of the 1970s or early 1980; sometimes an early English translation in another scientific journal; then a first collection of essays in French (much later, in the early 1990); and the more recent reprinted collection which is generally the only one available now (another 20 years later, after 2010). This long-term chronology says much about their complexity of their reception. In this article, all the English translations are mine.
5. Further elements can be found in a quite useful article of Juteau and Laurin (1989) about the four main radical and Marxists feminist theorizations at the end of the 1980s.

6. Guillaumin (2002 (1972)) published many articles in anti-racist and feminist journals, and two personal books in French: the first in 1972 (*Racist Ideology* (*L'idéologie raciste*)), was roughly speaking, her PhD work. The second (*Sex, Race and Practice of the power* (*Sexe, Race et Pratique du pouvoir*)), in 1992 (reprinted in 2016), is a collection of 10 of her main contributions. It first emphasizes her (then new) work about sex, starting with her 1978 founding article 'Practices of the power and idea of Nature (*Pratique du pouvoir et idée de Nature*)' (that was first published in the second issue of *Questions Féministes*, pp. 5–28), offering in a second part, another five articles mainly about race. Danielle Juteau, a French-speaking Canadian, a precursory feminist teacher at the University of Ottawa in 1972, the first appointed professor on the Interethnic relations Chair at the University of Montreal in 1991 and a personal friend of Colette Guillaumin and the other FMF members, played a very important role in the dissemination of her theorization, both about race and about sex, in the English-speaking world as well as in France. Apart from the very useful 1989 article already mentioned, she wrote a very important introduction to the major English translation of Guillaumin's work, published in 1995 by Routledge (Juteau 1995; this 1995 English book contains almost every 1992's book chapters and some more articles about race: Guillaumin, 1995). In this article, I will refer to the 2016 French re-edition of her 1992's book.
7. Some people alternatively credit Gayle Rubin (1975) for this 'sex/gender system' theoretical proposal.
8. As a consequence of these articles, a deep conflict divided the journal as well as the movement. The central debate was about the possibility to struggle against patriarchy without attacking heterosexuality. The majority, including Guillaumin, Mathieu and Wittig, argued that struggling only against patriarchy, was indeed reformism. Delphy and De Lesseps dissented. They kept publishing the journal (against what was collectively agreed), renaming it *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, while the others participated in the blooming autonomous/radical lesbian movement that surged nationally and internationally against what they considered as reformist feminism. They started publishing a journal called *Feminist Questions* (in the University of Berkeley, in English) and developed links with the lesbian movement in Quebec, sending important pieces to the 'for lesbians only' journal *Amazones d'Hier, Lesbiennes d'Aujourd'hui*.
9. In an article published by *L'Idiot international* (May 1970) the original title was: 'Pour un mouvement de libération des femmes'. [Wittig's original footnote].
10. Christiane Rochefort (1963) [Wittig's original footnote].
11. For a global presentation of lesbian theories and lesbianism as a complex social movement: Falquet (2019a).
12. In Wittig's analysis, heterosexuality is much more than a norm. Focusing on 'heteronormativity' means to place oneself at another, profoundly different level.
13. It is worth noting here, that at this point of her article, she explicitly quotes in a footnote the French 73 translation of Selma James' *Women's Power and the Subversion of the Community*, with Mariarosa Dalla Costa (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 17).
14. As Black feminists have rightly critiqued in many other cases.
15. She says that in the extreme situations of appropriation in which women are strictly speaking 'exchanged', they are not only seen as *pecus* in its first sense, livestock, but as *pecus* in its figured sense, money. Anthropologists and intellectuals pretend this only happens in 'exotic or archaic societies', but Guillaumin suggests that they are speaking of here and now (Guillaumin 2016 (1992): 16).
16. Mathieu (2013 (1991), 2014), both a sociologist and anthropologist, has many texts translated in English, but none of her two personal books, that are anthologies of her main

- articles: *L'anatomie politique. Catégorisations et idéologies du sexe* (1991, reprinted in 2013), and *L'anatomie politique 2. Usage, dérégulation et résilience des femmes* (2014).
17. Not in the common and somehow simplistic sense of tasks division, but rather as explained by Guillaumin's 'expressions' and 'means' of appropriation.
  18. Again, women are not females who have been socialized in a feminine way. Women are a social group of people that are permanently created and defined as appropriated by another social group. If going to biology, it is impossible to clearly define two, and only two sex groups.
  19. Because race is not 'natural', depending on place and period, any group can be in the place of 'white people' in modern western racism, and any group can be racialized.
  20. This work could also interestingly discuss the subtle reflection, though organized on different bases, of Tine Haubner (2022).
  21. Even if neoliberal globalization contributed to reveal some problematic logics of the state-organizing of these activities, it corresponds to a long-term reclaim of many women and feminists, including some famous Marxist and anti-racist theoreticians and activists, such as Angela Davis (1981). Black feminists have repeatedly insisted on the importance of community work realized by Black women, neither in a strictly private nor in a clearly State's perspective (Hill Collins 1990). Studying in depth this theme – though of enormous importance – is impossible here.
  22. Thesis IX: In the upheavals since the crisis of Fordism, manifest in the series of crises of the rapidly globalized economy and driving people into more and more precarious conditions, women are among those who lose out, just as other marginalized practices and groups.  
Thesis X: The dismantling of the Western welfare state in a globalized economy leaves the care for life to women in unpaid domestic work or in low-paid wage work, something that can be experienced in the global care-chain. We can conceive of this as 'care crisis', as a necessary consequence of a capitalist society, which in the shift of its economic centre to services gets into a profit squeeze, while it seizes on ever more barbaric forms of handling the crises through unequal creation of value levels.
  23. An interesting analysis of the allegedly very progressive Swedish Welfare State's system and its neoliberal transformation can be found in Selberg (2022).

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