



## BACK TO THE MARKET: EXTENDING IRIGARAY'S READING OF MARX

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### Abstract:

The study suggests ways to extend Luce Irigaray's reading of Marx in her article "Women on the Market" by applying it to a number of key issues in the feminist discourse especially the postmodern one. These issues are the relation between the metaphysical and the material, the abstract value and their implications on gender and its constructedness, ecofeminism, and the three social roles/functions of women specified by Irigaray (Mother, Virgin, and Prostitute) in terms of stereotypical representations of women in literature. The author starts with a thorough analysis of Irigaray's views and shows how they intersect or depart from classical Marxism in terms of the four key issues. The study concludes with some suggestions that, besides putting Irigaray's remarks to more useful application, would solve some conflicts in the Marxism / Feminism dialogue.

**Keywords:** Irigaray, feminism, postmodern feminism, ecofeminism, Marxism and Feminism, gender and sex

### 1. Introduction

Luce Irigaray's work is widely recognized and she is a main voice in post-1968 French feminism. In her texts, she reconsiders the question of feminine and of female sexuality in philosophy and psychoanalysis in order to dispute the male-centered discourse and hegemony. The main context that she works within is philosophy and psychoanalysis, and her approach is predominantly deconstructive. Irigaray's mission is thus to expose the inconsistencies and flaws in the phallogocentric discourse. To this end, Irigaray employs what Moi calls a "mimetic technique" that "becomes a conscious acting out of the hysteric (mimetic) position allocated to all women under patriarchy"<sup>ii</sup>. Irigaray's approach is predominantly deconstructive and thus, it undermines the dominant discourse but she, as Schwab affirms about her (Irigaray's) reading of Freud, "mimics ... not only to

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<sup>ii</sup> Schwab, Gail M. "Irigarayan Dialogism: Play and Powerplay". *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry. Eds. (NY: SUNY P,1992), 61.

*deconstruct but also to open ... [the] text up for further inquiry*"<sup>iii</sup>. This "opening up" of inquiry is true to the different places in her work in which she brings the Marxist analysis into play (which most of her interpreters fail to mention or address sufficiently). Here she opens up "a path of inquiry left unexplored by Freud (the material conditions that produce so-called normal femininity)"<sup>iv</sup>. The most famous example of Irigaray's use of Marxist theory is the article "Women on the Market" from *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In this article, she provides an astute reading of Marx and shows that the subjection of woman has been institutionalized by her reduction to an object of economic exchange.

I think that Irigaray's reading, as it opens up unexplored paths of inquiry, also provides more paths of inquiry on its own. Many of Irigaray's insightful remarks and conclusions in that article can be extended, built upon, and engaged on different theoretical levels. In this paper, I take the task of extending some of Irigaray's ideas in "Women on the Market" by discussing some of their implications. There are a number of issues that I will be discussing. The relation between the metaphysical and the material is the first of these. I then move to discuss Irigaray's remarks on abstract value and its implications on gender and its construction. I follow that with discussing the relevance of Irigaray's notes about the link between nature and women to the ecofeminist discourse. In addition, I will talk about the three social roles/functions of women specified by Irigaray in terms of stereotypical representations of women in literature. I conclude by addressing the recurrent theme of feminine language and the new suggestions provided in this regard.

At the beginning of the article, Irigaray explains the rationale of her engagement with Marx by stating that "*Marx's analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can thus be understood as an interpretation of the status of woman in so-called patriarchal societies*"<sup>v</sup>. Thus, the analogy between women's status and that of commodities is the basic premise of the text. Irigaray starts from the assumption that the commoditization of women is not just a symptom of oppression, but, rather, it is a framework for that oppression, and this is what she influentially expounds in the text. Her interpretive technique throughout is that she takes one of Marx's notes about commodities and then applies it to women, reaching important conclusions. The first point that Irigaray raises which has important implications is the link she accentuates between the metaphysical/philosophical/symbolic and the economic / material. Generally speaking, I see this as a direct engagement with the political. Taking into consideration the trajectory of her work, the very engagement with the Marxist analysis is a serious attempt at introducing the political dimension into that body of work, a point that I will return to later on.

At different places in the article, Irigaray clearly states that the social and economic power structure that results in exploitation and subordination is a manifestation of the metaphysical system. To illustrate this, she asserts that:

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<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Armour, Ellen T. *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), 19.

<sup>v</sup> Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 172.

*"This type of social system can be interpreted as the practical realization of the meta-physical. As the practical destiny of the metaphysical ... This practical realization of the met-physical has as its founding operation the appropriation of women's body by the father or his substitutes ... This transformation of women's bodies into use values and exchange values inaugurates the symbolic order ... Their nonaccess to the symbolic is what has established the social order."*<sup>vi</sup>

Many points deserve attention here. First, Irigaray is able to simultaneously maintain and modify the Marxist logic of base/superstructure. She establishes a structural relation between the social and the metaphysical. One is based on the other which obviously perpetuates the Marxist metaphor. Nevertheless, it is the material which is built on the metaphysical, and not vice versa. On the other hand, in being a realization, the socio-economic structure reflects the metaphysical suppositions. It does not simply produce the metaphysical but renders it materially. This, in a way, undermines the primacy of the material in the structure. I tend to see this as a creative appropriation of Marxism rather than as an attempt at undermining it per se. What Irigaray does is that she "extends" the Marxist metaphor by stretching it back into metaphysics which underlies all other structures. Irigaray points out that though Marx does not bring the metaphysical directly in his work, the primacy of the metaphysical is a main implication of his work. She summarizes this point in one of her concluding remarks when she points out that "*Marx exposes the meta-physical character of social operations*"<sup>vii</sup>, which, in part, explains why she is introducing him. This observation about Marx reiterates an important dimension of his theory (the metaphysical) that is often masked by the preconceived assumption of his preoccupation with the material that leaves no room for the metaphysical. Theoretically, Irigaray blurs the strict boundaries between materialist (Marxist) and textual (Deconstructive) criticism and provides a kind of "hybrid" approach that blends elements of both schools.

Another significant gesture in the previous quotation is Irigaray's affirmation that the appropriation and transformation of women's bodies "inaugurated" the social and symbolic system of patriarchy. As she reiterates elsewhere in the article, without the exploitation and subordination of women, that social and symbolic order won't be possible. This responds to a major problem raised in the feminist critique of Marxism that women do not form a class and that their oppression is subordinated to that of the working class<sup>viii</sup>. What Irigaray implies here is that women do not simply form a class because their exploitation is the basis of the very system, patriarchy, that produced classes and maintained oppression. It is the only system that has been produced in history so far and in which capitalism is the latest stage. In this sense, the exploitation of women is prototypical and foundational in relation to other forms of exploitation which, therefore, remain symptomatic and secondary. It follows that to oppose and disrupt

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<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>viii</sup> Sargent, Lydia. *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. (Cambridge: South End Press, 198), xi-xx.

oppressive and exploitative system, women's oppression should take priority, and if it is disrupted, the other forms will automatically fall apart.

Another significant insight in the article is related to the notion of Value. Irigaray elaborates on Marx's theories on the use and exchange values of commodities and also on Value, as an abstract standard which is "superimposed upon, and even substituted for, the value of relations of material, natural, and corporal (re)production"<sup>ix</sup>. By applying this to women as commodities, Irigaray shows that their exchange which transforms them into exchange value means that they have no value or identity outside the exchange process:

*"But when women are exchanged, woman's body must be placed as an abstraction ... It is thus not as "women" that they are exchanged, but as women reduced to some common feature – their current price in gold, or phalluses ... Woman thus has value only in that she can be exchanged ... It is only her measurement against a third term that remains external to her."<sup>x</sup>*

The abstraction process transforms women "into value-invested idealities"<sup>xi</sup>. This explains the enigmatic and fetish nature of women and their bodies, a point that is well-developed in the article. In the same context, Irigaray, in one of the concluding remarks of the article, affirms that:

*"The power of this practical economy of the meta-physical comes from the fact that "physiological" energy is transformed into abstract value without the mediation of an intelligible elaboration."<sup>xii</sup>*

This view illuminates the complex relations between the physiological and the abstract. Of course, Irigaray means this to be taken in the context of women's exploitation. Women's bodies are turned into abstract value based on the masculine currency, the phallus. I am not going to engage with the philosophical dimension of this but rather to extend its implication by applying it to the issue of gender and its production. The relation between sex and gender is another level of the relation between the physiological and the abstract which takes a social disposition here. Applying the same paradigm, we can look at gender as a transformation of physiological energy into social value. Gender is the abstract value of sex/biology. Recalling the remark referred to earlier that the abstract is superimposed on the material, we can easily envision how gender is superimposed on the physiological/biological, and thus it is a constructed reality. Naturalizing this reality is a hegemonic mechanism that aims at preserving the power structure.

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<sup>ix</sup> Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 171.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-6.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

Another significant point in Irigaray's reading of Marx is the connection, evident in Marx, between the subordination of nature/matter and that of women. Marx, as cited by Irigaray, states that "*the submission of 'nature' to a 'labor' on the part of man allows him to constitute 'nature' as use value and exchange value*"<sup>xiii</sup>. The commoditization of nature and its transformation to use and exchange values are basic steps towards "culture" which is masculine by definition. This link between the exploitation and subordination of women and nature is a basic premise in ecological trends in feminism or what is now termed ecofeminism. Irigaray's reading emphasizes the importance of the material conditions and relations to that important topic. The subordination of women and nature is basically a form of economic exploitation and appropriation. Both Nature and women are transformed into use and exchange values in one and the same process:

*"The circulation of women ... whose presuppositions include the following: the appropriation of nature by man; the transformation of nature according to "human" criteria, defined by men alone; the submission of nature to labor and technology; the reduction of its material, corporal, perceptible qualities to man's practical concrete activity."*<sup>xiv</sup>

This note accurately expounds on the ecological repercussions of the commoditization of nature. Nature is transformed according to "human criteria", which are male-centered criteria. Nature is reduced to use and exchange value and submitted to technology and labor. Now the exploitation is complete. I think that his is a powerful rendering of the instrumentalist approach to nature.

The emerging discourse of Ecofeminism is mainly concerned with the joint oppression of women, nature, and animals. Ecofeminists often talk in terms of "dominant and ancient traditions" of woman-nature connection, a connection that has been constructed as a means of oppression<sup>xv</sup>. In their work and as far as I am informed, there is a tendency to address that connection on cultural terms avoiding engagement with the material conditions and the economic basis of that connection and joint oppression. Thus, they remain on the level of the social/cultural or symbolic order without going deeper into the material and economic underlying structure. The exploitation, and the subsequent subordination, of women/nature/animals are realized on the level of social and cultural practices, and it is understandable that they be "resisted" and disrupted by counter-practices on the same levels. Nevertheless, as I think, if the underlying economic factors are taken into account, these counter-practices can be made more effective by extending them into the economic sphere, at least, or providing annexed economic practices.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>xv</sup> Gruen, Lori. "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection between Women and Animals". *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Greta Claire Gaard. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 61.

and

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. (London: Routledge, 1993), 20-22.

Carol J. Adams, who advocates what she terms as a feminist-vegetarian approach, is a relevant case here. In her *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, she provides an insightful study of the joint oppression of animals and women, and highlights the association of meat-eating with the male in technological societies<sup>xvi</sup>. Adams does not address those issues in terms of the material conditions of production and the capitalist system which perpetuates them and like other ecofeminists, she builds her argument on cultural terms. I find this strange taking into consideration the many relevant issues relating to the economic and material conditions and relations for Adams's project. The meat-eating practices and their politics are indispensable to the mode of production and consumption that, first, provides the material conditions and means for these practices, and, second, secures their dominance through its hegemony.

I do not want to ignore the fact that there has been negotiation between feminism, Marxist feminism and Ecofeminism. The affinity between them is easy to spot as all of them provide accounts for oppression. Some ecofeminists depart from Marxism and Marxist feminism because they object to the premise that the oppression of women is part of the larger oppression of the working class and that Marxism views animals and nature as distinct from human beings positing progress with the emancipation from nature<sup>xvii</sup>. These are important points and Irigaray's reading has something to offer in this regard. Without becoming an eco-Marxist or an ecofeminist in the strict sense, Irigaray indirectly responds to the previous points of critique. She restores the primacy of women's oppression as illustrated above and on Marxist terms. The oppression of the working class is based on that of women. Instead of seeing Marx as vindicating an anthropocentric view by dichotomizing between man and animal and man and nature, Irigaray shows that Marx defamiliarizes this distinction which was meant to look natural and essential. This distinction originates in the infrastructural one between subjects-exchangers and objects-commodities. Consequently, man's distinction of himself from nature/woman/animal is an integral step and part of the mechanism of exploitation, and this distinction, in Marx, is critiqued and exposed, rather than advocated or masked.

There are other ways in which the Marxist analysis as Irigaray appropriates it can be helpful to ecofeminism even when continuing their emphasis on the cultural. Plumwood, for example, provides an interesting analysis of the logic of dualism that inferiorizes nature and women and comes up with a family of features that are characteristic of dualism, which are backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation, instrumentalism, and homogenization<sup>xviii</sup>. I think that these can be seen as different manifestations of and steps in what is basically a process of economic appropriation and

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<sup>xvi</sup> Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. (NY: Continuum, 2000), 35-106.

<sup>xvii</sup> Birkeland, Janis. "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice". *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Greta Claire Gaard. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 27.

and

Gruen, Lori. "Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection between Women and Animals". *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Greta Claire Gaard. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 76.

<sup>xviii</sup> Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. (London: Routledge, 1993), 48-53.

commoditization in the hegemonic capitalist mode of production. They are part of the process described by Irigaray / Marx as *"the submission of nature to labor and technology; the reduction of its material, corporal, perceptible qualities to man's practical concrete activity"*. Moreover, Adams's notion of *"technological societies"* in which meat-eating is associated with the male is nothing but another term for the capitalist mode of production in which nature is submitted to technology. By and large, this drawing of attention to the material conditions of the exploitation of nature and animals in the ecofeminist discourse, as I think, will limit the tendency to romanticize, while intensifying the social commitment of the project as it takes a politico-economic dimension. In this way, activism, which seems to be both an inherent aspect and a requirement in the ecofeminist project, acquires the necessary dimensions and scope.

Moving to another issue, in the same article, Irigaray talks about three determined roles for women in the masculine exchange system. She provides the following note in this regard:

*"Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's "activity"; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself ... Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her pleasure."*<sup>xix</sup>

Irigaray shows that feminine sexuality is an extension of masculine sexuality as it is created to please the desire of the masculine "consumer". Women, therefore, do not have the right to their pleasure, and their sexuality is part of their commoditization. This is a recurrent argument in her work. The three roles of mother, virgin, and prostitute are reflections of the exchange of women as products. We can relate these social roles that Irigaray talks about here to women's stereotypical images in cultural texts, especially literature, an issue of central importance in feminism. These patriarchal images and representations of women, by virtue of Irigaray's insights, can be said to reflect the function of women as objects of exchange.

It follows that these dominant and abusive images should be viewed as being active on another level that reflects the social roles assigned to women in the economic system which reduces their into use and exchange of values. The use value is reproduction and the exchange value is as objects of men's desire. The three roles specified by Irigaray, which might well account for the wide spectrum of women's representations, are the result of the friction between women as use value (reproduction) and as exchange value (object of desire). Prostitution, for example, as Irigaray puts it, *"amounts to usage that is exchanged"*<sup>xx</sup>, a use value that is exchanged. Using the same paradigm, motherhood can be said to be a use value that is not exchanged, hence the

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<sup>xix</sup> Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 186-7.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

incest taboo. Thus, the roles assigned to women are consequences and reflections of the functions they have in the exchange system that commoditizes them. The “positive” dimensions given to some of these roles, like the mother, mask this fact. Woman as mother, which is sometimes viewed, even by some feminists, as a positive feminine role, is shown by Irigaray to be nothing but another reductive and oppressive role. It follows that chanting these images is hardly plausible without changing the underlying functions that they reflect and explains why these images persist.

Irigaray, in “Women on the market”, does not fail to address the main issue that her work is concerned with, which is the possibility of an alternative feminine discourse or language that would disrupt phallogentrism and phallograticism. The silence of women and their non access to the dominant discourse is due to their commoditization; their identity and the subject positions allowed to them are contingent on the exchange system: The exchange value of two signs, two commodities, two women, is a representation of the needs/desires of consumer-exchanger subjects: in no way is it the “property” of the signs/articles/women themselves.<sup>xxi</sup>

Women function like commodities and their value is determined by masculine desire. This value is not a property of themselves, but rather, it reflects an external element, what Irigaray calls the phallic currency, men’s desire. What Irigaray wants to emphasize here is not the futility of reaching a feminine language, but the right direction for reaching that goal. Disrupting the hegemonic discourse should take into consideration its economic mechanism that transforms women into commodities and exchange value, thus, assigning for them a certain position that entails silence. She affirms this in her last comment in the article when she talks about the critique of political economy that women can offer:

*“A critique that would no longer avoid that of discourse, and more generally of the symbolic system, in which it is realized. This will lead to interpreting in a different way the impact of symbolic social labor in the analysis of relations of production ... Not by reproducing, by copying, the “phallogratic” models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire”.*<sup>xxii</sup>

Thus, the economic and the philosophical/metaphysical go hand in hand. This inclusion of the economic and material aspect, “relations of production”, illuminates the difficulty for women’s self-assertion and liberation. Without changing their status as commodities of exchange, women will remain in their subordination and exploitation, and they won’t be able to express themselves.

It is useful to conclude this paper by asserting that I am not calling for universalizing the Marxist approach. After all, this is a matter of affiliation and ideology, and Marxism has its own limitations like all other theories. Besides all the paths of inquiry

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<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., 191.



opened up by Irigaray's reading of Marx that I discussed above, Irigaray's reading is a good example of a positive type of appropriation of perspective. Her reading is not a typical Marxist analysis, but she is able to employ this perspective and adapt it to her own intellectual ends. This is important in our post-theory, post-discipline age in which hybridity seems to be the norm. Cultural studies, for example, is an interdisciplinary field that claims to employ a hybrid approach in which perspectives are selectively drawn or "borrowed" from other disciplines<sup>xxiii</sup>. The metaphor of borrowing is interesting. It signifies the temporary use of something. We can say that Irigaray in "Women on the market" "borrowed" the Marxist approach. Using the Marxist approach need not be exclusive to Marxists, and you can say the same about all other approaches. The belief that employing a certain perspective automatically means affiliation and commitment limits the potential for communication and reciprocity among different theoretical schools.

By doing so, Irigaray takes up explicitly the question of the economic exploitation of women. She affirms that *"every operation on and in philosophical language possesses implications ... [that] are politically determined"*<sup>xxiv</sup>. This is an acknowledgment, but it also shows that the political in her readings of philosophy remains implicit. Her bringing of Marx departs from her earlier work in that it is a direct engagement with the political and the political implications here are more explicit. Irigaray's recent life and her political activism further validate her commitment to a political project, parallel to her intellectual one. Martin has an informative remark in this regard:

*"Her [Irigaray] political affinities lie very much on the European socialist left. The aims of her writings are to further the development of humanity in a direction that ends exploitation and brings about a culture of justice for everyone by means of a peaceful revolution"*<sup>xxv</sup>.

This project, like all revolutionary ones, is idealistic and romanticized, but it can still serve as a framework for social activism. I think that Irigaray's work in general and "Women on the Market" in particular are a good example of the positive role of the intellectual and the importance of transforming intellectual struggle into a political one. One important requirement of this is the readiness to engage with different theories and to employ various perspectives for the best results and the most comprehensive vision. As I hinted more than once in this paper, "Women on the Market" brings many things together. It brings the Marxist and the Deconstructionist, the metaphysical and the material, and the political and the intellectual.

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. (London: Sage, 2008), 7.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 181.

<sup>xxv</sup> Martin, Alison. "A European Initiative: Irigaray, Marx, and Citizenship". (*Hypatia* 19.3 (2004): 20-37), 20.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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