WOMEN, LABOR AND FAMILY LIFE:  
A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

JOAN B. LANDES

IN ITS RELATIVELY SHORT HISTORY, the movement of women's liberation has generated a number of political tendencies, ranging from liberal feminism to radical feminism, lesbian feminism, lesbian socialism, socialist feminism and Marxist feminism. Each group is linked in some fashion to a theoretical account of the grounds of women's oppression, the nature of family life, and a strategy for women's liberation. Moreover, each theoretical account is characterized by a methodological orientation to the study of social reality.

In this article I will explore the methodological and theoretical implications of one such approach to women's liberation—Marxist feminism. My choice is not arbitrary. I hope to show that whereas Marxist feminism is one among many orientations, it alone provides the means by which the political perspectives of other approaches can be transcended. At the same time, it helps to resituate many of the most important insights of feminist groups. Before turning to Marxist feminism, it is necessary to examine the context out of which it emerged in the contemporary movement for women's liberation.

Feminist theorists seek to express a unity among women. Yet each attempt at a unified version of feminism seems to have divided rather than united the many feminisms within the movement. The movement's heterodoxy is reflected in the growing body of feminist works. Paradoxically, those writers who have sought to interpret the movement in its own terms, that is, without resorting to external evaluations, have invariably turned to such well-established social and philosophical approaches as functionalism, ego psychology, existentialism, Weberianism and structuralism. Each version of social science has offered a distinctive perspective on the questions raised by the movement. These
differences can not be resolved by verbal commitments to feminism. The fact is, feminism, set in the context of each of these approaches, not only looks but is very different. The explanations of oppression and the visions of liberation which ground the various theories of women's liberation reflect these differences.

The methodological strategies chosen by feminist theorists are extremely revealing of the political orientations of today's movement. For example, several writers who begin with an explicit commitment to socialist politics reintroduce liberal perspectives through the social science methods they employ. The best examples are two seminal works of the radical and socialist wings of the women's movement: Woman's Estate by Juliet Mitchell, and The Dialectic of Sex by Shulamith Firestone.

Mitchell argues for a Marxist approach to feminism. Yet the method which she adopts diverges from a Marxist historical materialist approach to social reality. For example, the true subject of Woman's Estate is an abstraction called woman. This woman resists any historical or social definition. She is the same, or rather she is determined in the same way, inside different social classes. She performs the same "functions" within all societies. She is a product of an ideology generated through the socialization processes of the nuclear family. The conceptual model for this family is borrowed from functionalist theory. Indeed Mitchell praises Talcott Parsons, especially for his analysis of socialization processes, adding "no Marxist has provided a comparable analysis."

The female subject of the overlapping structures which compose family life—reproduction, sexuality, and socialization—is herself the product of an ideology which is considered eternal. In other words, Mitchell suggests that the source of women's oppression is to be located first within a uni-

1 Juliet Mitchell, Woman's Estate (New York, 1971). Because of the emphasis in this article on the political and theoretical implications of Mitchell's version of socialist feminist theory, I have not attempted a critique of her second major work, Psychoanalysis and Feminism (New York, 1974), in which she argues for the relevance to feminists of Freud's discoveries.
2 Mitchell, Woman's Estate, p. 117.
3 For a similar conception of ideology from a theorist who has influenced Mitchell, see: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays, translated by Ben Brewster (New York, 1971).
universal, atemporal ideology of womanhood which is translated into somewhat different practices in different societies. Both the ideology and the family practices possess an extremely durable character, so that woman, the subject of this ideology, possesses a disturbingly permanent social nature. As Mitchell states: “For though the family has changed since its first appearance, it has also remained—not just as an idealist concept but as a crucial ideological and economic unit with a certain rigidity and autonomy despite all its adaptations.”4 In this account, woman and the family are the embodiments of certain eternal ideas. The two are inextricably intertwined: “The Family ‘makes’ the Woman.”5 And one could add, woman is constituted over and over again. As in her second work, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Mitchell is here concerned with the primary interrelationships, especially in the family, “between individual animals that make them human beings” and with the manner in which the little girl grows up in every culture to be “like her mother but the boy will grow up to be another father.”6 She emphasizes the overlapping nature of ideology, womanhood and family life. She also adopts a methodological orientation to her subject which is consistent with the thesis of eternality. By utilizing functionalist role theory, Mitchell de-emphasizes the historical character of social relations. Woman, the eternal subject of an eternal ideology, is an abstraction.

Mitchell subsumes classes within the category of group. This allows her the flexibility she needs to focus her analysis on sexual classes rather than economic classes. The title of her book expresses this emphasis: The two terms contain a reference to sex (i.e., woman) and a reference to social strata (i.e., estate—in its broadest sense). Class differences, according to Mitchell, split women off from one another, rather than sex divisions dividing workers. The liberation which Mitchell foresees is bound up with the process which functionalists label social change or modernization. Within a differentiated family of the future, Mitchell envisions the possibilities for a pluralistic situation in which no individual would be tied to a particular role or an ascribed status.

4 Mitchell, Woman's Estate, p. 153 (her emphasis).
5 Ibid., p. 160.
6 Ibid., pp. 171, 170.
No longer will biological motherhood necessarily be equated with social motherhood.

In short, Mitchell wishes to differentiate social roles in the one sphere which most functionalists have considered undifferentiable, i.e., the “natural.” However, her argument amounts to a confirmation of what has already been, or is now being, affected by capitalism itself: the extension of market relationships to the sphere of personal life, which in the past provided an important, if insufficient and limited, support for individuals in an alienated social world. In broad terms, the earliest form of family life associated with capitalism was the productive unit whose working members included children, wife and employees or apprentices, all under the authority of the father-husband, pater-familias.\(^7\) In the period of industrial capitalism this early productive household unit gave way among the bourgeois class to the characteristic privatized family, which functioned in part as a refuge from the alienated sphere of market and production relations. The family as refuge suggested an arena in which "relationships were not mediated through the market and the individual members were not competing with each other."\(^8\) Within this new, non-productive family we find the fullest development of the role of non-working wife.\(^9\) Only in the monopoly stage of industrial capitalism was this initially bourgeois family structure extended to some degree among the working classes. The bourgeois family was fully grounded in the economic relations of capitalist society. At the same time, the family possessed a limited amount of independence, which could function as the basis for protest against the most repelling aspects of modern industry. Likewise, the family upheld the importance of individual sexual

---


love at a time when love was increasingly subordinated to property considerations. Thus, the family fostered an important element of anti-authoritarianism alongside the very real domination of wife by husband, and children by parents. However, within advanced capitalist society the private and autonomous family unit is undermined more and more by the tendency, arising out of the economy, to dissolve all independent cultural institutions. In other words, the logic of capitalism is to abolish the distinctions within the capitalist totality and to turn against social formations which it initially fostered.

To the extent that the classical bourgeois family was bound up with the oppression of women and children, it has been the object of attack by nineteenth and twentieth century feminists. By limiting themselves to this one issue, however, contemporary feminists fall into the trap of endorsing the system responsible for the destruction of autonomous forms of social life which possess a real, if limited, moment of positive community. Full realization of such autonomy can occur only with the abolition of capitalism itself. Thus, Mitchell's shortcoming is further to affirm the social consequences of capitalist development through an uncritical reliance on sociological modernization theory. She seems to agree with many functionalists that human progress can be achieved only through greater specialization and differentiation of functional social relationships. She poses no alternative to formal equality and rationalization as a basis for a more liberated society. She never asks whether woman's present social existence might not encompass something more than a set of abstract functions. She appears to mistake the division of labor under capitalism for freedom. Finally, Mitchell fails to acknowledge the possibility that in creating a movement for the future which abolishes the alienated division of labor, men and women of the present might look backward as well as forward toward an ideal of community which survives in battered and incomplete form in

10 On this point see: Horkheimer, "Authority and The Family."
11 Marx remarks in Capital, Vol. I (New York, 1967), pp. 394-402, how with the development of machinery capital was led to exploit the labor of women and children, and in the process, to destroy the pre-existing family life among the working class. In the present period, the requirement of capital for cheaper labor entails a tendency to utilize women and to attack the role of housewife which was in an intervening period encouraged by these same economic forces.
today's family. Instead, Mitchell sees only one side of the family's multi-faceted character; in her view, it "embodies the most conservative concepts available; it rigidifies the past ideals and presents them as the present pleasures. By its very nature, it is there to prevent the future."  

Shulamith Firestone's vision of a contractual family resembles the image of differentiated family life just described. Firestone begins her work, *The Dialectic of Sex*, by promising a dialectical and historical materialist approach grounded in sexual differences rather than class relationships. She claims that this change will allow not only for a comprehension of sexual oppression, but also for an orientation to class struggle. In fact, Firestone's classifications divide and separate, and only then relate to social factors. Relations, in her method, are always external because every factor is social and logically independent of every other factor. Firestone substitutes an exterior calculus to account for what she hopes will be the necessary relationships between working class revolution and feminist revolution. But what can be added can just as easily be subtracted. She offers no reason why sexual revolution cannot be achieved without class revolution. Sexual revolution seems to result from a series of technological changes—including, but not limited to, test tube babies—rather than a transformation of oppressive social relationships.

Firestone's vision of liberation is tied to a series of assumptions about individual freedom. Every person is free, on the basis of his or her individual rights and powers, to enter into contractual relations with every other person. These wholly instrumental relationships will be guided by quantitative considerations: the achievement of a specific objective for a limited amount of time. In other words, all human relationships in Firestone's world take the commodity form. All things, including one's person, are for sale. All arenas of life are now unequivocally characterized by capitalist social relations. The future family is so completely rationalized that even relations between parents and children are defined through contracts. Women's liberation is achieved on the terms of a privatistic, competitive and contract-

tual world. Individuals are nothing more than monads who occupy fragmented spaces. "Liberation" here reverts to an early bourgeois conception of possessive individualism.¹⁴

Neither Woman's Estate nor The Dialectic of Sex offers feminists a way of transcending liberal political conceptions. These influential attempts to perfect Marxism by turning to one or another version of bourgeois social theory result in an ahistorical and abstract view of social reality. Lacking an historical awareness, Mitchell and Firestone reify basic elements of capitalism so that they reappear as transcendent aspects of all social life. Their attempts to articulate a universal theory of women's oppression reduce to biological arguments and abstract conceptions of women. By deploying functionalist and structuralist approaches, these writers reintroduce certain fundamental antinomies of bourgeois theory. In the end, the two most significant feminist attempts to go beyond classical Marxism regress behind it by accepting liberal perspectives.

* * *

These comments should not be taken to mean that feminism must be abandoned by Marxists as merely another version of bourgeois thought. In addition to the fact that there exists a long history of struggle on the part of working women around so-called "women's issues," it is also true that within the socialist movement there have been many who have fought to incorporate the question of woman's emancipation within socialist practice.¹⁵ Still, the record of Marxist attention to women's issues is uneven and there have been periods of what has been termed by one writer "proletarian anti-feminism" within the socialist movement.¹⁶ Significantly, after a long lull of nearly fifty years

there is now developing a body of literature extending the Marxist approach to the problems opened up by the contemporary movement for women's liberation. This literature also expands even further the questions traditionally explored by Marxists. As against earlier Marxist treatments of women's oppression which focused on female workers in industry, contemporary Marxist feminists are now concerned with the character of women's work within the family and its relationship to capitalist production.17

In contrast to liberal feminism, the Marxist approach to women's oppression is grounded in an understanding of women as social beings whose life activity, labor, takes an alienated form under capitalist social relations within the family or private sphere as well as in the sphere of commodity production. Those who focus on the social relations embodied in domestic labor within the working class family identify the peculiarly capitalist character of this work as well as the ties which bind the historical form of the oppression of women to the exploitative character of class relationships. The non-"gainfully employed" housewife and her work, housework, are revealed as products of the changes in the sexual division of labor and the structure of family life brought about by capitalist development. Therefore the negation of this specific form of domestic work does not signify the elimination of the family as such, but rather the supersession of a particular historical form of the family.

Before detailing some of the conclusions of the Marxist feminist debate over the character of domestic labor, it should be emphasized that these investigations proceed from an indispensable historical insight. As Lukács remarked, “Not until the rise of capitalism was a unified economic structure, and hence a—formally—unified structure of consciousness that embraced the whole society, brought into being.”¹⁸ The methodological analogue of this new reality is captured in the Marxist category of concrete totality. Persons, as well as things, are conceived in their dialectical and dynamic relationship to each other as well as to the whole, that is, in their integration in the totality. Reality is understood as a dynamic process undergoing historical transformation. The apparent facts on the surface of social life are seen as products of the reified appearance embedded in the capitalist totality itself.¹⁹

In this view, Marxist feminism rejects the commonplace assumption that what is empirically separate should be taken as such. As against the liberal feminist argument, these writers begin to explore the internal relationships which exist between community and workplace, private life and public existence, family and economy, reproduction and production. Whereas on the surface it may appear that the family is unrelated to economic life, the effort to elaborate a critical theory of society from a feminist perspective confirms that “what is immediate as sense perception is not concrete, but abstract . . . the alternative: the concrete is gained by mediation, by working through the immediate, not accepting it.”²⁰ A critical dimension is attained by demonstrating how the so-called “facts”—i.e., what is affirmed as universal and unchangeable—are historically concrete and therefore subject to transformation. The apparently unchangeable nature of women’s work in the home is shown to be an aspect of the capitalist totality.

Under capitalism, a worker's ability to labor is a commodity and is sold in the marketplace for wages. The precondition for this situation is an historical development by which the working class is stripped of any independent means of social production. As Marx stated:

...the labourer instead of being in the position to sell commodities in which his labour is incorporated, must be obliged to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power, which exists only in his living self... It [capital] can spring into life, only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free labourer selling his labour-power. And this one historical condition comprises a world's history. Capital, therefore, announces from its first appearance a new epoch in the process of social production.21

Marxist feminists point out that the separation of the working class from the means of production also entails the separation of the family unit from the sphere of production. However, the two spheres, while distinct, continue to be internally related. Both the family and the economy are the products of the same historical development. The production of labor power in its commodity form and the privatized consumption of manufactured articles as means of subsistence occur within the family unit associated with the rise of capitalism, which over time strips the family of any independent means of production. Therefore, the domestic labor process contributes to the historical production of the working class under capitalist relations of production.

Marxist feminists have asked whether the working class housewife falls under the category of productive labor which Marx reserved for that labor which exchanges with capital and increases capital by producing surplus value.22 The arguments suggest that the housewife is not a productive laborer.23 Wally Secombe concludes that the housewife is therefore an unproductive laborer, the category which Marx used to describe labor which exchanges with revenue resulting from profits, interest or rents. A more satisfying position on this definitional issue is ad-

23 See note 17 above for a survey of the different positions in the debate.
vanced by Ira Gerstein and Lise Vogel, who argue that domestic labor is a distinctive form of social labor or productive activity which occurs within capitalism—that is, it is organized to some extent by capital itself, although it does not fall under the categories which Marx used to describe the sphere of commodity production proper. As Gerstein notes, "Labor power is the single and unique commodity in capitalist society which does not take place in a capitalist manner." Or, as Secombe argues in his reply to his critics, whereas domestic labor does not fall directly under the law of value as does labor performed in the sphere of the production of surplus value, it, like all labor within capitalist society, is influenced by this law in decisive ways. I take these arguments to mean that the housewife's labor is productive activity in the general sense of that term; it is a portion of the total or general social labor within society. Furthermore, although domestic labor does not produce surplus value, Secombe offers a compelling argument for the position that "...domestic labor creates value." He submits that the category of value is decisive in understanding any form of labor which occurs within a capitalist society since it expresses "...the relation of separated private labours to the total social labour in a society of generalized commodity production. Without this link the underlying connection between the domestic and industrial units cannot be adequately established; consequently, women's two labours are left to float analytically, to be related to one another only by way of the consciousness of women who move back and forth between them every day." In other words, it might be said that a social formation exists which is marked by qualitative distinctions between different forms of social life. One such distinction appears in the separation between the domestic and industrial realms. But this appearance obscures the social relations which bind housework into the larger social division of labor; thus domestic labor is "equalized" with other labors in society through the continuous exchange of commodities, including labor power, within the marketplace.

This summary suggests that the debate over domestic labor has far-reaching implications for Marxist political practice. Many

26 Ibid.
orthodox accounts of Marxism argue that the theory of alienation which grounds the concept of exploitation is situated by Marx in the social relationship between wage labor and capital at the point of production. Wage labor which is engaged by capital to produce surplus value is robbed of a portion of its total product which is appropriated by the capitalist. Consequently, the exploitative relations between wage labor and capital at the production site determine the form of the class struggle.

The definitional question—is or is not housework productive labor?—which preoccupies Marxist feminists when they investigate family life becomes another way of theoretically locating the point from which revolutionary change can proceed in capitalist society. These writers ask what relationship, if any, do housewives have to the class struggle. They ask whether the social conflicts which emerge around the sexual division of labor in the family and other specifically "women's issues" are an aspect of the movement to abolish capitalist social relations.

These are essential considerations for any feminist political strategy. Yet the literature in the housework debate either is unknown or is ignored by many feminists, even those in the socialist wing of the movement. It is important to note that the presentation of the character of women's work as either a definitional issue or a category dispute over whether or not housewives are exploited as workers, has been characterized by many as a sterile question. What is required is an extended discussion which can expand the insights already achieved in the housework debate by uncovering the material bases for such aspects of advanced capitalist social life as the commodity character of female sexuality, the unequal relation between men and women at work and at home, and the property character of family life. These features of social existence are, of course, noted by many liberal and radical feminists. But they are treated in their works as either an attitudinal problem, a cultural artifact surviving from an earlier social structure, or a universal feature of women's condition.\(^{27}\) For Marxists the challenge is to reveal how such "facts" are themselves products of a given historical situation which can be altered.

Using an often-quoted passage from the *Economic and
Philosophic Manuscripts I will attempt to offer an approach to the alienated features of women's existence under capitalism which can resituate the insights of liberal and radical feminists and expand the discussion already begun within the Marxist feminist literature. In this work, Marx refers to the family as a product of the isolation, dehumanization, separation and distortion of social relationships which occurs under capitalism. He writes:

This material, immediately perceptible private property is the material perceptible expression of estranged human life. Its movement—production and consumption—is the perceptible revelation of the movement of all production until now, i.e., the realization or the reality of man. Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of private property, as the appropriation of human life, is therefore the positive transcendence of all estrangement—that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his human, i.e., social existence. Religious estrangement, as such, occurs only in the realm of consciousness, of man's inner life, but economic estrangement is that of real life; its transcendence therefore embraces both aspects.28

This passage might be read to mean that all estrangement, including that which occurs within the family, will be abolished automatically upon the achievement of socialism. On such a reading, the so-called facts of continuing male privilege and female subordination in private and public life in contemporary socialist societies can be advanced as a way of disputing Marx's analysis. But to follow this line of argument requires a reintroduction of perspectives rooted in a naturalized conception of the sexual division of labor and of female biology so that women's inferiority is "proved" to be inevitable as long as women are women.

It would seem that Marx's own intention was to suggest the theoretical grounds for political action: the positive transcendence of an exploitative and oppressive social form. If feminists are to find the bases for a politics which can mediate between the present situation and a future society in which relations between the sexes are no longer oppressive in character, we must find an interpretation which does not force us to obliterate sexual distinction itself.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that when Marx wrote this passage he was concerned with family life in the bourgeois class. Indeed, just four years later, in The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels stated unequivocally:

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians and in public prostitution.29

Eli Zaretsky and other writers have demonstrated that in the twentieth century family life in the working class has assumed a new level of importance.30 The shortening of the working day, the development of mass forms of consumption, the extension of mass culture, and the rise in the importance of subjectivity have together transformed working class family life. Such changes suggest that we must either abandon Marx's statement that the family is a particular mode of production which falls under the general law of private property or we must alter his emphasis. I propose that we do the latter and view the working class family as a specific mode of production—that is, "a definite form of activity...a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life...."31—which is dominated by the alienated social processes of capitalist society as a whole.32

32 The theoretical formulation proposed in this article is on a high level of abstraction. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that variations exist among working class families due to the many regional, ethnic and racial divisions within the class. Moreover, the capitalist mode of production occurs within a variety of social formations. These social formations are transformed over time by the introduction of capitalist social relations, retaining all the while something of their original character. A detailed investigation would reveal that the requirements of capital within one or another national society may contribute to the strengthening as well as the weakening of "traditional" family patterns among different groups within the industrial working class. The recent study by John Berger and Jean Mohr, A Seventh Man: A Book of Images and Words about the Experiences of Migrant Workers in Europe (Baltimore, 1975), is a compelling description of the ways in which the traditional family relationships of
The formulation suggested here does not signify that the family merely copies the economic base or that alienation at work simply spills over into family existence. Rather, the reproduction of the working class within capitalism occurs not only at the office or plant, but in the family and other institutions of everyday life. In order to comprehend the reproduction of class relations from the vantage point of personal or family life, it is necessary to reject any theoretical orientation which takes as given the family's autonomy, independence or isolation from production "proper" and which therefore posits only external connections between production and the family's role as an agency of reproduction and socialization. The Marxist formulation emphasizes the existence of internal relations between family life and commodity production; the two spheres are qualitatively distinct but integrated aspects of one mode of production.\textsuperscript{33} Exploitation of the working class in capitalism occurs not merely to the individual worker at his place of work, but also on a society-wide basis. Domestic labor reproduces the fundamental class relations of capitalist society not merely by the day, the week, or the year, but over a lifetime. The family viewed as a mode of production of capitalism has a class dimension. This is not merely because it is a "superstructural" reflection of the economic base, but rather because the reproduction of labor power occurs within the working class family.

male industrial migrant workers from southern Europe to the advanced industrial capitalist societies of northwestern Europe are transformed. The authors stress that a similar study should be done for migrant female laborers. More studies of this kind, on the United States as well as on Europe, are needed before we can fully understand the various patterns of family life which coexist and change over time in capitalist societies. See also: Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack, Immigrant Workers and Class Structure in Western Europe (London); Godula Kosack, "Migrant Women: The Move to Western Europe—a Step Towards Emancipation?" Race and Class, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Spring 1976; Francis Wilson, Migrant Labour in South Africa (Johannesburg, 1972); and Ester Boserup, Woman's Role in Economic Development (New York, 1970).

\textsuperscript{33} As argued in the text of this article, the integration of family and economy seems to intensify under advanced capitalism. In Capital, Vol. 1, Marx suggests that whereas capital requires that the working class reproduce itself as a class for production, it is not terribly interested in the form in which it maintains and reproduces itself. Also, he states that the worker performs necessary vital functions outside the process of production. However, the latter has been misinterpreted by those who see the family as operating outside of the laws of capitalism or as representing some pre-capitalist entity inside capitalism. At this place in the text Marx also demonstrates how the worker's reproduction is for capital "a factor of the production and reproduction of capital." pp. 572, 571.
Curiously, the sexual dimension of the reproduction of labor power appears to the family members as a "natural," even animal-like, aspect of human nature. Women, in particular, are linked to this realm of nature. Sexuality, in such a context, is repressed sexuality. The history of sexual relations and their social content harden into nature: sexuality becomes second nature. Accordingly, all attempts to present woman, sexuality and reproduction as products of a realm of nature reveal a "... history so long unliberated—history so long monotonously oppressive—that it congeals .... Second nature is not simply nature or history, but frozen history that surfaces as nature."34

The sexual division of labor within the working class family reflects a specialization of tasks that enables the worker's creative capacity to be transformed into a commodity to be bought and sold and thereby estranged from the worker. In order to repeat this process on a daily basis the housewife must purchase with the wage packet the means of subsistence for the entire family. As Marx demonstrated, the products produced by the worker stand opposed to the worker's entire family, who must now use their wages in order to live.

The capital given in exchange for labour-power is converted into necessaries, by the consumption of which the muscles, nerves, bones, and brains of existing labourers are reproduced, and new labourers are begotten. Within the limits of what is strictly necessary, the individual consumption of the working-class is, therefore, the reconversion of the means of subsistence given by capital in exchange for labour-power into fresh labour-power at the disposal of capital for exploitation. It is the production and reproduction of that means of production so indispensable to the capitalist: the labourer himself.35

Furthermore, the very kinds of products which are purchased and consumed by the working class family reflect the "imaginary appetites" or "false needs" which dominate capitalist production. Betty Friedan is right to suggest that there is a relationship between the general system of commodity production and the consumption of false needs by the American house-

wife.\textsuperscript{36} She remains confused about this relationship because she cannot think of the family as anything but a bounded institution. In such a view, all economic and social influences are external to the organization of family life. What Friedan and other liberal feminists fail to see is that “the social does not ‘influence’ the private, it dwells within it.”\textsuperscript{37}

The working class family is pervaded through and through by commodity relationships. Enjoyment and leisure in the home occur through commodities. Yet people believe that the family is the only sphere left in which a person can be authentic; it is viewed as an arena of true subjectivity. Certainly useful labor goes into the production of the worker’s labor power in the commodity form. In this process real human needs are satisfied through a form of social labor. At the same time, however, subjective content of such relations with the family is constantly being undermined and cancelled by the universal tendency under capitalism for all social relations to assume the commodity form. Thus, husband and wife are deemed to “own” (have an investment in) one another and to “own” (have property in) their children. The life insurance policy purchased by the working man as a potential gift to wife and children becomes a testimony to the amount of sexual power he has to invest in their happiness.\textsuperscript{38} Such is the power of money in capitalist society. As Marx recognized: “Money is the pimp between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me. For me it is the other person.”\textsuperscript{39} Personal relations between man and wife within the private sphere of the family are mediated through money.

Today “liberated” marriage partners are counseled to draw up detailed contracts specifying their individual contributions to the marriage in order to facilitate a more efficient and equitable division of their mutual property should the marriage end in divorce. Indeed, the universal character of what appears as the


\textsuperscript{37} Jacoby, \textit{Social Amnesia}, p. 104.


\textsuperscript{39} Marx, \textit{Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts}, pp. 165-166.
particular sphere of personal life is best revealed in divorce, an increasingly common phenomenon. In divorce the very relations which were considered exempt from the alienated order of rights and property are directly subjected to that order as questions of property and monetary responsibility take precedence over all other matters.\(^{40}\)

In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that our sexual metaphors are metaphors of conquest. In fact, they are also metaphors of *ownership*. "To take" or "to have" one another is the language of a modern marriage ceremony. The language continues to express the core of marriage as recognized in the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant. He wrote, "Sexual community is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another . . . marriage . . . is the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possession of each other’s sexual attributes for the duration of their lives."\(^{41}\) The most intimate relationships between persons are invaded by the language of things or commodity relations. Persons, in this view, are "owned" and "disposed" of like any other worldly object. Advertised schemes for contract marriage and computerized mating reveal even further that "...today even sex is assimilated into the relationship of exchange, into the rational 'give' and 'take.' "\(^{42}\) Thus, sexual performance becomes a goal towards which man has to strive. And sexual conquests are accumulated and guarded against all potential competitors.\(^{43}\)

Women as well as men endeavor to accumulate lovers.

By focusing on the family sphere, Marxist feminism reveals the extent to which all human senses are reduced to the one sense of "having," to a one-sided gratification appropriate to the ownership of private property. Marxist feminism alters the conception of the autonomous family. It demonstrates that relations within the family are not "natural" relations. Indeed, it reveals that "...the family not only depends on the historically concrete social reality but is socially mediated down to its innermost struc-

41 Cited in Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 100.
ture." Both production and consumption within the family take an alienated form. The working class housewife, like the worker, is an alienated producer. The parallel between housework and labor performed within the modern office or plant, the extent to which both kinds of work are characterized by tedious, repetitive and fragmented tasks, is a manifestation of the internal relations which bind family to workplace under capitalism. The reproduction and care of children and aged family members are bound up with the production of the commodity labor power.

On the other hand, it is often argued that housework, unlike office or factory work, possesses aspects that are pre-capitalist—organic, non-rationalized. Indeed, housework as a form of production does satisfy authentic needs. But the production which occurs in the working class family is not developed autonomously by the producers, for the family is itself a solidly capitalist relation. As such, it embodies a contradictory unit between production for use and production for exchange. As noted, production within the family is oriented toward exchange value obtained through the sale of labor power rather than around needs which can be satisfied in a more truly human form of production. Not surprisingly, the family expresses that which is characteristic of all capitalist production: the triumph of exchange value over use value production. The tremendous development of the laborer as a productive force within capitalism is seen within the family as the one-sided, alienated, brutalized form of this development: even the worker's productivity exists only for capital.

The fetishization of female sexuality in commercial advertising is not the result of universal sex class privilege, as many feminists would have us believe. Rather, as Dalla Costa notes, under capitalism "...women are robbed of their sexual life which has been transformed into a function of reproducing labor power." Men are also affected by a process of repression which amounts to the temporal as well as the spatial reduction of the libido. Capitalism's organization of the working day assigns sex to the hours during which much of the work which goes into

44 Aspects of Sociology, p. 130.
45 See articles by Margaret Benston, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Jean Gardiner cited above, note 17.
the daily reproduction of labor power must be accomplished. The so-called free-space of leisure activity is also a sphere of domination. The repressive organization of sexuality amounts to its qualitative and quantitative restriction, so that genital sexuality comes to dominate all other forms of sexual gratification, becoming itself a means to a limited end—procreation.

The naturalization of the family and woman in the ideologies of late capitalism—even within the feminist movement, as revealed in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone—must be counterposed against the tendency toward commodity fetishism within capitalist society. Relations between persons take on the form of relations between things, they become reified; and relations between things take on the properties of human beings, they become personified. In Marx’s words, commodity fetishism refers to “material relations between persons and social relations between things.” All ideologies which naturalize woman or the family thereby conceal the social relations between the housewife and her product, labor power. They treat the worker’s labor as something which springs to life at the factory gates.

The view presented here reveals that the working class family is a mode of production and reproduction of the working class under capitalism, of the individual worker as a worker, and of the married woman as a housewife as well as a potential and frequently employed wage laborer. Indeed, women have always been employed as wage laborers under capitalism, from its origins down to the present. The process of reproduction and production of the working class over generations involves the utilization of female labor as both wage labor and domestic labor. There is a direct correspondence between the categories of jobs which women perform in the paid labor force and the

47 For an excellent discussion of these points, see Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Boston, 1966).
50 When the woman labors only at housework, her labor power is being expended although it is not being directly utilized by capital in the production of surplus value.
kind of production which they perform in the home.\textsuperscript{51} Like the
male worker, the housewife experiences over the course of her
own life-time a split between her labor power and her personal-
ity, the result of the metamorphosis of her labor power into a
thing or an object which she sells on the market.\textsuperscript{52} And the
necessity to transform her labor power into a commodity for sale
is determined by the size of the wage packet offered to workers
in various sectors of the economy, as well as the labor force
requirements of capital at any point in time.\textsuperscript{53}

The feminist literature is sensitive to the conservative con-
tent of the housewife's role within the family. This conservatism
is directly related to the instruction which workers and future
workers receive within the family. It is here that the family
teaches workers to sell their labor power for the sake of con-
sumption which they come to understand as leisure time. It
builds that leisure, not productive activity, gives meaning to life.
Within the family, patterns of hierarchy (of men over women
and of parents over children) serve to introduce workers to the
hierarchical labor patterns of the workplace. The ideology of the
family helps to teach workers that these patterns are "natural" as
well as legitimate. Also the family absorbs the shock of those who
fail to achieve their "freedom" in the social division of labor.

The entire way in which workers live, as well as where they
live, are aspects of capitalist alienation. There are no absolute
divisions between family and factory in this respect. Housing
developments are especially marked by the standardized charac-
ter of the organization of physical space as well as the private
lives of their residents. As Murray Bookchin notes, the feature-

So, whereas it is to the advantage of capital to maintain the working class family in its
present form, there is a counter-tendency which suggests that capital might want to
employ female labor power directly for commodity production. Over the course of
capitalist development one can see both tendencies operating together as well as
separately—that is, sequentially—depending upon the needs of capital at any given
time.

\textsuperscript{51} See: Robert W. Smuts, \textit{Woman and Work in America} (New York, 1971); Caroline Bird,
\textit{Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down} (New York, 1968).

\textsuperscript{52} See Lukács, \textit{History and Class Consciousness}, p. 168.

\textsuperscript{53} We need to supplement our knowledge of dual labor markets by race and sex in
order to account for the number of single, divorced or widowed women with children
in the labor force who are among the most disadvantaged workers and for the
disproportionate number of these women who are non-white. See: Valerie Kincade
less architecture of these buildings with their institutional corridors and office-like apartments suggests that “... the developments are bureaucratic institutions for self-reproduction and self-maintenance, just as the office skyscrapers are bureaucratic institutions for commerce and administration.”

Women, in particular, are encouraged to regulate each family member’s behavior not only inside the family but, more important, in such a way that the norms of correct behavior are projected outside the home. The good son or husband is a good worker as well.

Certainly, then, woman’s role as producer of the commodity labor power possesses a conservative dimension insofar as her labor constitutes the production of the worker as a worker or the reproduction of the working class as a working class under capitalism. Hierarchy and repression are important features of this conservative content of the working class family and its female members. At the same time, the reproduction of the working class itself is founded upon the mediation of women’s oppression within the class. The family also is a form of production within which social needs are met.

These considerations suggest the outlines of a full-scale investigation of capitalist society from the standpoint of the working class family. An examination of capitalist production as viewed from the vantage point of the family brings into prominence a series of contradictions. These contradictions are grouped around, or are aspects of, a central contradiction in capitalism and for it. To say that a contradiction exists in capitalism means that there is a contradiction between its content and its form; to say that a contradiction exists for it means that there is a contradiction between its mode of being and its essential transformation. To what central and secondary contradictions does the capitalist character of work point?

The central contradiction in capitalism posed by the nature of housework is that marked by the fundamental integration of housework into social labor (its content) and its privatized, isolated, “unproductive” (for capital, that is) form. Just as in the past, relations of exploitation in the factory have produced demands for unionization, higher wages, better working conditions, etc.—essentially for work reforms within the system—so

now the social character of housework has led to well-intended, but mistaken demands for wages for housewives. Those who have raised these demands have failed to grasp the character of this first contradiction. They have not understood that the awarding of a wage, if possible, would neither alter the relations of production nor the fact that the housewife already shares in the wage-packet of the male wage earner. This is not to say that women should not struggle to force capital to bear an increasing share of the cost of the reproduction of labor power.

Housework's central contradiction for capitalism—which touches upon some broader aspects of alienation—is that between the way housework is now performed and a more truly human form of production not measured by labor time. The difficulties posed for post-capitalist societies by this contradiction are worthy of examination. A failure to understand it has clouded the vision of the socialist movement and has contributed to the formulation of misconceived strategies which hope to liberate women “for production,” ignoring how, as housewives, they already enter into it. As a form of alienated labor, housework cannot be transformed by “freeing” women to enter directly into the labor market. Nor can domestic work provide an alternative to capitalism if it serves to harken back to some earlier mode of production. Housework shows that whereas the subjugation of labor by means of the discipline of labor-time may be the precondition for the emancipation of labor, it is not to be mistaken for emancipation itself. It is only in this limited sense that housework suggests, but cannot in itself offer, the vision of a form of production which is less, not more, alienated than the production of exchange value under capitalism.

These contradictions reveal a number of problems which also deserve serious examination. To begin with, the socialist call for “freeing” women for production has long since been heeded by capitalism itself. Since World War II married women have been entering the labor force in record numbers and, in contrast with the early part of this century, they now exceed the number of single working women. This development has sharpened and extended the antagonism between the property character of sexual relations under capitalism and the capitalist presupposition of a free laborer in a free market for labor. In other words, it has deepened women’s consciousness of the contradic-
tion between their status as proprietors of their personal capacities (mainly as sellers of labor power) and as objects of male sexual proprietorship. It is in this sense—and wholly within capitalism—that women's "liberation" from the home has fed potential political opposition to capitalist social arrangements.

Another aspect of this contradiction involves the antagonism between the ideology of feminity, which places women on a pedestal and encourages them to believe they can elevate their social status through marriage, and the exploitation of all working women on the labor market. For those women who seek security in their dependent but ostensibly respected positions as subordinate mates to their husbands, the real degradation experienced in the world of wage labor can produce knowledge of a conflict. It is here that the criticisms of the "feminine mystique" and the emphasis on transforming personal relations are useful for the theory and practice of the movement.

A major aspect of the contradiction between the form of women's work in the home and its social content is revealed by the housewife's integration into social labor and her isolation from the sphere of production of surplus value. Those who have advocated wages, not housework, have often noted the isolated housewife's attachment to conservative neighborhood institutions like churches, small businesses, schools, bingo nights, etc. For them, for the housewife to quit the home and join the union has been seen as a first step toward her liberation. Those who have advocated wages for housework, on the other hand, have also noted the potential for the community to become a locus of social struggle. While I have noted the limitations of the wages for housework demand, the perception that housework is an aspect of the productive process challenges movements for social change more seriously to incorporate the insights of feminist theory in drawing up strategy. The investigation of domestic labor in the family thus has practical as well as theoretical implications. It is toward such considerations that further contributions to Marxist feminist theory should be directed.

Hampshire College,
Amherst, Massachusetts