The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism

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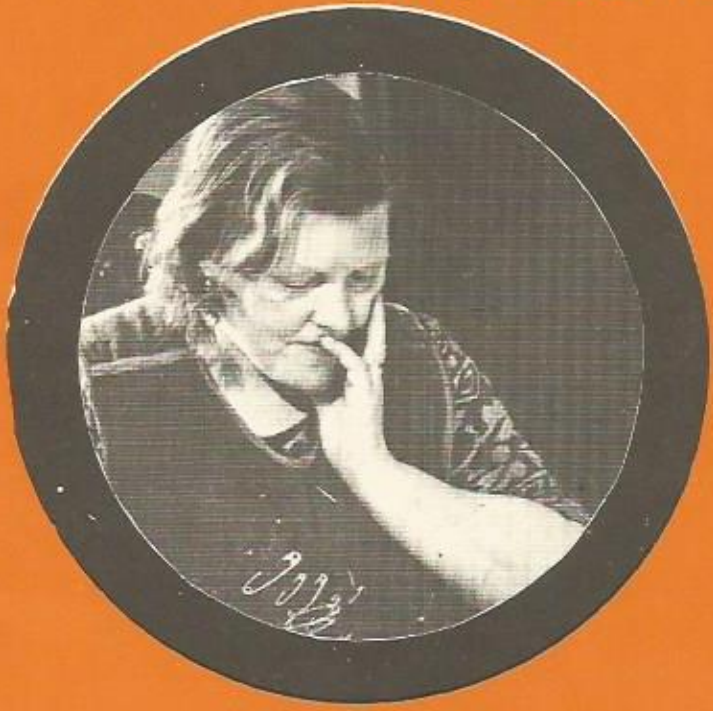

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The re-emergence of a women's movement in the late sixties brought with it a flood of radical literature on the oppression of women. The bulk of this writing was descriptive in character. While the portrayal of women's life-circumstances was often vivid and accurate, the analysis was generally very thin. The immediacy of women's oppression was seldom penetrated so that its structural roots could be grasped. A partial exception must be made for the Marxist analysis of the housewife and her labour under capitalism. In this area, Margaret Benston,[1] Peggy Morton [2] and Juliet Mitchell,[3] to name only three, made valuable investigative contributions. More recently, Selma James and Mariarosa dalla Costa [4] have advanced a thesis on the housewife that has provoked a heated debate among radical women. Serious rejoinders have been levelled against their main argument from several quarters of the women's movement, particularly from its socialist wing.[5] All this has served to raise the level of debate on the entire question and confront the workers' movement with the fact that housewives remain as a *massive labouring population* in late capitalism completely outside the organisations and struggles of the proletariat.

Of course, bourgeois economists have always ignored the housewife as a labourer. For those held spellbound by the fetishism of price theory, any operation not tagged with a price is *a priori* not economic. Since this is the status of the domestic labourer, she stands beyond their field of inquiry—no part of the official economy. Adding, of course, that the housewife has tremendous 'purchasing power' and that her 'changing tastes' affect the market place dramatically, they portray housewives as superficial social parasites, consuming but never producing.

It is particularly painful to note that Marxists have rarely attacked this reactionary perspective and demolished its underlying assumptions. Granted that Marx did not explicitly elaborate an analysis of domestic labour, there is nothing in his work, so far as I am aware, that prevents one from doing so. Indeed, in *Capital*, as I shall show, Marx laid out a framework within which domestic labour clearly fits. He always treated the consumption of the means of subsistence and the reproduction of labour power as two aspects of the same process. Furthermore, it is the wage form that obscures domestic labour's relation to capital and Marx clearly exposed 'this phenomenal form, which makes the actual relations invisible and indeed shows the very opposite of that relation.'[6]

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[1] Margaret Benston, 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', *Monthly Review*, September 1969.

[2] Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution,' *New Left Review* 40, November-December 1966.

[3] Peggy Morton, 'Women's Work is Never Done', *Women Unite*, Canadian Womens Educational Press, Toronto, 1972.

[4] Selma James and Mariarosa dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol, 1973. James and dalla Costa have maintained in this debate that housewives are central to the women's struggle and that a revolutionary strategy must be built around their location in the household and the labour they perform there. As James puts it: 'The family under capitalism is a centre essentially of social production. When previously, so-called Marxists said that the capitalist family did not produce for capitalism, was not part of social production, it followed that they repudiated women's potential social power. Or rather, presuming that women in the home could not have social power, they could not see that women in the home produced. If your production is vital for capitalism, refusing to produce, refusing to work, is a fundamental lever of social power.' op. cit. Serious errors, in my opinion, lie at the core of James and dalla Costa's work. In footnotes, I will briefly identify some of these where they directly intersect with and contradict this thesis. It must be recognized, however, that this is not a full nor adequate critique of their position. Such a critique would require an entirely different article.

[5] This discussion has taken place in a number of articles, published in magazines (*Red Rag, Socialist Woman, Shrew, Radical Philosophy*), as pamphlets, and as internal documents of the Women's Liberation movement.

[6] *Capital*, 1 (Moscow, 1961) p. 505. Both Engels and Trotsky paid some attention to the problem of domestic labour: e.g. 'It is my conviction that the real equality of men and women can come true only when the exploitation of either by capital has been abolished and private housework transformed into a public industry'. Friedrich

The denial of domestic labour's economic function (the reproduction of labour power) has had detrimental repercussions on other elements of a Marxist analysis. For instance, the nuclear family unit has never been adequately situated by Marxists within the capitalist social formation and it has often been assessed, quite inadequately, as an entirely superstructural phenomenon. Huge lacunae in analysis make for underdeveloped practice. Little wonder that left organizations have historically developed few strategic perspectives that frontally address the social relations of the bourgeois family.

The Family's Relations to Production

In order to situate domestic labour within production it is necessary first to describe the family's relations to the mode of production.[7] For the totality of social relations that comprise a society are founded upon one central cluster of relations that substructure the rest, and are causally basic. These are the relations of production. The family is ultimately dependent upon the dominant mode of production for its existence and form.

Engels to Gertrude Guillaume-Schek, 5 July 1885, Marx/Engels *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, 1965, p. 386; 'To establish the political equality of men and women in the Soviet State was one problem and the simplest. A much more difficult problem was the next – that of establishing the industrial equality of men and women workers in the factories, the mills and the trade unions, and to do it in such a way that the men should not put the women at a disadvantage. But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman in the home is an infinitely more arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionized before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is an actual equality of men and women within the home, in a normal sense as well as in conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality at work or even in politics. As long as woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and the sewing, all her chances of participation in social and cultural life are cut down to the extreme.' Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Life*, London 1953, p. 21.

[7] Notes on assumptions and method: (a) Since the focal point of this piece is domestic labour's relation to wage labour, I necessarily take the working-class family as the appropriate subject of analysis. This leaves aside the questions of class differences between working-class and bourgeois families. It does assume, however, that the objective character of the working-class family is in no sense 'proletarian' but that it is a thoroughly bourgeois institution by virtue of its functional integration within the capitalist social formation. (b) The method used in this investigation is a structural rather than an historical analysis. This means that the elements of a social formation are studied in their structural totality at a particular stage of development, generally one in which the mode of production under investigation is in a dominant phase. For this study, the phase is that of full industrial maturity within the advanced capitalist nations. cf. 'A history is possible, and can be scientific, only on the basis of results won by preliminary structural research, and the results of these historical researches will also contribute to the development of structural research. In this circular movement of cognition . . . the starting point is always analysis of structures and of functions that realize them in defined conditions.' M. Godelier, *Rationality*

In feudal societies, the family was co-terminous with the basic unit of production, and as such, domestic labour was embedded within the labour of general production. Capitalism entailed fundamental alteration in the mode of production and these structural changes have altered the position of the domestic labourer within production. They are briefly listed here, so as to provide an initial overview for our investigation before proceeding to a full analysis of their implications for the development of the economy as a whole and for the consciousness of the housewife in particular.

The following general features of the capitalist mode of production pertain to domestic labour's position and function.

1. With the advent of industrial capitalism, the general labour process was split into two discrete units; a domestic and an industrial unit. The character of the work performed in each was fundamentally different. The domestic unit reproduced labour power for the labour market. The industrial unit produced goods and services for the commodity market. This split in the labour process had produced a split in the labour force roughly along sexual lines—women into the domestic unit, men into industry. The latter is the unit of capitalist production, the former is the unit of reproduction for capital.[5]

2. Within industry, the worker is divorced from the means of production and therefore from the fruits of his labour. The mode of appropriation is embedded within the industrial unit only. Although capital accumulates from the appropriation of the use value of both labours, it is only in production 'proper' that a wage is paid. One result of this is that the domestic unit is generally not considered to be part of the economy at all.

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and Irrationality in Economics, (NLB London, 1972), p. xxxiii. It could be objected that a structural investigation is not appropriate because women's oppression is not unique to capitalism and arose prior to the advent of capitalism. This is, of course, true, but it does not deny the validity of a structural perspective. Historically, capitalism was the inheritor of a variety of institutional remnants left over from feudal structures. Among the most significant there were sex relations of property, authority, and a sex-typed division of labour. Once these remnants were incorporated and remoulded within the bourgeois order, they became active components of the social formation as a whole—reproducing and being reproduced by it. Regardless of their precapitalist origins, therefore, sex relations and family relations have become capitalist relations in the bourgeois epoch, and must be studied as such.

[5] The historical transition of the domestic unit from its feudal location (co-terminous with production) to capitalism (divorced from production) was an uneven development of considerable duration. It was still incomplete in England in the 1860s when Marx wrote Capital: "The system prevalent in England is that the capitalist concentrates a large number of machines on his premises, and then distributes the produce of those machines for further manipulation amongst domestic

3. The domestic worker is divorced not only from the means of production but also from the means of exchange. She is therefore materially dependent upon the redistribution of the wage to be conducted in private between her and her husband without the benefit of a contract other than the general contract of marriage in civil law.
4. Because the wage form presides exclusively over labour within industry, it is only within this unit that the productivity of labour time is of interest to capital. Therefore it is only the labour of this unit that enters directly into the development of productive forces. The consequence of the privatization of domestic labour and its removal from the arena of surplus appropriation is that the law of value does not govern domestic labour. Consequently it does not enter directly into the development of the productive forces. This has produced massive differences in the respective social structure and the labour process of each unit. These differences are reflected in the differing consciousness of workers in the two realms. Because gender difference correlates with work locale and consciousness, character differences appear as biological destiny to male and female workers alike.
5. The split of the labour process divorced production from consumption and interposed the commodity market between the two, so that the family and individual consumption necessarily occur in commodity form.

Domestic Labour's Relation to Capital

The division of the capitalist mode of production into domestic and industrial units removes the housewife from any direct relation with capital. In situating her within the capitalist social formation therefore, it becomes necessary at the outset to analyse those elements that mediate her relation with capital. In strictly economic terms the family unit stands between the commodity market and the labour market. These provide mediations of consumption and production respectively. The internal activity of the family reflects this duality. The family consumes the means of subsistence, purchased in the commodity market, and reproduces labour power to sell to capital in the labour market. These two processes are both embodied within the general labour of housework. Since the purpose here is to situate the housewife as a labourer I shall concentrate almost entirely on the production side of her relation to capital.

When labour power is exchanged with the wage, it takes, in this transaction, the form of a commodity. Like other commodities it has

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workers. The variety of the transition form, however, does not conceal the tendency to conversion into the factory system proper.' *Capital* I, p. 443.

value produced by the necessary labour expended in its production: 'The value of labour power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction of this special article. So far as it has value it represents no more than a definite quantity of the average labour of society incorporated in it.'[9] The value of labour power achieves an equality with the value of the wage when it is sold to the capitalist by the worker.[10]

Revealed here are two aspects of the commodity labour power. On the one hand its origin in the labour expended in its production, and on the other, its equivalent value expressed in the wage. As properties found in all commodities, Marx terms these two polarities *relative* and *equivalent* form. As a simpler way of stating the same relation we might say: two commodities, labour power and the wage, are exchanged for one another at equal value. This alternative merely expresses the equivalent form within labour power as an external equivalent—the wage. Regardless of which way it is conceived, the investigation proceeds from this point along similar lines.

It is labour power's duality that allows it to play a mediating role between the housewife and capital. In its relative form it is linked back to domestic labour and in its equivalent form it is linked forward to capital. For purposes of exposition I shall take these two linkages in reverse order.

The Wage (Equivalent Form)

Marx divides the industrial working day into two parts. Within the first (necessary labour time), the worker produces value expressed as the wage, sufficient to sustain him and his family in living conditions

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[9] *Capital*, I, p. 167.

[10] Marx considers the value of labour power to be determined in the context of *general historical conditions* which exist above and beyond mere physical necessity. He writes: 'If the owner of labour power works today, tomorrow he must again be able to repeat the same process in the same conditions as regards health and strength. His means of subsistence must therefore be sufficient to maintain him in his normal state as a labouring individual. His natural wants, such as food, clothing, fuel and housing vary according to the climatic and physical conditions of his country. On the other hand, the number and extent of his so-called necessary wants, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves to a great extent dependent on the degree of civilization of a country, more particularly on the conditions under which, and consequently on the habits and degree of comfort in which, the class of free labourers has been formed. In contradistinction therefore, to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of labour-power a historical and moral element.' *Capital*, I, p. 168.

normal for the working class of the particular historical period in which he lives. In the second portion of the working day—surplus labour time—he produces value which is realized as surplus value by the capitalist. The entire accumulation of capital is founded upon the value produced in surplus labour time over and above necessary labour time.

From the standpoint of the capitalist, the wage is a production cost, to be lumped together with other costs. His interest is in profit measured as a portion of total investment. The constituent parts of his investment (variable and constant capital) are of interest only in so far as their rearrangement alters his rate of profit.

From labour's standpoint, on the other hand, the wage is value created solely by the industrial labourer in a portion of the working day. As value it derives from no other source but the worker's own labour. 'What flows back to the worker in the shape of wages is a portion of the product that is continually reproduced by him. The capitalist, it is true, pays him in money, but this money is merely the transmitted form of the product of his labour. It is his labour of last week, or of last year, that pays for his labour power of this week.'[11]

Labour Power (Relative Form)

While the wage is the sole monetary means of the proletarian family's subsistence, this expresses only one side of labour power's duality. Only when the past labour expended in the creation of labour power is described can its relative form take shape. '(Labour power's) value, like that of every other commodity, is already fixed before it goes into circulation, since a definite quantity of social labour has been spent upon it.'[12]

Certainly a portion of this 'definite quantity of social labour' is embodied in the commodities purchased with the wage—(housing, food, clothing, etc). But these commodities do not walk into the household and convert themselves into the family's subsistence of their own accord. Houses must be cleaned, meals prepared and clothing washed, in order for the wage's value to be converted into the means of subsistence. In short, the commodities which the wage purchases are not themselves in a finally consumable form at the point of purchase. An additional labour—namely housework—is necessary in order to convert these commodities into regenerated labour power.

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[11] *Capital*, I, p. 532.
[12] *Capital*, I, p. 170

When the housewife acts directly upon wage-purchased goods and necessarily alters their form, her labour becomes part of the congealed mass of past labour embodied in labour power. The value she creates is realized as one part of the value labour power achieves as a commodity when it is sold. All this is merely a consistent application of the labour theory of value to the reproduction of labour power itself – namely that all labour produces value when it produces any part of a commodity that achieves equivalence in the marketplace with other commodities.

It might be argued to refute this thesis, that domestic labour is privatized, is not a social labour, and therefore can neither realize nor enter into labour power's value. In order to answer this argument, the distinction between concrete and abstract labour must be introduced. To illustrate: the labour of a shoemaker and a tailor are, concretely, two entirely different labours. But when their shoes and coats come to market as commodities they achieve a measure of one another and abstractly, a common measure of the labours of the shoemaker and the tailor. When this simple couplet is expanded to comprise the reality of a totalized commodity marketplace, a higher abstraction sets up—a measure of the average labour of society expressed by the universal commodity measure—money.

Now labour power enters this marketplace and draws a monetary price. The past labour embodied in this special commodity is therefore brought into relation with the average labour of society via the wage. It matters not at all that the concrete conditions of domestic labour are privatized. The fact is that labour power as a commodity sold in the marketplace abstracts each of its labour components regardless of their private origins.

Marx writes: 'In the production of commodities, the specific social character of private labour carried on independently consists in the equality of every kind of that labour by virtue of its being human labour which character, therefore assumes in the product, the form of value. . .'[11]

While domestic labour achieves value in the selling of labour power, it still remains a privatized labour outside of the exercise of the law of value. In other words, it contributes directly to the creation of the commodity labour power while having no direct relation with capital. It is this special *duality* which defines the character of domestic labour under capitalism.

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[11] *Capital*, I, p. 79.

In bringing both sides of the equation together, we get the following: domestic labour figures substantially in the relative value of labour power, but is no part at all of its equivalent, expressed in the wage. Of course the wage and labour power are of equal value, and so abstractly, equal amounts of social labour are expended on each side of the equation, but this equivalence is not an identity, concretely. The labour that produces labour power, and the labour that produces the wage are two entirely distinct labours. Domestic labour is a part of the former, and not of the latter.

But there appears to be a snag in our equation. If the wage equals the value of labour power and yet domestic labour figures in labour power's value but is not paid in the wage—is this not an unbalanced equation? This is a problem of bourgeois appearance occurring as a result of the phenomenal wage form. The wage presents itself as a payment for labour rather than a payment to reproduce labour power. Marx noted this deception in relation to wage labour and it applies as well to domestic labour.

To illustrate: let the wage be divided into two parts. Part A to sustain the wage labourer (and his substitutes) while part B sustains the domestic labourer (and her substitutes). The value of B is equivalent to the value domestic labour creates. But is this value determinable? Marx leaves no doubt that it is. In referring to unproductive workers who render a personal service (such as cooks, seamstresses, etc) he writes: 'This does not prevent the value of the services of these unproductive labourers being determined in the same (or analogous) way as that of the productive labourers: that is by the production costs involved in maintaining or producing them.'[14]

Here is the criteria for establishing domestic labour's value: it creates value equivalent to the 'production costs' of its own maintenance—namely part B of the wage. A + B operate in symmetrical fashion within the wage form as a whole. They purchase the commodities necessary to reproduce their respective labour powers. In so far as the housewife handles the *entire* wage and converts it into a consumable use value for the reproduction of *both* their labour powers, she transfers its entire value while enhancing its value by an amount equivalent to B.

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[14] *Theories of Surplus Value*, I, p. 159.

Housework: Necessary but Unproductive Labour

If domestic labour actually transfers and creates value, does this make it a productive labour? In a general ahistorical sense, domestic labour creates use-values and is therefore a productive labour. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that domestic labour, has been a socially necessary labour, throughout history and continues to be so under capitalism.[15]

Housework does not disappear when wage workers live alone, but must either be purchased with the wage (restaurant, laundry, housecleaning services, etc) or else be completed by wage workers themselves in extra-job time. Secondly, the reproduction of labour power is not merely a daily necessity but also involves reproducing an entirely new generation of workers. In this sense, labour power is reproduced in the first place, before the worker ever takes a job.

But these general characteristics of domestic labour do not make the case for it being a productive labour *in the specific context of capitalist production*.[16] As Marx clearly states: 'These definitions [of productive and unproductive labour] are therefore not derived from the material characteristics of labour (neither from the nature of its product, nor from the particular character of the labour as concrete labour), but from the definite social form, the social relations of production within which labour is realized.'[17] 'The labourer alone is productive who produces surplus value for the capitalist. . . . Hence the notion of a productive labour implies not merely a relation between labourer and product of labour but also a specific social relation of product, a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus value.'[18]

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[15] Socially necessary labour is not to be confused with necessary labour time. The latter is a specific portion of the industrial working day wherein the worker creates value, equivalent to the wage as a means of the family's subsistence. This category has no application to domestic labour.

[16] 'The precise distinctions I have drawn between productive and unproductive, direct and indirect, production and reproduction are all necessary in order to situate the housewife accurately in the capitalist mode of production. It is around these distinctions that the work of James and dalla Costa breaks down. In maintaining that domestic labour is productive they never make the distinction between a labour's general character, and its specific relation, and so they cannot employ a rigorous category like 'productive' accurately at all. Nowhere do they maintain that the housewife works in direct relation with capital and yet they appear unaware that the directness of this relation is the central criterion of productive labour. They use the terms 'productive' primarily to emphasize the indispensable nature of domestic labour to capitalist production, and to counteract the denial of domestic labour's role by past generations of Marxists. This point is well taken, but it is surely not impossible to rectify this omission while retaining some precision in the use of Marxist categories.

A productive labour then has two characteristics: it is conducted in direct relation with capital and it produces surplus value.[18] Domestic labour meets neither criteria. Its relation with capital is not direct (i.e. it is not a wage labour) and secondly, it does not create more value than it itself possesses. Domestic labour is unproductive (in the economic sense) and conforms with Marx's description of an unproductive labour 'exchanged not with capital but with revenue, that is wages or profits'.[20]

Does categorizing domestic labour as unproductive negate the assertion that it creates value? There is no contradiction between these two categories in *Capital*: 'If we now compare the two processes of producing value and of creating surplus value, we see the latter is nothing but a continuation of the former *beyond a certain point*. If on the other hand, the process be not carried beyond the point where the value paid by the capitalist for the labour power is replaced by an exact equivalent it is simply a process of producing value; if on the other hand it be continued beyond that point, it becomes a process of creating surplus value.'[21]

Domestic Labour and the Wage Form

Just as the wage passes through the industrial worker's hands to pay for his subsistence, so too does it pass through his wife's hands to ensure the family's subsistence. As members of the same consumption unit, the husband and wife share a common interest in the wage's magnitude, while being sharply differentiated by its form. It appears that he is paid for his labour (hence its importance) while she is not for hers (hence its triviality). This appearance simultaneously deceives both workers. Before examining this deception, it must be stated at the outset that no part of the wage's mystifying appearance is purely illusory. The fact that the husband receives a paycheck while his wife does not—this is a brutal reality, but a deceptive one nonetheless, for it serves to obscure an underlying relation, and (as Marx said) 'shows the very opposite of that relation'.

This, James and dalla Costa fail to do. They also assert that the housewife is 'exploited' but often they use the term in a pejorative sense signifying psychological oppression. The housewife, in Marxist terms, is unexploited because surplus value is not extracted from her labour. To say this is not as James and dalla Costa imply, to be soft on women's oppression. The housewife is intensely *oppressed* within the nuclear family under capitalism, but she is not *exploited*.

[18] *Theories of Surplus Value*, I, p. 157.

[19] *Capital*, I, p. 477.

[20] See Ian Gough, 'Productive and Unproductive Labour in Marx', NLR 76 for a clear exposition of this distinction.

[20] *Theories of Surplus Value*, Vol. I, p. 157.

[21] *Capital*, I, pp. 189–90.

The basis of the wage's deception is that, in appearing to be a payment for work done on the industrial job site, it provokes a conceptual substitution of this labour for labour power. Rather than paying for industrial labour, the wage in reality pays for an entirely different labour — the labour that reproduces the labour power of the entire family. This conceptual substitution occurs because the industrial worker stands alone before capital as an independent agent, and the labour that reproduces his labour power is nowhere in sight. The exclusion of the housewife from labour's exchange with capital is thus a critical factor in establishing the wage's deceptive appearance. Marxists, in remaining preoccupied with the part of this deception that occurs at the point of production, have often missed its other aspect—the obfuscation of the housewife's contribution to the overall process of capitalist production. Since these two aspects are, in fact, two interdependent faces of the same deceptive appearance, the total impact of the wage form is impossible to grasp without an appreciation of their complementary presentation. For only when the housewife is excluded from the wage transaction can the industrial labourer appear independently to exchange his labour for a wage and only when he does appear in this way can she be moved offstage and her labour derealized.

It is as if capital were directing a play entitled 'The Working Day'. The curtain rises to reveal a group of industrial labourers crowding around the gates of a factory preparing to be hired to work for a day in return for a wage. The audience finds the action on stage so absorbing that they accept the immediate appearance of the play as reality. In doing so, they forget that the actors are not the sole agents of the onstage action. Backstage are a group of stage hands (housewives) who have been preparing the workers for the opening curtain for hours beforehand. Although these workers are out of sight and therefore out of mind, they are nonetheless indispensable to the entire production.

It is clear that the wage's mystification is not limited to its effect upon the immediate agents of its enactment but reaches a wider audience.[22] One of the general results of this is the total obfuscation of the origins of surplus value. Another way of looking at the conceptual substitu-

[22] The wage's mystification shows up among the radical economists who attempt to arrive at a rough measure of the housewife's value by calculating what she would be paid in the marketplace for her various labours. This is an exercise in bourgeois reasoning involving a complete capitulation to the deceptive rationale of the wage form. It is based upon the assumption that wages are a measure of the value of work done rather than a monetary package paid to ensure the family's subsistence. This distinction between labour and labour power is hardly academic. For if the subcomponent of the wage that pays for the housewife's subsistence (what I have called B part) were pulled out of the wage and given to the housewife as a separate paycheck, the total of A and B would not increase the wage's magnitude one penny.

tion of labour for labour power is that it is a liquidation of the distinction between past and present labour. In the following passage Marx reconstructs this distinction and in the process, reveals the basis of capital's larcenous exchange with labour. 'The past labour that is embodied in labour power and the living labour it can call into action, the daily cost of maintaining it, and its daily expenditure in work, are two entirely different things. The former determines the exchange value of labour power, the latter is its use value. The value of labour power and the value that labour power creates are two entirely different magnitudes. . . This difference is what the capitalist had in view when he was purchasing labour power . . . the seller of labour power realizes its exchange value and parts with its use value. He cannot take one without giving the other.'[23]

When the value of 'past' labour is subtracted from the value of present labour, the result is surplus value. The wage form, in provoking a conceptual substitution of present for past labour, completely obscures the labour origins of surplus value which then appears as if it were a natural outgrowth of capital itself. In this way, the mystery of capital's accumulation is built into the very structure of the capitalist mode of production. The split between industrial and domestic labour, and the separation of the latter from a direct relation with capital—these are structural pre-requisites for the deceptive presentation of capital's exchange with labour in direct contradiction to its essential nature.

The Function of Domestic Labour: Economic and Ideological Reproduction

'The capitalist system imposes itself because, at every moment, it reproduces and develops its originating structure . . . the capitalist system is an historical totality that regenders its own origin at every moment and expands its field of application by causing whatever was opposing to fall within it.'[24] A social formation must reproduce[25] continually, the conditions of its own production. This means concretely that three different reproductions must take place: (a) in the means of production, (b) in the forces of production (labour power), and (c) in the relations of production. These reproductions are the *sine qua non* of the social system's existence. Within capitalist relations

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[23] *Capital*, I, p. 188.

[24] Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, p. 180.

[25] Four overlapping subconcepts describe the total process of reproduction: 1. perpetuation; 2. renewal; 3. expansion; 4. adaptation. The objective development of capital requires all of these to encompass the concept of reproduction. cf. *Capital* II p. 524–

domestic labour is integral to the second and third of these reproductions. While both are embedded within the same labour process and are carried out by the same labourer within the same work day, it is important to keep them conceptually distinct because they reproduce different aspects of the social totality. The reproduction of labour power is an economic function while the reproduction of the relations of production is ideological in nature. If these functions are analysed separately, the family's location within the base/superstructure edifice may then be more precisely considered.

The Reproduction of Labour Power

The reproduction of labour power is the reproduction of the *capacity* for work. Domestic labour reproduces labour power on two levels which proceed concurrently: (i) on a daily basis, (ii) on a generational basis. The former gets the wage worker to the plant gates every morning, the latter reproduces the next generation of both wage and domestic labour power.

To show this concretely, I have broken down this capacity into three component parts and have detailed the domestic labour that reproduces them. Also described (by letters) are the two levels delineated above: (i) daily (^{D}), (ii) generational (^{G}).

Labour power reproduced	*Domestic labour required*
Physical maintenance[26]	pregnancy and childbirth^{G}, child care^{G}, housecleaning^{DG}, cooking^{DG}, schedule management^{DG}, shopping^{DG}
Psychological maintenance	general tension absorption and management^{DG}, promotion of cordial family relations^{DG}, sexual relations^{D}
Skills	child socialization^{G} (now shared with the school)[27]

[26] Physical maintenance requires a reproductive biological element that operates relatively autonomously irrespective of particular historical conditions. Because capitalism has successfully moulded biological forces to suit its social ends, there is no need to separate out the biological element in describing the reproduction of labour power.

[27] This function, like others in the general repertoire of domestic tasks, has been slowly eroded in the history of capitalism. With the increasing complexity of technology and the advancing specialization of labour, many of the training functions performed by the family are now assumed by the state. This has involved an exponential growth in educational facilities of all types.

Reproduction of the Relations of Production

The family has a special role to play in the ideological reproduction of the relations of production. The state (through its educational and media apparatus) is a complement but not a substitute for the family in this regard. For it is the family, and above all the mother that produces willing participants for the social order. The early socialization of children is primarily the mother's task. Eventually young adults must be produced who have internalized a repertoire of attitudes and perceptual structures that enable them to self-actualize willingly in an adjusted manner within bourgeois relations. The formation of character suitable to the requirements of life within the capitalist world is accomplished, above all, through primary socialization in the early years of life.

Freud's pioneering emphasis on the centrality of the first six years of life for the formation of the adult personality has never been seriously refuted. Marxists, however, in harbouring a healthy distrust for psychological explanation of social phenomena have over-compensated by largely ignoring the importance of child socialization in reproducing bourgeois social relations. As Sartre has suggested, one would almost suppose, from reading many Marxists, that a person's consciousness suddenly appears when they take their first job.

The first six years occur in their entirety within the nuclear family. It is in these years that the groundwork is laid for the child's eventual assimilation as an adult into the external world. It is primarily the labour of the mother that lays this groundwork. This labour of socialization reproduces a particular component of the relations of production—the basic structures upon which the adult character is founded. As such it is a labour to ideological ends.

The Family's Relation to Base and Superstructure

The labour of the family unit reproduces simultaneously components of labour power and the relations of production. It follows from this that the function of the family unit within the capitalist mode of production is a reproductive one, but that this function has both an economic and an ideological aspect.

If base and superstructure are conceived as discrete institutional realms in the sense that bourgeois social science conceives of the world with clear-cut classificational boundaries, the above description of the family is an unsatisfactory formulation. Conceived in this way, it is illogical to say the family is both a part of the base and superstructure. But the question itself ('is the family in the base or superstructure?') is in-

correctly posed and the bind it produces flows from its misconception of Marxist categories.[28]

The terms base and superstructure signify different functional levels or aspects of the social world having a certain defined relationship to one another. Economic activity (the base) substructures the social order, for it is this social activity which ensures the production and reproduction of the material world. Ideological activity sustains the coherence of the social world at the level of consciousness. An institutional realm (such as the family) need not be exclusively comprised of one aspect of social activity or another. Ideological activity may be a part of the social life of a realm that has an economic function. This is, in fact, what occurs in the family. The social activity of the family reproduces specific aspects of labour power and the relations of production, and it is in this sense that the nuclear family is a dual-faceted institution having functional aspects of both base and superstructure.

Domestic Labour and the Development of the Productive Forces

The separation of the household from the means of production has had profound consequences for the family unit in the bourgeois epoch. For it is this separation that has placed the domestic unit beyond the exercise of the law of value. The restless momentum of capital operating within the industrial process provides the impetus for the constant transformation of the organization of labour and technology that has been a hallmark of the capitalist system. The domestic labour force, having no direct relation with capital, is only affected by this development peripherally and has not undergone any significant structural alteration in the organization of its labour process throughout the entire capitalist epoch.

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[28] Marx uses categories in a way that is radically dissimilar from bourgeois science. For Marx, categories do not slice up the real world into mutually exclusive and logically independent factors (A is no part of B and does not imply B). Such a conception violates social reality and therefore sets up a mental model of the world which cannot grasp its dynamic, relational, interpenetrated, reciprocally causal, multifaceted nature. For instance, Marx repeatedly warns that capital is not a thing but a definite social relation, and he gives it different names, to specify various aspects of the overall process of capital in motion: variable capital, surplus value, money, interest, etc. Thus, the Marxist process of categorizing must correspond to social reality and not violate its nature. Categories describe distinguishable functional aspects of an organic process, and since the whole is constantly in internal motion different categories are turning into one another constantly as different moments in a process are transformed. cf. B. Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge, 1971, Chapters 1, 2, 3.

Within industrial production, any increase in the productivity of a unit of labour time results in a proportional increase in surplus value. Since such an increase raises profits and provides a corporation with competitive advantage, it becomes a general law of capitalist development that management constantly seeks to increase the productivity of a unit of labour time. It is this imperative, internal to the development of capital itself, which has resulted in the restless transformation and advancement of the forces of production throughout the history of capitalism. This has taken the form of an increasing technological complexity and a corresponding advance in the overall organization and division of the labour force.

A comparable development has not occurred in the household where the introduction of new technology has had virtually no effect on the organization of labour. A century ago, the housewife toiled alone in her kitchen over a small wood stove. Now she has a small electric stove and other single-family household appliances, but she still toils alone in exactly the same organization of labour. Dalla Costa is useful on this point: 'to the extent that she must in isolation procreate, raise and be responsible for children, a high mechanization of domestic chores does not free any time for the women to leave the household. She is always on duty . . . her work day is unending not because she has no machines but because she is isolated.'[29]

The domestic labour process has stagnated while the industrial labour process has constantly advanced because domestic labour is not part of variable capital, is not paid on an hourly rate, and therefore capital has no interest in the productivity of a unit of domestic labour time. Whether a domestic task is completed in one hour or four has no effect on capital. As long as the wage worker shows up for work every shift, able and willing to work, and his children in the future, that is all that really matters. It is no surprise then, that the household is the least efficient organization of a labour process existent within capitalism. Precisely because there exists no continual impetus to reorganize domestic labour to improve its efficiency, it is the one labour process which has not been socialized, though there is nothing inherent in the work itself that would prevent it from being so.

While developments within industry do not produce a direct effect on the organization of labour in the home, there is a constant infusion of new technology into the household via commodity consumption. This is in no way a progressive application of technology, for capital's interests are served in personal consumption by the most inefficient product application in order to maximize the quantity of goods con-

[29] Dalla Costa, in *Radical America* Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 75.

sumed per person. The result of this particular instance of uneven and combined development is the appearance in the household of constantly updated technology while the organization of labour remains completely static. There are a number of important by-products of this structurally produced stagnation:

1. It has entailed a steady erosion, throughout the course of the bourgeois epoch, of the vitality and the autonomy of the domestic unit, relative to industrial production. The development of industrial production necessitated an upgrading in the industrial labour force which the family, as a backward unit, was unable to provide. Certain key facets of the reproduction of an increasingly advanced labour force were removed from the household and assumed by the state (as witnessed in the exponential growth of all facets of education). This not only diminished the family's function within the social order, but it has trivialized the nature of domestic labour still further.
2. While broad layers of the proletariat have gained higher levels of technical expertise and general knowledge through the reorganization of the labour process, the housewife has been largely by-passed. The level of skill and knowledge generated from her work has made little advance in the last century. Because other labour processes have been developed over this time span, the position of the domestic labourer relative to all but the lowest sectors of the proletariat has deteriorated. General advances in education and culture have mitigated this effect somewhat but the housewife's atomized location removed from the public milieu, has minimized even this generalized transmission.
3. The material insufficiency of the family as a social unit creates the conditions of its own structural subordination within the capitalist social formation. The family is forced outside of itself to obtain the means of its own subsistence both in the form of the wage and commodity goods from the market place. It is these external relations which determine the family's class position and circumscribe the life conditions and opportunities of its dependent members.

These three specific aspects of the family's structural subordination must be situated within the larger dynamics of the capitalist system. Under the rule of capital, the forms and relations of production dominate their counterparts in reproduction. This hierarchy of determination operates particularly strongly upon the family whose functions are entirely reproductive. By virtue of its indirect and mediated relation with capital, the family's structure is shaped and its labour determined by external forces operating beyond its immediate social field.

The following passage from *Capital* describes the structural subordination of 'other kinds of capital' to industrial capital. It could be applied just as readily to the family. 'To the extent that (industrial capital) seizes control of social production, the technique and social organiza-

tion of the labour process are revolutionized, . . . The other kinds of capital, . . . are not only subordinated to it and the mechanism of their functions altered in conformity with it, but move solely with it as their basis, hence live and die, stand and fall with this basis.'[10] The general malaise of the family unit, whose vitality and autonomy are being steadily eroded in the stampeding 'progress' of capital, has not escaped the notice of social commentators of all ideological stripes. Almost unanimously they have pronounced the family to be 'in crisis', though their commentary generally bemoans the symptoms without situating the causes.

More significant are the broad numbers of housewives who are registering the objective stagnation and backwardness of the domestic unit with a pervasive dissatisfaction that is now becoming consciously articulated throughout the West. The accumulation of this atomized dissent has yet to achieve viable organizational forms where its direct and progressive impact on the class struggle could be realized. It is therefore necessary to consider more fully, the impact of the housewife's position and function on her consciousness in order to explore the possibilities of breaking her struggle out into public, where she can contribute directly to the revolutionary contestation of capital itself.

The Impact of the Housewife's Locale and Function on her Consciousness

The separation of the labourer from the product of her/his labour is considered to pertain exclusively to the wage labourer. The fact that, in its own unique way, it occurs for the wife in the home is usually ignored by Marxists as a by-product of the failure to consider domestic labour within the capitalist relations of production.

Capitalism established the division between industrial and domestic labour, and this division reproduced a physical separation in the location of their labours. In this way, a sexual division of labour becomes a physical separation of the sexes during the working day. For the housewife this has meant an enforced daily separation from the product of her labour—the living capacities of her husband and children who are consumed in alien production. When the husband returns from work he is exhausted – his labour power has been expended. His wife must spend the majority of her time before he returns to work restoring his capacity to endure the next shift. The entire character of this labour is one of personal service—literally a labour so that others may live. This

[10] *Capital*, II, p. 57.

creates the standard attitude of a 'good' housewife—self-denial for the sake of her family.

If the male proletarian is the family's only means of subsistence, his welfare is paramount. In this his family is forced to regard his health and ability to work as a most precarious commodity. The fluctuating price he brings on the labour market, loss of pay due to lay off, injury, sickness or strike; all these unknowns have direct repercussions on the worker's family. They create underlying anxiety and *insecurity* which take a heavy toll on the family unit.

Similarly, children are future worker-commodities. The general conditions of the labour market that will determine their money worth are not yet known but can only be anticipated. This future-directed insecurity has a conservatizing effect upon parents. They often feel pressure to push their children to be upwardly mobile and this drive has a tendency to weaken cross-generational solidarity within the proletariat.[31]

The housewife's exclusion from the wage transaction spells her total material dependence upon her husband who supplies, through the wage, the money necessary to sustain her life and those of her children. By receiving the wage, he has a basic authority over its use. Its distribution within the family is a private affair conducted between husband and wife as individuals without the benefit of contract. He 'gives' her money for the week, and if she needs more—she must 'ask' for it.

In a society of generalized commodity production, 'the labour of an individual asserts itself only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products and indirectly between the producers.'[32] The housewife's labour cannot assert itself nor assert her because its value is hidden, and she receives no paycheck to signify its presence. The fact that the product of her labour is embodied in another person does not allow for a clear perception of its appropriation by capital, and consequently of her relation to capital.

In consequence, the labour she performs disappears as 'real' work. Common language idiom betrays this derealization well:

Teacher: Who works in your family, Jimmy?
Jimmy Jones: My father.

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[31] Historically, this drive towards upward mobility has tended to be much stronger in North American families than in its European counterparts. Proletarian traditions and more limited opportunities for petty bourgeois entrepreneurship have historically negated this effect in Europe.

[32] *Capital*, I, p. 77–8.

Teacher: Do you work, Mrs Jones:
Jimmy's Mother: No, I'm a housewife.

Wage workers, at least, have a direct relation with capital. Their purpose in working is to get paid, and they do not generally describe their work as meaningful. As a result, they can experience alienation from their work and hostility toward the boss without apology. A housewife cannot do this. In the absence of a paycheck to justify her toil, the housewife must account for her work in non-economic terms. Hers is a 'labour of love performed out of a devotion to her family'. A housewife who admits that she hates her work is not a 'good' mother. Often, therefore, her alienation from her work must be repressed from consciousness, lest she implode with guilt and feelings of personal inadequacy. The end result of this is that housework takes on the appearance of an arrangement of destiny, a natural female vocation and duty.

The Privatization of Domestic Life

A significant result of the family's location in the capitalist system has been the privatization of domestic life. The separation of the family from the work place has divorced its activity (and particularly the life-work of the domestic labourer) from the public realm. The family takes up residence literally in atomized self-contained dwelling units behind closed doors. The home in capitalist societies is architecturally structured to enforce the family's privacy.

At the same time, commodity relations have been generalized into every public sphere. All social intercourse in public is marked by the supremacy of exchange value. This has voided the public milieu of all interpersonally satisfying social exchange. Human needs for intimacy, companionship, spontaneity, ease and affirmation cannot be met in the socially bankrupt public milieu of mass culture.

People are literally driven into private to attempt to satisfy those needs. Their daily foray into public must be counterbalanced with a time of retreat. The privatized family home functions as this vital realm, where public tension can be displaced and absorbed. The housewife's role is central in all this. With the heightened dichotomy between public and private space, her primary responsibility is to sustain and orchestrate the private implosion of public tension. She co-ordinates family activity in order to manage tension. Above all family conflict must be muted, and at the very least, contained behind closed doors. The spillover of discord into the public realm is avoided for it reflects badly upon the women's competence in tension managing. The strong differentiation between public and private space heightens the impact of

home as an atomized ghetto that stifles the housewife's social development.

A Balance Sheet on the Potential of Housewives in Political Struggle

Because the housewife is atomized and lacks a direct relation with capital, she finds it extremely difficult to locate the ultimate source of her oppression beyond her husband, the immediate agent of a portion of it. This is not merely a perceptual problem, it is much more concretely an objective limitation in her opportunity for struggle which tends to produce a response of passivity and acquiescence. She rebels as an isolated individual to the immediate detriment of her husband and children and her actions do not contest the relations of capital directly. She is not a part of any union and the withdrawal of her labour power is considered a crime by law. She is, in effect, under a constant injunction forbidding her from striking under the threat of losing her children. The law, in any case, is a formal stricture relatively seldom invoked because the ideology of motherhood operates pervasively to deter her from ever considering such action. For the housewife rebellion is often, at one and the same time, objectively untenable and subjectively unthinkable.

Enclosed within the household, pitted against her husband and children, her resistance to subordination and to degradation tends to be chanelled into family fights—a displacement of conflict denied access to the political arena. The history of working-class families in the bourgeois era is a history of marital and family discord that has not generally seen progressive forms of interpersonal contestation. Only when women have external opportunities to work and to be instrumentally involved in the community does interpersonal confrontation around the domestic division of labour become progressive. (In the past decade, the opportunities for external involvement have re-emerged for many women, but this has not been typical of the bourgeois era historically.)

The division of the working class into domestic and industrial units is perhaps the fundamental structural split existent within the class. All divisions (race, occupation, etc) are harmful to the proletariat's ability to contest capital, but the sex split has a specific character which obscures its detrimental impact on the unity of proletarian forces and therefore makes it difficult to address and combat.

The sex split occurs on privatized, intimate terrain within the family unit. Other intra-class divisions are not experienced so personally and privately, precisely because none is so largely structured into a privatized praxis. It is this that has buried so much of women's struggle and

interpersonalized its mode of contestation.[13] Political struggle with a mass social character is precisely the type of experience that working-class housewives have lacked because of the objective limitation of their location in the capitalist social formation. This absence of a readily available arena of collective struggle has been, historically, a profound barrier to radicalization of housewives for it is in such struggles that the power of collective action is discovered, and the practical talents of political organization are developed.[14]

These limitations are not merely ones of mobilization. On a larger

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[13] For instance, the women's radicalization of the late sixties adopted primarily interpersonal forms of struggle. Particularly in North America, the women's movement carried the new left's subjective style of contestation to its logical conclusion. In its heyday (1969–70) the movement's dominant form was the consciousness-raising group and one of the primary struggles was against the male left's chauvinism *at the level of attitudes*. The limits of this form of struggle (in terms of its political effect) were rapidly reached and the women's movement went into decline. This is not at all to say that consciousness about the oppression of women has declined. On the contrary, women's consciousness has grown as a generalized diffuse awareness seeping into the working class, but this development has very little organizational expression at this time. The fundamental principle of women's liberation, the independent organization of women against their oppression, finds new fields for application in the workers' movement, such as women's caucuses within the trade union. At the same time the more adequate development of the proletarian class struggle requires the overcoming of the sexual division of labour graphically depicted in the film *Salt of the Earth*. See also F. Dobbs *Teamster Rebellion* New York 1972, pp. 58–70.

[14] Flowing from their analysis of housework as productive and the housewife as exploited, James and dalla Costa construct a concept of the domestic unit as a 'social factory'. This conveniently dissolves differences between the domestic and industrial unit which are absolutely basic to the capitalist mode of production. The consequence of this error is that James and dalla Costa ignore completely the inherent limitations of the household as an arena of women's struggle. For them, the household *is* a factory, and it follows as a matter of course that a general strike of housewives will shut it down. 'To abandon the home is already a form of struggle since the social services we perform there would then cease to be carried out in those conditions, and so all those who work out of the home would then demand that the burden carried by us until now be thrown squarely where it belongs—on to the shoulders of capital. This alteration in the terms of the struggle will be all the more evident, the more the refusal of domestic labour on the part of women will be violent, determined and on a mass scale.' James, op. cit. p. 39. This is surely the stuff of revolutionary fantasy—a general strike of housewives, crippling the economy. It is pure spontaneism to propose such a grand scheme without any mode of organization, any arena of struggle where the social relations of capital may be contested. Mass abstention from the household is simply not an option for working-class housewives. Dalla Costa and James consistently ignore the economic compulsion of work under capitalism both in the home and in the factory. A strategy based on mass disengagement of labour power is entirely utopian for any sector of the oppressed, including housewives. As a tactic, the general strike has a special significance in a specific conjuncture, but it can only take place after a long, steadily sharpening series of partial struggles and partial victories. Posed outside of such a context, as a strategy in and of itself, mass disengagement is hopelessly untransitional—nothing precedes the revolutionary moment of mass exodus.

historical plane they place limits on the role of housewives in socialist revolution. Revolutionary transformation is only possible because the proletariat is engaged directly in socialized labour and therefore bears as a class the pre-requisites of a socialist mode of production. While the labour of housewives remains privatized, they are unable to prefigure the new order nor spearhead the productive forces in breaking the old.

Potential

To state these limitations frankly is not to capitulate before them, nor to write off the potential of housewives in political struggle. It is precisely the uneven and combined nature of socialist revolution which affords opportunities for housewives to move on to the historical stage in their own interests and in the general interests of women and of the proletariat. Mobilizations of housewives raising demands for the socialization of housework, demands against the state, demands for price-watch committees, etc—such actions can make a tremendous contribution to the advancement of the class struggle particularly *if they are combined with simultaneous proletarian initiatives.*

The history of revolutions affords a rich display of the effects of cross-fertilization between various unevenly developed fronts of struggle. This mutual effect takes place both at the level of generalized political understanding and in the exemplary lessons which advanced forms of struggle for those in struggle elsewhere. In such circumstances it is not uncommon for objectively backward layers to be thrown forward by leaps and bounds and to make their own unique contribution to the revolutionary dynamic.

Such a possibility exists for housewives as the protracted crisis of late capitalism unfolds. This has a great deal to do with the character of that crisis—a generalized decomposition of bourgeois relations at every level of the social formation. Women's radicalization is but one expression of this totalized crisis. Though in the past there have been severe difficulties in mobilizing atomized and privatized populations such as housewives, the future possibilities must not be discounted. Certainly the objective pressures acting upon housewives are intensifying. Housewives are the principal bearers of the loss of real income which the working class is beginning to suffer throughout the west. As inflation spirals upwards and wage controls go into effect, housewives must intensify their labour in order to absorb the family's loss of real income and prevent a precipitous decline in their family's standard of living. Either they must take jobs to supplement family income or work harder domestically to stretch existing income. In these conditions housewives are becoming overtly angry and beginning to blame landlords, corporations and governments for their situation. As a result,

consumer boycotts, rent strikes, price-watch committees and campaigns against inadequate state services are increasing in frequency and militancy. These mobilizations would appear to have real potential particularly if they are linked to the ongoing campaigns of the workers' organizations. In this way they could assert the unity of proletarian forces and incipiently challenge the sexual division of labour within the proletariat.

But granted that such mobilizations continue to rise, and even granted that they are not sidetracked into reformism, housewives still will not provide the decisive motive force of the women's struggle. To the contrary, it was the huge flood of women out of their homes into higher education and industrial production in the 1960s that created the material preconditions for a women's radicalization at the end of the decade. Women now constitute between 30 and 40 per cent of wage labourers under advanced capitalism, and their absolute numbers and relative proportion are steadily increasing. It is mainly from within this population rather than from the diminishing numbers of women who are still exclusively housewives, that women's leadership will come in the years ahead. Women wage workers and students struggling for full equality with men within unions and in the schools will be in the vanguard of struggles that will diminish the sex divisions of the class. Furthermore it will be primarily these women who will inject radical women's consciousness back into the population of women who remain exclusively housewives. This arises from their objective location in the social formation which must after all be the starting point for any revolutionary strategy.

Wally Seccombe

Postscript

In this article I described the specific *duality* of domestic labour under capitalism - that it creates value but is not subject to the direct reign of the law of value. Its labour time is not compelled and distributed directly by capital and its productivity is not immediately germaine to the production of surplus value. This therefore leaves the regulation of domestic labour to indirect mechanisms which *supplement* the law of value in the family. These mechanisms need some amplification.

It is obvious that the authority of her husband (and the insistent demands of her children) command the housewife's labour. But to say that he is the bearer of a set of authority relations does not, by itself, describe the economic incentive for this authority(1). The real material imperative which compels domestic labour is the maintenance of the means of subsistence (ie. the total household) in the best possible condition given the limits of the wage's purchasing power.

Marx states that the capitalist need not bother with this incentive but 'may safely leave its fulfilment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation' (2). Since the housewife labours directly on the family's behalf (and only

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(1) By way of analogy - the fact that the capitalist enforces the rules of capital over labour does not explain the laws of capital that provoke his authority in the first place. He does not exercise the authority because he is an authoritarian but because he is a capitalist. His ability to command and organise labour time goes a long way to determining his rate of profit. This authority is therefore embedded in the logic of the system, of which he, the capitalist, is but 'capital personified'.

indirectly for capital) her labour is compelled by their collective interest as a family in converting the wage into as comfortable a household as possible. On the average there is no surplus in the wage, above the means necessary for subsistence, and so the housewife has no significant leeway in making this conversion. The intensity of her labour is governed by the effort that is necessary to convert the wage into the reproduced labour power of the entire family (including her own). This intensity is compelled through the husband's authority, the children's demands, and the wife's own socialised conception of a 'good housekeeper'. But these are simply the personal means through which economic necessity is expressed inside the family.

Is domestic labour's intensity measurable in value terms? To get at this question let us assume that the housewife works in average conditions(3). In such circumstance, the wage equals the value of labour power. *Hidden* within this equation is the inevitable exercise of domestic labour which converts the average wage into the means of subsistence necessary to reproduce the average labour power. And so, if the mean wage and the normal living conditions of the working class are known, then the average intensity of domestic labour necessary to transform the wage into the means of subsistence (as use value) must also in theory be knowable. The problem is that value's standard measure is necessary labour *time*, and domestic labour is not a labour conducted or measured primarily in terms of duration or rate. Precisely because the housewife is on duty around the clock, one aspect of her labour is timeless and eternal.

But this does not negate the fact that it has a discernible intensity which varies under different conditions. No one would wish to argue that merely because two housewives were both on duty around the clock that the one with a single child and an income of $ 8,000 would need to work as hard as the other with four children and an income of $ 5,000.

In sum, the law of value does not intrude directly into the household to reign over the wife's labour there. But it does surround the family unit - determining a) the general level of the wage and b) the cost of the necessary commodities on the market. These two variables elicit an average intensity of domestic labour necessary to convert the

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(2) *CAPITAL* Vol I, p. 537

(3) Historically specified 'average conditions' are the starting point for any consideration of value's magnitude. This is reflected in value's measure - socially necessary labour time - necessary under the average conditions of work prevalent at the time.

wage into reproduced labour power under the normal living conditions(4) of the proletariat.

We are now in a position to specify what happens when average conditions do not prevail. Here I want to take but one variant - the case where the price of labour power falls below its value.

Of course it is a constant objective of capital to drive real wages down and thus to increase surplus labour time. Marx identifies the lowering of the price of labour power beneath its value as 'one of the most important' countertendencies (5) to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. It is necessary therefore to try to assess how easily capital can do this and what are the signs that it is in fact taking place.

Where wages fall beneath the value of labour power does this immediately show up in a lowered standard of living for the working class? No. The housewife intervenes between the wage and the family's material conditions with her labour. By working harder she can prevent a fall in real wages from turning into a deterioration of the use value of the household. Because the family's needs do not drop as the wage declines, these needs (expressed through the personal mechanisms mentioned earlier) exert an intensified pressure on the housewife to 'make the wage go further' by shopping more carefully, planning and preparing meals from scratch, mending old clothes instead of buying new ones, etc.

Housewives then, represent a vast hidden reservoir of labour which will be tapped unobtrusively in conditions where the wage drops below value. This intensification of domestic labour takes place automatically to preserve the family's living standards. In this sense the family's needs (including new needs recently created), act as a supplementary extension of the law of value operating within the family.

The other alternative for the working class family, confronted with a falling single wage, is for the wife to seek employment. This course offers capital what it constantly seeks - an expansion of surplus labour time from the same labouring population. In return, the wife's wage (on the average nowhere near her husband's) supplements his income to bring their total wage back in line with the average costs of reproducing labour power. At first glance it might appear that their combined wage would easily outdistance their necessary costs, but keep in mind that as soon as the wife goes out to work, household costs in-

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(4) An important part of 'normal living conditions' is the mean family size necessary, demographically, to produce the labour force of the future. It is obvious that this will play an important role (along with the real purchasing power of the wage) in determining the average intensity of domestic labour.

(5) *CAPITAL* Vol III, p.235

crease. Her transportation to and from work, daycare, babysitters, less time to cook, clean and sew, higher combined taxes - all this necessitates a larger total wage than was formerly necessary to get the same level of labour power reproduced. Her wage then, fills the gap between the old single wage and the new expanded cost of reproducing the family's labour power.

What is the relevance of all this for the present day situation in the West? The past four years have seen real wages fall as a general tendency throughout the capitalist world. Not even bourgeois economists dispute this any more. *Capital's central defence against its own inherent tendency to stagnation*, now showing itself more and more clearly as the global recession deepens, *is to widen this gap between the price and the value of labour power still further.*

This has forced housewives to intensify their labour at home and/or seek outside employment to maintain the family's living standards as real wages fall. The question is - how much of a gap can housewives compensate for and where is the limit to the family's flexibility(6) in this regard? There can be no overall answer to this - it requires a specific analysis of a given social formation. A general comment however: Capital's economic leeway, gained by virtue of the family-unit's flexibility, may well be paid for in non-economic terms - in the loss of the family's coherence as a socialiser for the bourgeois order. To be somewhat schematic - ideological stability is sacrificed at the altar of economic necessity, requiring a more intense state intervention as internalised family discipline gradually breaks down.

By showing, in the foregoing, how domestic labour is regulated, through supplementary mechanisms, by the external fluctuations of the labour and commodity goods market, I have considered this privatised labour to be an integral (though separated) part of the totality of capitalist production relations. Value, as Marx says, 'is only a material expression for a relation between the productive activities of people'. And so to assert that domestic labour creates and transfers value is to include it in this totality. The consequence of this is to expand the concept of the capitalist mode of production to include the social relations of the family unit insofar as they structure the labour conducted therein. I now want to explore further the theoretical (and ultimately political) implications of this extended framework.

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(6) This cushioning function on the economic plane is remarkably symmetrical with the ideological function of housewives as tension managers (see section, The Privatisation of Domestic Life). On both levels the housewife absorbs and compensates for class tensions. On the one hand this protects the working class (at her expense) from the blows of the class struggle but on the other it gives capitalism a flexibility which it does not derive from the interface of labour with capital.

The Marxist theory of value is a weapon designed to cut through the mystifying appearance of bourgeois reality and to lay bare its essential foundation in a set of production relations upon which capital expands itself and over which it exercises control. In *Capital*, Marx repeatedly demonstrates, in tracing the operation of value through various stages of capitalist production, how the social forms in which production is organised present an appearance to its participants that is 'inverted', 'deceptive', and 'mystifying'. Capitalist society is a layered reality. Its surface forms are real but nevertheless belie its underlying nature and obscure it from view. Only consistent application of value analysis defeats this surface appearance, strips away its cloak of mystery to reveal the inner connections, the organic workings of the mode of production which are central to its self - accumulation and its domination of labour.

The theory of value reveals the social character of diverse, separate, private labours. This understanding allows us to watch a thousand dazzling commodity transactions without getting distracted or absorbed in surface appearances. What we are really watching, in essence, is a multitude of private labours being *connected* to one another, and *evaluated* against one another. Even though these labours remain private, enclosed within separated concrete conditions, the very process of generalised commodity exchange achieves an underlying connection which we follow perpetually by making an abstraction. 'Seeing' what is going on beneath the surface, we mentally *deprivatise* these labours which remain separated nevertheless in capitalist reality.

The relation of this theoretical understanding to its political counterpart - class consciousness is obvious. Seeing the common interests of all those who create value, understanding the necessity of their common activity to a common (anti-capitalist) end, though they remain separated into different enterprises, industries, and countries - this is working class consciousness. While people arrive at this understanding in different ways, the point is that the theory of value and political class consciousness are complimentary components of an integrated whole.

Domestic labour is the most severely privatised of all labours under capitalism. In asserting that the housewife's labour creates and transfers value, we are taking an initiative, on the theoretical plane, towards its *deprivatisation*. To maintain its relation to industrial labour is to assert that the structural split between domestic and industrial labour is a social form which belies this underlying connection.

As Marx in *Capital* traces value from its origins in private diverse labours, through surplus value to its final result in capital accumulation, he also elaborates at each stage what social form exists on the surface of the transaction that disguises it and makes it appear as something else. For instance, he describes the mystifying wage form which hides the creation of surplus value in production by provoking a conceptual substitution of labour for labour power. This deceptive form

lays the basis for the next one - the mysterious appearance of profit out of nowhere as if it were a natural outgrowth of capital itself(7). These social forms are interdependent - each one lays the deceptive basis for the next in this chain of appearances.

In extending the analysis of value back into the domestic unit, it is therefore necessary to elaborate the social form which disguises the relation of domestic to industrial workers and disconnects their labours from one another (see section on Domestic Labour and the Wage Form). This form (the structural split), banishes the housewife as a labourer from sight and produces the appearance of the wage worker at the factory gates as an independent 'free agent' to be paid (naturally enough) for *his* labour. The point here is that this split sets the stage for the wage form, playing an indispensable role in provoking the substitution of labour for labour power.

This confusion, produced by the very nature of the capitalist mode of production, is much more than a fine point of theoretical debate. It is a political problem for the working class. It promotes the notion of wage-for-labour as a 'fair' exchange. (If wages are too low we must fight for a 'fair deal' at the next contract)

Furthermore, the mystery of the wage form will be broken through the political activity of the working class. But if such activity is conceived as excluding housewives, as leaving them hidden away at home, *this is a problem not only for their own political development, but for the development of the entire workers movement.* For just as her seclusion is a prerequisite for the wage's deception, so her active assertion as the labourer behind the wage labourer aids in its defeat. Her active presence in proletarian struggle helps to demonstrate that it is not his labour but his labour power (in fact, past labour, some hers but not his) that is really being exchanged for the wage. When this is grasped, the notion of a 'fair' exchange with capital is surpassed. Surplus value suddenly appears as the inevitable result of working under capitalist relations– and not a 'negotiable' item in the struggle over wages.

WALLY SECCOMBE

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(7) ' Because at one pole, the price of labour power assumes the transmuted form of wages, surplus value appears at the opposite pole in the transmuted form of profit'-

CAPITAL Vol III, p.37.

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