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Clara Jones (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and Capitalism*,
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Virginia Woolf has been a (hyper)canonical author for decades – at least since the 1980s, after new generations of scholars, most of whom identified as feminists, managed to wrest her from the hands of New Critics –, but there have been quite a few publications lately that have further secured her place among the most important intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century. The most recent voice in the choir to make the compelling argument that Woolf is still a fundamental intellectual our present day ought to engage with is the series edited by Derek Ryan for Edinburgh University Press, “Virginia Woolf – Variations”. With two titles published in June 2024, this series of specially commissioned edited collections highlights how useful Woolf may be to explore today’s concerns, so that her words may recombine in, and resonate with, different times, readers, and places. Alongside a collection of essays on *Virginia Woolf and the Anthropocene*, edited by Peter Adkins, the other book published in the series this year explores the place of capitalism in Woolf’s *oeuvre* in order to give a better sense of how this materialist intellectual engaged with questions related to capital, race, class, gender, labour, and the marketplace.

Although in the Anglo-American – i.e. British and North American – tradition Woolf was recovered and revised by feminist literary critics in the 1970s as an essayist who insisted on the interdependency of the oppression of women on the one hand and material structures on the other (money and, famously, ‘a room of one’s own’, not to mention her later, somewhat different engagement with materiality in *Three Guineas* and “The Leaning Tower”), not much scholarly ink had been spilt over Woolf’s relationship with capitalism before the publication of *Virginia Woolf and Capitalism*. As the editor of the collection, Clara Jones, rightly points out in her Introduction, “Even while critics have drawn attention to Woolf’s negotiation of class, consumption and empire in her fiction and non-fiction works, ‘capitalism’ remains a comparatively under-used key term in Woolf studies” (p. 7). This (relative) lack of scholarship may be put down, as Jones goes on to argue, to a certain “reticence” (*ibidem*) about coupling Woolf with Marxism – a critical perspective that a materialist critic like Michèle Barrett justly states in her chapter has somewhat waned in significance, with due exceptions, since the end of the cold war.

Interestingly, Jones draws attention to the ambivalence Woolf felt towards Marx in her writings, as the German philosopher was openly mentioned by the British author

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in her essay “The Leaning Tower” (1940) – “originally a talk delivered in May 1940 to the Brighton Branch of the Workers’ Educational Association” (p. 8) – and in the short story “The Legacy”, commissioned (and then rejected) by *Harper’s Bazaar* in the same year. By this late stage in her career, Woolf had become decidedly less ambivalent about politics, and this phase coincides, as Jones suggests, with a similar alignment with Marxist theory in Leonard Woolf’s writing (cf. *Barbarians at the Gate*, 1939). In both Woolfian occurrences, Marx figures as a nodding acquaintance in a left-wing environment whose theories of labour are not necessarily credited with the awe and appreciation that many commentators would claim as his lot: although a Marxist understanding of society and capital may be seen in some of Woolf’s arguments, she is far from seeing him as an important interlocutor for her own work. This anticipates, it could be argued, the feminist reviews of Marx that would become dominant in 1970s British socialist feminism – we may think here of Barrett herself, as well as of Sheila Rowbotham and Mary McIntosh, for instance.

The chapters then move on to consider Woolf’s engagement with capitalism from different angles. Part 1, titled “Class, Empire, Capital”, opens with Barrett’s examination of ‘the desire to dominate’ in Woolf’s fiction (*Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*) in relation to Marxist analyses of labour. What emerges here seems to be in line with the diagnoses produced by most socialist feminists a few decades ago, namely that Marx’s framework is insufficient to describe the situation of women under capitalism, as “Woolf, in her fiction, wishes to draw attention to issues other than the class relation that Marx says is not only central but exclusively important” (p. 34). In combination with issues related to class, in her fiction Woolf is especially interested, as Barrett points out, in the ways in which this social positioning intersects with other (usually more psychological) aspects of characters. In her view, as evidenced in other texts by Woolf (“Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid”, “Women and Fiction”, *A Room of One’s Own*, as well as Notebook 21 in the Woolfian archive, now available online on WoolfNotes), the British author finds the Marxist economic(ist) interpretation insufficient and is at any rate more interested in the psychological pulls that lie underneath our desire for possession – or “rage for acquisition”, as she terms it in *A Room* (p. 40). As Barrett concludes, Woolf “was certainly not a ‘Marxist’ of any recognisable stripe. In some respects Woolf’s thinking could have been of interest to Marxists of her time, but they did not perceive the relevance of her ideas” (p. 41).

Anna Snaith’s chapter, titled “Empire, Slavery and Capitalism”, returns to the conflicted relationship between Woolf’s *oeuvre* on the one hand and issues pertaining to race, Empire, and slavery on the other. With her characteristic acumen, Snaith brings home the idea that Woolf’s “most sustained and consistent engagement with capitalist modernity centres on the arena of empire” (p. 48), especially when placed in dialogue with other contemporary anti-imperialists such as her husband Leonard and J.A. Hobson, who, for all their important intuitions and arguments, generally refrained from integrating gender into their political frameworks. What has often been problematised in the existing scholarship is Woolf’s relationship with race; instead of simply ‘calling her out’ or posthumously reprimanding her for her blind spots, Snaith produces a fruitful dialogue between *A Room* and the writings of Alice Walker, Sylvia Wynter, and Saidiya

Hartman – all three being racialised authors who engaged on some level with Woolf, often ‘writing back’ to her problematic assumptions about race and gender.

From our modern perspective, Woolf may also be considered to be quite problematic in her relationship with class. Even though several commentators have already attempted to show how Woolf was attuned to modern, intersectional understandings of gender and feminism, her social positioning undoubtedly made her an upper-middle-class intellectual who could depend on inherited wealth, with all the privileges this class belonging entailed. In their previous work, Anna Snaith and Clara Jones famously corrected the idea that Woolf was a snob – one of the prejudices produced by New Critics and subsequently perpetuated by Quentin Bell’s 1972 biography – but more scholarship is still needed to better explore Woolf’s involvement in the Women’s Cooperative Guild (WCG). What every reader of Woolf generally knows is how she wrote an introductory letter to *Life as We Have Known It*, the collection of autobiographical writings produced by working-class women as edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies and published by the Hogarth Press in 1931. What was perhaps not quite so well known is how deep and nuanced Woolf’s relationship with the WCG was outside of the correspondence with Llewelyn Davies on the subject of the Woolfs’ potential publication of the collection. Within this context, Charlotte Taylor Suppé’s chapter is a welcome intervention in the field, as it deftly explores the tension inherent in Woolf’s participation in this working class environment, ambivalent as the author often was towards women to whom she felt drawn but from whom she also often felt alienated. As perfectly encapsulated by Taylor Suppé at the very beginning of the chapter, “Where the WCG was a society of mothers that exercised working-class women’s economic influence and directly campaigned for political change, Woolf was a child-free woman who fostered a feminism based on upper-middle-class women’s professional autonomy and embraced ambivalence in her textual politics” (p. 70). By illuminating this intersection between womanhood, motherhood, and capitalism, the author sheds new light on Woolf’s relationship with working-class women, consumption under capitalism, and the potential of cooperation in the face of a profoundly unequal social and economic system.

In a similar fashion, Bryony Randall’s subsequent chapter in Part 2 of the collection analyses the only three working women writers represented in Woolf’s early fiction: “Rosamond Merridew in her short story ‘[The Journal Of Mistress Joan Martyn]’ (composed in 1906, unpublished in Woolf’s lifetime); Miss Willatt in ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’ (composed and rejected for publication in 1909 and unpublished in her lifetime); and Miss Allan in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915)” (p. 183). By extending the notion of capital beyond the purely economic so that it may encompass the cultural and the social – as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu –, Randall successfully produces a nuanced analysis of Woolf’s representation of these working women writers, one which additionally manages to eschew the risk of conflating Woolf’s early writings with her autobiographical experience.

As should already be evident from the previous discussion, *Virginia Woolf and Capitalism* creates a path in Woolf’s *oeuvre* that helps us see aspects of her work – in a broad sense – that had previously passed undetected under critical radars, while at

the same time leading us down the beaten path, making it new. For instance, Charles Andrews' chapter on the liturgies of peace and war in *Jacob's Room*, Nicola Wilson's insightful chapter on the Hogarth Press and capitalism, Stanislava Dikova's detailed analysis of the public sphere in *Night and Day*, and Brenda R. Silver's retrospective account of Michael Cunningham's appropriation of Woolf through his oft-cited (and subsequently cinematized) novel *The Hours* all seem to explore aspects of Woolf's life and work that are more than familiar to a Woolf scholar. However, the rich detail offered in these chapters and the dense theorisation that results from this discussion clearly take Woolf scholarship in new, exciting directions. Suffice it to mention here Wilson's ability to draw attention to the "ambivalence, resistance and complicity" (p. 160) of the Woolfs' publishing enterprise through her combination of publishing theory on the one hand and the kind of books and series Leonard and Virginia Woolf foregrounded as 'reluctant capitalists' on the other. Far from providing a celebratory account of the Hogarth Press, Wilson provides the reader with the rich and composite tapestry that may help him or her better understand the social and political context underpinning their activity as publishers, as well as the future directions taken by the Hogarth Press when it left their hands.

If these articles manage to cover some new ground in the familiar topics and texts of the field, Natasha Peryian's chapter on "biometric feminism" explores an understudied aspect of such a canonical text as *A Room of One's Own* by focusing on the crucial notion of intelligence and its relationship with meritocracy, while Rachel Bowlby continues her fundamental work in cultural inquiry by foregrounding Woolf's understanding and depiction of herself as a rentier during her life, thereby producing some useful information on the cultural and economic capital she owned. This materialist, contextual work is further enhanced by one of the most illuminating chapters in the collection, namely Evelyn Tsz Yan Chan's "Capitalism and Woolf's Beyond-Work", where the author weaves in and out of different texts and stages in Woolf's career so as to better understand Woolf's relationship with work and leisure as represented in her fiction. The portrait of Woolf as a 'reluctant capitalist' that emerges from this discussion clearly suggests, as Chan points out, that the modernist author "wanted to reimagine work even while trapped within the constraints of capitalism" (p. 239), challenging the prevailing definitions of work and leisure in the process.

As if this brilliant scholarly endeavour was not enough, *Virginia Woolf and Capitalism* also offers a creative-critical coda where Helen Tyson carries out a nuanced, highly informative reading of the *Three Guineas* scrapbooks while offering the results of her teaching them in an undergraduate seminar where students were asked to discuss them in order to produce 'scrapbooks of their own'; and Kabe Wilson returns to his oft-praised collage work of Woolf's texts by creating "a demographic map of how British interwar capitalist society was depicted in *Mrs Dalloway*" through a "found poem" where only the references to "to a paid occupation, named business, or personal title" have been maintained (p. 295). While very different in nature, with Tyson's chapter falling more on the critical side of the divide, the final contributions leave the reader to ponder for him- or herself the significance of capitalism in Woolf's times and works through a more inspirational tone.

In line with the series' aims, then, *Virginia Woolf and Capitalism* successfully produces new resonances even in old readers by making them attuned to aspects of Woolf's words that risked being neglected or positively obscured. Rich in detail and nuanced in its analysis, this collection of essays is already part of the compulsory reading on Woolf for scholars, students, and common readers alike.