

# The root causes of the attacks on reproductive rights: A Marxist analysis – Liberation School

*Karina Garcia*

*Editor's introduction: Women's History Month is a time to recommit ourselves to the unfinished struggle for women's liberation, and this year it is even more crucial than ever. The conservative leaning Supreme Court is considering gutting or even overturning Roe v. Wade, which would roll back women's hard-won and fundamental right to abortion. The current attacks on abortion rights are the culmination of decades of reactionary organizing to establish extreme reproductive control by challenging birth control access, criminalizing miscarriage, undoing the right to abortion, and promoting abstinence-only sex (mis)education.*

*This article offers a Marxist analysis of why abortion rights are in peril today, and how the historical attempt to limit and control reproductive freedom stretches back to the very beginnings of class society. This article was originally published in the Autumn 2019 issue of [Breaking the Chains](#) magazine, titled "[Not a Moral Issue](#)."*

## Introduction

Thirteen years ago, a speaker at a meeting, addressing the right-wing attacks on women's rights in the context of the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, emphasized how important it was to elect pro-choice Democrats. The speaker gave no further explanation to the attacks.

At the time, the right-wing was attacking the ACA because it would expand abortion and contraception access. A couple years after it became law, the Supreme Court had already restricted access to birth control to "respect the religious beliefs" of corporations vis-a-vis reactionary owners. And to pass the ACA, the Democrats gladly compromised on reproductive rights. Obamacare ultimately continued to deny federal funds for abortion coverage and required that every state offer at least one insurance plan that did not cover abortions.

At the meeting, a young socialist woman spoke from the floor and criticized the speaker for not raising the "systematic" explanation. She said that capitalism was behind these patriarchal policies. She said that the bosses—the capitalists—want to restrict birth control and abortion because they want the working class to produce more workers and thereby drive down wages. On top of that, they want to pay less in healthcare costs to cover their employees. I remember nodding in the moment that indeed there must be a deeper cause. I knew capitalism as a system was implicated. What she was saying had

a logic to it. But when I went home it started to make a lot less sense.

Do the capitalists really need more workers? Millions of people are unemployed as it is and they are incarcerating the “surplus” population. Is it really possible that the capitalists would conspire in this way to restrict abortion rights, but none of them would ever slip up and admit it? Why is it that some Democrats support abortion rights then? They too represent the capitalist class’s interests. It can’t just be about forcing women to produce more workers.

And as for costs and profits, the Affordable Care Act was going to make insurance companies, the healthcare sector, and the banks mega-profits with or without abortion coverage, so why try to tank the bill on that basis? It wasn’t really only about profit either.

She *was* right that the attack was “systematic” and that these sexist policies are linked to capitalism, but there seemed to be more to the answer than she’d presented. I dove into the Marxist and historical writing about the anti-abortion movement because I wanted to understand this and be able to explain it—for myself and others.

The Marxist approach to women’s oppression and liberation is often misunderstood or mischaracterized. In university settings it is portrayed as “economic determinism” or “reductionism” — asserting that Marxists reduce every issue to economics. In a way, that’s what the socialist speaking from the floor was doing in that meeting. But that’s not an accurate description of the Marxist method.

It is true that Marxists emphasize the importance of the economic system, in that the mode of production plays a critical role in shaping the economic system and the structures of society. Marxists start by looking at how a society produces and reproduces itself and the norms, laws and relationships under which production and reproduction take place. That is what “economics” really means anyway. At its base, every society is engaged in producing and reproducing.

The ideas, laws, formal institutions, religions that justify, strengthen, and stabilize those underlying processes and relations at the base of production and reproduction is what Marx called the superstructure.

## **The capitalist mode of production and the family**

So for instance, under capitalism, there are some people who own the means of production (land, factories, technology, etc.), while others go to work every day and work on those means of production. They generate profits that go back to the owners. That exploitation is at the base of society. But that arrangement would not last a single day if it was not backed up by the laws, the courts and the police —which protect the owners and landlords—and by the schools, media, politicians, and religious institutions that have taught us since day one that this is the normal and perfectly natural way of

things.

The capitalist mode of production developed historically out of previous modes of production, including slavery and feudalism. Capitalism represented a major change in the dominant form of property and labor and many other things changed as a result of that. Racism and white supremacy are part and parcel of the foundation of modern capitalism. In the case of the United States, colonial dispossession and racialized chattel slavery are the foundations for the accumulation of wealth within the capitalist mode of production.

Capitalism did not simply erase the pre-existing world and start with a blank slate. Patriarchy has existed since the dawn of class society and is part of the fabric of the capitalist system. In pre-class society, before private ownership of property there was a much more diverse set of family arrangements and women generally played a leadership role for the community as a whole.

After those pre-class modes of production were overthrown, and eventually the forms of social and family organization alongside them, women were held in a subordinate position and male supremacy became the law. For thousands of years, women's basic conditions and status were confined to the home. Law, custom, and ideology held women to a dependent status and entirely subject to the whims of the leading male in the family. Housework and child rearing, in addition to ongoing work in the fields (in the case of agricultural societies), were delineated as "women's work." This was a central element to modes of production based on private property.

In the United States, today, the capitalist mode of production has changed in many ways, as has the shape and detail of the superstructure. Yet core historic features persist. While women can enter the wage workforce and women can legally own property and have independent political and civil rights, the basic unit of what has been called social reproduction is the nuclear family. In that family, women carry out the vast majority of the labor in the household, in child rearing, and in elder care. Because this family form has been carried over in its essential characteristics, all the values, traditions, and cultural norms that developed to explain and justify male supremacy have been largely carried over, too.

While capitalism has broken down many of the economic relationships that were at the heart of a nuclear family, the family has not been abolished or collapsed entirely. The family unit has changed, but the precarious existence of workers under capitalism makes it necessary for most workers to have a family to survive. One income is not enough. Take, for example, the conditions of so many LGBTQ youth who have been rejected by their families. To not have a family is, in these instances, to be subjected to the worst forms of deprivation, homelessness, and brutality that capitalism has to offer.

For the purposes of the capitalist system, the family unit is highly valuable—especially as it relates to the reproduction and caring for the next generation of workers. Lisa Vogel highlights this in her social reproduction theory [1]. Others have taken it in different directions, highlighting the other forms of

labor that are often unpaid or underpaid, but are nonetheless essential for reproducing a workforce that is healthy and stable enough to continue to come into work.

## **Reactionary worldview explains economic shifts**

How does this relate to the attacks on women's rights and attacks on women's growing assertiveness in challenging sexual violence and sexist rhetoric? These don't present themselves as issues of the basic functioning of the mode of production. They can appear distinct and separate, so people fighting for women's rights on these fronts might not see the linkage to capitalism. And yet more and more activists are talking about systemic patriarchy. The Party for Socialism and Liberation banners, "The whole system is sexist! Fight for socialism!" have been very popular in these movements.

Here we are talking about struggles in the world of politics and culture, the superstructure [2]. They appear as fights within capitalism—in the sense that you should be able to fight for and achieve full abortion rights and other reproductive services under capitalism. In some countries that already exists. You should be able to reduce sexual harassment or violence or eliminate it altogether under capitalism. At least, in theory, it is not pivotal to the mode of production.

But if that is the case, why are those gains so hard to win? Why do socialists insist a revolution would be necessary to really achieve them? It's because the domination of women remains a pillar of the U.S. capitalist class's form of rule.

Abortion access became a major political issue starting in the late 1970s as a cornerstone of an emerging reactionary trend. A reactionary is someone who says that things were better in society before they changed. "Make America Great Again" is a true reactionary slogan. It implies we should return to the past. Big sections of the ruling class turn to a reactionary agenda when they feel that their social control is slipping in the face of a powerful social movement, or when capitalism itself has destabilized the economy and when life seems more uncertain for big sections of the population.

In the late 1970s, both were happening in the United States. The mass uprisings of the 1960s and early 70s with the struggles for women's liberation, Black liberation, LGBTQ liberation, and the anti-war movement were powerful challenges to the U.S. capitalist status quo. The Vietnamese anti-colonial resistance defeated U.S. imperialism, dealing it a major blow while imperialism was engaged in constant heated confrontation with the socialist bloc.

The U.S. economy also went into a period of recession during which layoffs and unemployment increased, consumer spending decreased. Capitalist recessions are cyclical and occur regularly because of overproduction. From 1979 to 1984, approximately 11.5 million workers either lost their jobs or shifted to lower-paying service jobs. Most of the jobs that were lost were in manufacturing industries such as steel, auto, mining, electronics, and more.

The reactionaries have a very powerful appeal and socialists should understand how it works. They say essentially, “Your life used to be better, right? You’re feeling less sure about your future right? Well, that’s understandable because look at how much has changed. We’ve lost our way. And now we’re going to hell in a hand-basket unless we turn back.” Then they link that to whatever issue, whether it be abortion, sex education, gay rights, and so on. The reactionaries sometimes blame the “weak” government, which has bent to pressure and refused to defend “our values, while at other times attacking the government for being “too big.”

Another example is how the economic ravaging of whole Black communities is laid at the feet of Black women for “having too many children out of wedlock,” or at the feet of “absent” Black males. This reactionary worldview builds upon the extreme racist character of the U.S. capitalist system along with thousands of years of ingrained cultural indoctrination that with a “strong” family—that is with men and women in their “proper place”—everything will be fine.

This sort of reactionary worldview offers an all-purpose explanation for general problems or unsettling changes. Politicians then conveniently avoid discussion of the actual causes of social and economic distress, i.e., capitalist instability. It furthermore coincides with and makes use of the explanations being cultivated in conservative religious institutions, which tend to focus on going back to a more moral time, and theorize the problems of modern society as a reflection of an absence of godliness and values. So these ideas and theories are already circulating and can easily be picked up on by a politician who wants to present himself as a champion of “family values” while not actually doing anything to change families’ material conditions.

And so the “New Right,” ascending in the Republican Party in the late 1970s, started to really focus on abortion in the 1980s and 1990s. Abortion rights were identified as a weak spot for the women’s movement because it had been secured in the Supreme Court in *Roe v Wade*, not via legislation. There was existing opposition on religious grounds that they could mobilize, and there were big parts of the country where abortion rights had become law but the movement was weak.

Evangelical mega-churches and televangelists were entering politics in a big way—most famously in the “Moral Majority”—and eventually became significant power-brokers that handpicked and groomed elected representatives. They delivered considerable resources and a captive audience to enterprising politicians, as long as they took on their issues and their framing. The whole Moral Majority movement became a target base of support for hard-right capitalists who personally did not care much about abortion or other moral issues, but who wanted to turn back government regulations, social spending, and the power of labor unions. Over time, this relationship produced a major pipeline of campaign funds and airtime.

In short, abortion became a preferred electoral issue, quickly moving from local and state to federal politics. Right-wing politicians could portray pro-choice Democrats as ‘baby killers’ and link them to

the “decline of the family.” It is not so much that these issues in and of themselves threaten capitalists profits, but that they offered a way for one sector of the capitalist class—leaning on the powerful institutions of the superstructure in their areas to consolidate political legitimacy—to distract constituents from social and economic concerns that the politicians have no desire to address.

It became a central political strategy for the conservative right. The Republican Party used to be considered just the “pro-business” and “law-and-order” party. Some were actually liberal on “social issues.” But as the party moved further to the right, that has changed.

In the United States, where money controls so much of politics, the agenda is set by the highest bidder. With the near obliteration of campaign finance laws, this has become more overt. A few billionaires could say, “These are my political interests, these are my priorities and I’m gonna throw my money around only to those who take on my agenda and my interests.” When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, they meant that ruling-class ideas were dominant because the ruling class “has the means of material production at its disposal” and therefore “has control at the same time over the means of mental production” [3]. Today ruling-class ideas become dominant because of the *direct* and explicit intervention of the most powerful capitalists and their politicians. In the absence of a fight-back movement, the reactionary obsessions of some really rich men can set the tone of politics, and actually can determine major issues for hundreds of millions of working-class women in the United States and worldwide.

The anti-abortion billionaires are not spending their money because it will help their immediate profits. If anything, they are spending significant parts of their fortunes on these right-wing causes. That is where capitalism comes back in at the systematic level. It is not as a conspiracy for profits, but as a form of political rule based on disciplining and intimidating one section of poor and working people, distracting and confusing others, and finally winning over and satisfying other layers.

## **True rights attainable only with a new mode of production**

No mode of production based on extreme inequality and exploitation would be able to last long if it did not have ruling institutions, political systems, ideas, traditions, and so on, that protected and rationalized those economic processes. The ruling class does not just get to extract wealth; it also has to find stable ways to rule.

Forms of patriarchy operate powerfully at the base of capitalism, in how the system produces and reproduces itself on a daily basis. It also is a cornerstone at this superstructural level, and in particular, as a central element of the reactionary agenda. So how could patriarchy be ended under capitalism if it is so embedded at every level of the capitalist system? It is impossible.

Socialism, by contrast, eliminates the economic dependence on the family unit. Simply by changing

who controls and owns the vast means of production, every person can now be guaranteed housing, food, healthcare, childcare, retirement, and other human needs as guaranteed rights. The gender pay gap and undervaluing of “women’s work” could essentially be overturned overnight. A government in the hands of class-conscious workers would also remove from power the lackeys of the billionaire bigots, and instead launch bold initiatives to advance women’s equality and liberation in the world of culture, ideology, education and politics.

This would be an ongoing process, of course, but it would be fundamentally different from the battle for women’s rights under capitalism. In the present, we fight for rights inside a system that reproduces patriarchal economic relationships daily, and under a ruling class that defaults to a reactionary agenda as a way to protect its exploitative rule. That is why “smashing the patriarchy” often feels so impossible. Under socialism, by contrast, the battle will be to win an egalitarian superstructure that will harmonize with a new economic system based on meeting the needs of all.

## References

[1]See Dickinson, Hannah. (2019). “Social reproduction: A theoretical framework with organizing potential.” *Breaking the Chains* 4, no. 1. Also available [here](#).

[2] Ford, Derek. (2021). “The base-superstructure: A model for analysis and action.” *Liberation School*, November 22. Available [here](#).

[3] Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. (1964/1978). “The German ideology: Part I,” in R.C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels reader, 2nd ed.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 172.