

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOMESTIC ROLE OF WOMEN

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The feminist movement has posed a fundamental challenge to social scientists, a challenge reflected in the necessity of providing an analysis of the causes of the oppression of women. The response has been varied, with available models ranging from a focus on biological explanations to class analysis. I would argue, however, that we have not yet reached the point where we are able to integrate these various positions into an adequate analysis of the forms of oppression women have experienced and continue to experience, the sources of their oppression, the mechanisms by which it is maintained, and the means to eliminate it. The resolution of this "impasse" requires that we begin to fully examine the spheres of female activity and attempt to integrate our understanding of the social forces which shape female participation in society.

As Juliet Mitchell has shown in her criticisms of socialist movements, we have failed to look at woman's role through the structures that compose it: production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization (Mitchell, 1966). The value of her analysis is its ability to examine the position of women historically in terms of their variable role within each structure. The difficulty, on the other hand, emerges in treating these categories as independent structures which are unrelated in origin. For this reason, R. Bridenthal has argued that it is possible to fuse Mitchell's latter three

structures into one, each representing an aspect of the reproduction of the species (Bridenthal, 1976:3-5). One is then able to examine the situation of women through an analysis of their position in the productive sphere (as workers) and the reproductive sphere (as housewives and mothers). Through an historical examination, one can discover the nature of the relationship between these spheres, and the implications this holds for the societal position of women.

A beginning point in such an attempt is an examination of the structure of the reproductive sphere and the position it occupies under capitalist relations. Using a Marxist framework, W. Seccombe has questioned the role of household labour (i.e., reproductive) in the creation of value, and examines its linkages to the overall wage-relation system (Seccombe, 1973).

Seccombe's thesis is that sexual oppression emerged, with the advance of capitalism, due to the sexual division of labour: a division into an "industrial unit" and a "domestic unit" (1973:6). Moreover, this development required the physical separation of the workplace and the home (I will return to a discussion of this "division" in my discussion of the transition from a precapitalist mode to a capitalist mode of production).

Seccombe argues that the labour of the domestic unit has a dual nature. On the one hand, domestic labour is necessary labour because the commodities of capital require

additional labour (i.e., housework) before consumption. In the preparation of food for family consumption, the housewife's labour creates a use-value insofar as the product of her labour directly serves certain consumption needs. Such labour also allows for the reproduction of the wage earner's labour-power (i.e., capacity for work, 1973:14). Domestic labour thus creates value because "all labour produces value when it produces any part of a commodity that achieves equivalence in the market place with other commodities" (Seccombe, 1973:9). Domestic labour helps produce and reproduce labour power as a commodity.

On the other hand, and here is where we begin to approach the dual nature of domestic labour, the Marxist "law of value" cannot apply to labour in the reproductive sphere. There are two reasons for this: first, domestic labour is not engaged in an exchange relation with capital, and second, it is unproductive because it produces no surplus value. In other words, because domestic labour has only a use-value, it has no direct relation to capital. It then becomes difficult to measure the value of such labour. For other commodities, this is unproblematic. For example, labour power as a commodity achieves its equivalence through the wage relation. But, since domestic labour is not exchanged on a market, it has no apparent exchange value. Seccombe's solution is to argue that the value of domestic labour is equivalent to that part of the worker's wage that goes to the maintenance of

domestic labour (1973:8-10). Its value, in this sense is mediated by the wage transaction between capital and the wage earner. It is also for this reason that Seccombe argues that one cannot speak of surplus value creation in reference to domestic labour. Because the value of this labour is seen as equivalent to its maintenance costs, the possibility of an extraction of a surplus value from household labour by capital is rendered impossible under Seccombe's scheme.

The housewife is assumed to receive the value she creates. He recognizes that a "mystification" of the wage relation occurs under capitalism. Whereas wages are equivalent to the value of labour power, not the value produced by labour power, this is not the case with the relation between capital and the housewife. The value she produces is contained in the wage received by the wage earner.

Seccombe's analysis is valuable in several respects. It represents needed insight into an area which Marxists have tended to ignore in theoretical endeavors. Moreover, his analysis of the mediation of the relation between capital and domestic labour by the wage transaction contains important implications regarding the "political potential" of housewives (1973:21-23). The problem however is that he does not really develop his argument to the necessary point. It is useful to explicate the structure of domestic labour under capitalism, but this in itself is not sufficient. One must question the motivation behind the continuing reproduction

of that structure in its present form. In other words, does domestic labour, in its privatized and unwaged form, serve a value to capital in addition to the simple use value it creates? I am really seeking to question the conception of household labour as non-productive, in the sense of creating no surplus value. A strict Marxist application of the term surplus value blinds us to the value extracted by capital from domestic labour. The structure of the domestic sphere allows for the reproduction of class relations in various forms. These must be explicated before one can attempt to account for the reproduction of sexism in contemporary society. What I am suggesting is a reconceptualization of our understanding of surplus value creation so that we are not forced to deal only with those exchange transactions which occur on an open market. If one can demonstrate a value served by domestic labour in the direct reproduction of class relations, and the extraction of that value by capital, then it becomes possible to discuss the productivity of domestic labour.

I will now discuss the role of domestic labour in the satisfaction of certain of capital's needs. First, capitalism cannot satisfy all a worker's needs through commodity production. These needs must however be met in order to maintain a passive working force. Domestic labour becomes the forum for the satisfaction of these needs in that it has personal value which cannot be reproduced by socialized domestic labour.

The family and the role of the housewife provide an area where the male worker can achieve some sense of authority and control (which is otherwise lacking in his relation to capital).

Secondly, domestic labour realizes a higher standard of living for the worker than is realized in his actual wages. Workers are paid a wage to cover the cost of maintaining their labour power. Domestic labour is the activity which transforms that wage into usable goods. Obviously, there are alternative methods of maintaining labour power: restaurants, laundries, tailors, etc. But it is cheaper for capital to maintain domestic labour than to give workers higher wages so that they can buy these services on a competitive market.

The wage labour system is sustained by the socially necessary, but private, labour of housewives and mothers. Child rearing, cleaning, laundry, maintenance of property, food preparation, reproduction, etc. are all necessary elements in the maintenance of life and the reproduction of the work force. In this sense, they are all aspects of the mode of reproduction. This sphere produces daily and generationally the labour needed by capital.

Finally, by maintaining an economically dependent, and therefore passive, individual within the family the industrial sector creates an individual who is easier to manipulate. Historically this has been the case: women have functioned as a cheap and passive reserve work force. This is reflected in their unequal wages, narrow choice of occupations, and

underrepresentation in trade unions. It is a situation which has been relatively easy to maintain. She has no structural responsibility in the waged labour force. Rather, her participation is seen as transitory, depending on the labour needs of the industrialized sector. Reserve labour power is stored in the family, drawn upon when necessary, and then reabsorbed when no longer needed. The position of women as unwaged privatized labourers in the family is reproduced outside of the family. They have traditionally been located in low wage positions in more or less marginal occupations.

However, one must be careful not to view female wage labour as only transitory in nature. This is a problem in Secombe's analysis, as well as in that of other Marxists who only deal with the housewife and ignore women as workers. The error is compounded when Marxists attempt to find a basis for the unity between the working class and housewives. To see only her domestic labour or her position as wage earner as the source of unity is to ignore that women are often both domestic labourers and wage earners. The central feature of women under capitalism is not their position as domestic labourers, but rather their dual role. The task is to relate these two roles in a coherent fashion -- something which Marxists have not yet done. When Marxist feminists deal with the issue of wage labour, they assume that their interests are synonymous with working class interests. This is not the case however, due to the contradictory nature of wage labour and

domestic labour, a contradiction contained in the female role. Female wage labour is not synonymous with male wage labour; the former's economic position as domestic labourers has transformed their economic position as wage labourers. Their increased proletarianization has not eliminated the gap between female and male workers. It is a question again of the specific oppression of women: this is an issue which is not dealt with by merely recognizing that women serve two roles. The key is to see the integration of these two roles, and the contradiction that integration poses for women.

Female labour is both privatized and socialized: she is both a domestic and an industrial unit. Her status as worker reduces her isolation, but has done nothing to reduce the oppression of her privatized labour at home. Her domination within the family is controlled by the male worker. Granted, it was originally based on his relation to the means of production, but it has been maintained, even with the entry of women into industry. The solution is to look for the interplay of this dual role of women, a situation which has given rise to a tension between the productive sphere and the reproductive sphere.

Women are positioned historically in the center of this dialectic, and with advanced capitalism the opposing forces of production and reproduction have posed contradictions for women which demand a resolution. If one can isolate these



contradictions, then perhaps one can build a base for a successful feminist movement. The Women's Work Study Group (1976) has argued that these contradictions do in fact reflect "stress points" in the capitalist system. One needs to examine the historical emergence of these contradictions and the changing nature of the productive and reproductive spheres. I will briefly discuss three historical phases and the impact the changing roles of production and reproduction has had on the position of women. The historical phases are the stages of precapitalism, industrialization, and monopoly capitalism.

In precapitalist societies, the family was the major productive unit in the economy. The female performed the tasks of the reproductive sphere (reproduction, health care, laundry, and so on), as well as the tasks associated with the material production of necessities. Production was generally for immediate consumption, but also involved the market exchange of goods. There was a sexual division of labor at work, both categories of sexually divided tasks being regarded as valuable and socially necessary. Moreover, both forms of labour were performed within the family unit. In fact, one could say that the productive and reproductive spheres maintained a symbiotic relationship, in that each sphere was dependent to a great extent on the labour which occurred within the other sphere (Bridenthal, 1976:5).

It is only with capitalism that material production, organized socially in the form of wage labour,

became separated from the reproductive tasks within the family. With this separation of production and reproduction, the family relinquished its economic functions, and the household was devalued in terms of its socio-economic contribution. It was devalued precisely because it became isolated from the socialized production of surplus value.

In the nineteenth century, with the rise of industry, commodity production shifted increasingly to the factory system. The shift fundamentally altered the position of women. It shifted the nature of demand from skilled workers to low wage unskilled workers who could perform the tasks of running the machines. Since physical strength was no longer as important a variable for this task, women were increasingly brought in as a cheap and readily available source of unskilled labour. However, the increased entry of women posed a serious threat to the bargaining position of the skilled male worker. It was during this period that the ideology of the family unit was transformed. The focus shifted from its value as a productive unit to its value as an institution for securing personal happiness and fulfillment (Zaretsky, 1976:47-57). Females were regarded as the key figures in that unit, thereby reinforcing motherhood as the feminine ideal. At the same time, the ideology defined the labour undertaken by women in this sphere as economically unproductive. Such an ideology served two purposes. First, by upholding motherhood and the household as the "natural" and "true" position of women, the male worker

was able to restrict the entry of a large number of women into the labour market. At the same time, capital's needs were met. For those women who could not afford the "luxury" of remaining in the home, their ideological position as unproductive domestic labourers left them in a weak bargaining position upon entry into socialized production. Capitalists were then able to maintain a cheap supply of labour, which could be easily laid off during economic recessions. Women workers are the first to go when jobs are scarce. Part of this is due to the ideology that a male worker has a family to support, whereas a female probably has a husband to support her.

The sexist ideology of this period crossed class-boundaries as well. Whereas the vote was extended to all white men, regardless of social position, in the mid 1800's in North America, women, regardless of their economic standing, were refused the franchise (Women's Work Study Group, 1976:31).

The increasing socialization of production, and its separation from the more privatized reproductive sphere posed visible contradictions for women in this period. Female workers were doubly exploited, both as domestic and as wage labourers, while bourgeois women were increasingly isolated in their separate sphere. The result was an upsurge of feminist protest. As Zaretsky notes, the protest took two forms. First, the bourgeois women organized a protest against the enforced idleness of their domestic lives, and demanded access to middle class occupations. Protest from working class women was focused

on a call for reforms in the industrial sphere so as to lessen the hardships of their working position (Zaretsky, 1973:37). Unfortunately, both movements placed their hopes solely on the granting of the franchise; they assumed that contradictions could be resolved through legal means. As they quickly came to realize, this was not the case. The oppression of women was too integrally connected to the specific mode of production.

The monopoly phase of capitalism which began to emerge in the early twentieth century is characterized by several developments: an increasing concentration of capital, a shift away from labour intensive industry, and a rise in profit rates which is accompanied by a need to maintain high consumption rates. It is a period marked by a rise in wages, which is controlled for by capitalists by a corresponding rise in commodity prices (see Braverman, 1974). Furthermore, monopoly capitalists reorganized corporate facilities to spread the ideology of consumerism, and thereby ensure a market for their commodities. The family unit took on a new value for capital as a market for products. With increasingly sophisticated forces of production and ideological manipulation at their control, capitalists were able to cultivate that family market through an ideology of mass consumption. A cheap yet educated work force was required to perform the task of marketing the increasing mass of commodities. The result was a rapidly expanding white collar sector for which women provided an ideal source of labour. However, the rising expectations imposed by mass

consumerism often could not be met by a single wage earner in the family unit. To facilitate the entry of married women into the work force, the technology of capitalism produced new labour saving devices (automatic washers, dryers, freezers, TV dinners, and so on) which decreased the time spent on household tasks. These devices undoubtedly have had an impact on domestic labour; at the same time there has been a qualitative expansion of woman's work. Due to the increased emphasis on consumption and standard of living, women have had more tasks to perform. Her responsibilities in the reproductive sphere were not reduced: if anything, they were redefined in order to widen their scope. Women now have to be child psychologists, aware consumers, and "efficient" housekeepers. What has occurred with monopoly capitalism is the development of a larger group of women who are engaged in labour in both the productive and reproductive spheres.

Women have entered the productive sphere largely in work tasks which are part of the reproductive sphere (i.e., teaching, nursing, social work, domestic service sectors). Bridenthal argues quite convincingly that this phenomenon is indicative of an increasing shift of the mode of reproduction from the personal to the public forum (1976:6-8). While the labour within the family remains privatized, decisions and policy concerning the form and use of that labour are no longer in the woman's control. Bridenthal's discussion focuses on the increasing intervention of the capitalist system

into the reproductive sphere in order to ensure the control of the reproduction of the labour force. The increased entry of the female into socialized production transformed the area of reproductive labour. This in turn threatens the maintenance of the specific mode of production unless the former is controlled by capital. In other words, capital must on the one hand maintain the stability of the nuclear family (to ensure the personal happiness of the worker and obscure his alienation on the job), and on the other hand, it requires women as an available source of reserve labour. The structural contradiction of these needs has left women in advanced capitalism both socialized and privatized in their labour; both waged and unwaged.

The contradictory nature of capitalist ideology becomes only too evident. The family unit is portrayed as a separate entity from the economic sphere. But in fact, the household as a productive and consumptive unit is integrally tied to certain economic needs of the system. The myth of the family as independent of the productive sphere is necessary if society is to maintain the notion that the personal life of the worker has an entirely self controlled meaning. Because the family is organized around reproduction and consumption however, it is impossible to speak of family organization without considering the labour needs of capital. As already noted, monopoly capital relies on high rates of consumption and high commodity prices. These needs, in turn, force women into the work force

on an increasingly permanent basis in order to maintain the standard of living demanded by mass consumerism. This poses a challenge to the traditional position of the male as the wage earner, and to the authority that position has given him over the female. The result is an erosion of the traditional ideology of the family unit, though the demand by capital for such a unit remains. This is not to say that capital has reorganized its sexist ideology. On the contrary, it is reproduced as long as women receive lower wages and are concentrated in low-skilled occupations. However the transformation in the reproductive sphere (it is becoming less and less the primary position for women as greater numbers join the work force) makes visible the need for a transformation in the productive sphere. Women are now both regular participants in the wage labour force and in the domestic labour force, yet still the ideology defines them in terms of housewives and mothers. The tension and contradiction inherent in their dual role is masked by a false separation of the two spheres. Capital has mystified the place of women within capitalist production. It thus becomes the task of a revolutionary movement to "demystify" their position, and organize on the basis of an understanding of both spheres of female labour.

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