

THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILY: REPRODUCTION, PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION

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INTRODUCTION

In our urban industrialized society, people no longer work in their homes; they *go* to work, and the world of commodity production appears an entirely separate world from that of the family. The ideal of the family and the home as a retreat, a sanctuary from the cold competitive world of the marketplace, reinforces this apparent separation. In the home we can allow the natural affections, emotions, and personal needs of human beings expression and satisfaction. Social historians have recently reinvented this Victorian ideal of the family as a defense against contemporary mass society with its alienation, isolation, and corporate domination of everyday life (Lasch, 1977). Although this ideal may accurately describe our hopes for family life, it also masks another aspect of the family — that work occurs in the home, and production that takes place through family relations is socially necessary labor. This home work is essential to the profits gained in market production, to the expansion of that economy, and the functioning of society as a whole (Mitchell, 1971; Eisenstein, 1979).

In previous centuries, especially in societies based on agriculture or in the early stages of capitalism, the home was the place of work for everyone in the family. The family itself was clearly an economic unit and necessary for the survival of each member. In industrial and post-industrial society, however, the home has become primarily a place of work for women, and work done there is not exchanged for wages. This reinforces the notion that women in the home do not really work since real labor in capitalism is wage labor. And the work they do is not important since the importance of work in capitalism is judged by the wages received for it. Home work is inferior and, hence, the women who perform it are inferior.

HOUSEWORK AND THE REPRODUCTION OF LABOR POWER

The role of the woman as wife involves expectations of caring for the man-husband's personal needs, his property. She is not only a wife, but a *housewife* responsible for the or-

ganization and cleaning of a house, cooking, laundry, sewing, and shopping. In caring for the husband's personal needs, her duties may extend to those of nurse and psychologist. If they are a middle class couple, she may also serve as secretary, taking messages, making appointments, or planning and organizing their social activities. As mother, she bears and raises children who, by custom and law, bear the man's name and inherit his property. All of these activities involve labor. They require time and energy. Yet as part of a role within the family, they appear to be natural extensions of the woman's personality. "A woman does not go to her job as housewife; she wakes up to it" (Rowbothan, 1973). It is part of her existence in total, and even if she works outside the home as well, she learns to regard her family responsibilities, namely housework and child care, as primary (Lopata, 1971).

Not only is women's work never done, but it never produces a completed product to see as the direct result of labor. Among British housewives interviewed by Ann Oakley (1974), almost all spontaneously mentioned monotony as the most unpleasant aspect of their work. This monotony results from the unending repetition of tasks which never results in a finished product. The tasks a housewife performs during any given day may not be at all connected to one another and do not require her full concentration, but they prevent her concentrating on anything else. The monotony and fragmentation of the labor experience resembles that of the assembly line factory worker. Many housewives feel that there is never enough time for the work they must do so that time pressure exacerbates the unpleasantness of their labor. Unlike factory workers, however, housewives may value their autonomy, the fact that they are "their own boss." But, as Oakley points out, this quality is limited, since failure to perform housework can have serious external consequences in the displeasure of a husband or the ill health of a child.

As maintenance work, its accomplishments are often invisible. The husband, who has been away all day, notices only the work not

done, the cluttered living room or unprepared dinner. Most housewives in Oakley's study stated that their husbands never appreciated their work but did make negative comments.

Husbands and housewives do not value housework because it cannot be exchanged for wages. The housewife produces for immediate consumption. She produces for use value rather than exchange value. However, work performed by a housewife is essential in reproducing her husband's and perhaps her own ability to work outside the home, and that work *is* exchanged for wages. She reproduces their labor power through food and clean clothes, through providing a place to rest and replace lost energies. This labor power, according to the Marxist analysis of production, actually comprises a commodity, something the worker possesses that he or she exchanges for wages. Like all commodities, labor power is produced by a worker. Housework becomes commodity reproduction because it reproduces a commodity which is exchanged for wages.

Feminists have argued that domestic labor performed by women also contributes to the male privilege of husbands and all men in the family and in society as a whole. Women work in the home to maintain both the system of capitalism and the system of patriarchy. Otherwise, when industrialization separated housework from work for market exchange, men might have stayed home. Rather, women's confinement to unpaid labor in the home increased men's claims over women's labor in a personal way. (Hartman, 1976).

The domination of society by the marketplace and commodity exchange obscures the enormous value of women's work in the home. Besides the skills required to cook nourishing meals everyday for a group of people, keep their house and belongings clean and in order, tend to emotional and physical needs, "homemaking" may extend to otherwise professional and paid skills such as interior decorating, sewing, furniture refinishing, upholstery, and other decorative arts. Entertaining, educating, and caring for children requires skills and time which in other contexts become professionally paid occupations. Housewives work longer hours than almost any other group of workers—the Chase Manhattan Bank has estimated that women who

have small children work an average 99.6 hour week (Mitchell, 1972).

Housework, including child care, is inefficiently organized compared to other kinds of work in industrial capitalism. Unlike housework, production for exchange takes place communally, with many workers together, each performing his or her own task on the assembly line to produce a commodity. The high degree of specialization and the highly complex division of labor, along with advances in technology and automation, increase production to the point of profit. But a housewife works in isolation, each woman with her own home, kitchen, and children (Gordon, 1970). Each task is distinct from the other and accomplished totally by her.

The alienation of the housewife thus differs from the alienation of the assembly worker. It stems from her solitude and from the draining of her energies in reproducing things that have no tangible market value. She begins to see herself only as reflected in the needs of others. The worker experiences alienation, or separation from self, in his/her inability to control the process and products of his/her labor (Marx, 1844). The housewife loses that sense of self in the sacrificial nature of her role which even finds ideological justification in the ideal of the true woman and mother who completely "gives of herself." Meredith Tax (1970) portrays the feelings of a woman confined to her role as housewife: "When I am by myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world. Other people recognize him as real, and take him into account. He effects other people and events. I stay in my imaginary world in this house, doing jobs that I largely invent, and that no one cares about but myself. The only time that I think I might be real is when I hear myself screaming or having hysterics."

Women respond to this feeling of emptiness in many ways - ironically, ways which society looks upon as part of the weakness or silliness of women. Chronic fatigue and nervousness, illness and hysteria, severe depression, intense irritability may all stem from this basic alienation and feeling of nothingness. Women may resort to tranquilizers, alcohol, excessive smoking to relieve the symptoms. They may become compulsive consumers. "House-

proud" women attempt to find a sense of dignity and self-worth in excessive cleanliness and tidying, a compulsive activity that some psychiatrists call pathological (Oakley, 1974).

The family does provide a realm of privacy for the worker, a place where the individual may express personal emotions and develop intimate relations that are not possible in the world of commodity production where one must at least appear strong, competent, and obedient as well, or risk losing the job. Survival depends upon pleasing one's co-workers and especially one's employer. But families are a given; we are born into them and this lends a certain security to our relationships which allows us to develop more fully as individuals. In these relationships we feel most "at home" and can express our anxieties, fears, anger, and hostilities as well as affection and understanding—the family is a release valve.

But there develops another side to the relegation of the family as the "safe" place. When emotions are so narrowly confined, they can become intensified and distorted, and the loving family transforms into a tinder box of neuroses, and often violence. This is the seedy side of the sacred home where sons murder fathers, mothers brutalize children, and husbands beat wives (Martin, 1976; Green, 1980).

In spite of its failures and tragedies, many people look to the family and the home for security, warmth, and companionship.

The family becomes a kind of "in group" and other people are outsiders, not to be trusted. Loneliness and alienation go along with this kind of social isolation as well as a sense of powerlessness that reinforces the belief that "you can't change the system." When everyone remains within their own atomized and individuated unit, viewing all others as outsiders, feelings of public responsibility and social commitment decline. It becomes difficult to conceive of oneself as belonging to a larger group with common interests and collective power. This tendency appears in the activities of labor especially among women workers who often think of their jobs as secondary to their families in importance and will be conservative, afraid to organize or to go on strike. (Gordon, 1970).

NUCLEAR FAMILY CHILD CARE

Although compulsory schooling laws provide for a child's education, the burden of caring for its physical and emotional needs still falls on the mother. During the first five or six years of a child's life, it depends entirely upon the mother for care. The effects upon both mother and child from such an intense relationship often differ radically from the charming images presented on baby food commercials and diaper ads. Nearly everyone has heard of the "Tired Mother Syndrome." Beverly Jones (1970) describes it as resembling a psychosis: "Women with this syndrome complain of being utterly exhausted, irritable, unable to concentrate. They may wander about somewhat aimlessly, they may have physical pains. They are depressed, anxious, sometimes paranoid and they cry a lot." As she points out, this often happens to women confined to household tasks even without children to take care of. But child care, unlike housework, can never be ignored or deferred. Children have to be fed, cleaned, clothed, played with, napped, comforted — a continuous job that must be done with patience, understanding, and sympathy. A woman faced with such continual demands must constantly suppress her own needs and desires, must always be thinking of the child's safety and comfort. If there are several children, the tasks are all compounded, and the resulting lack of sleep, combined with the inability to take a day off or even an afternoon nap, would leave anyone tired and sluggish. The number of women under therapy or confined to mental wards in hospitals testifies to the psychologically debilitating effects of the housewife/mother role (Chesler, 1972). When poverty or the need to work to support the family is added to such strains, the results may be physical and mental disorder.

Why don't fathers participate in child care, experiencing its pleasures and rewards and, at the same time, relieving women of the stress of total responsibility? The sexual division of labor encourages women to enact what Talcott Parsons calls an "expressive" role and men an "instrumental" role (Parsons and Bales, 1956). The instrumental father concerns himself with getting things done and making money, not with cuddling babies or comforting young children. Chodorow (1978) confronts the question from its other end argu-

ing that the relegation of women to the role of mothering, a job fathers could do as well, reproduces the division of labor within the home in a psychological way. Not only do little girls follow the role pattern of their mothers, but they develop, in their relationship with her, deep psychological needs for intimacy. Husbands, socialized to be like their instrumental father, do not satisfy these needs. Hence, girls grow up and desire to have babies to reestablish that close emotional bond. Men, on the other hand, look to their wives and girlfriends for the emotional intimacy they experienced with their mothers.

Women and children who depend upon the father for economic support and approval are thrust upon each other in codependent ways that often result in distorted relationships (Comer). When a child begins to struggle for its independence, it fights the mother who cared for it and loved it. And when the mother is left alone with no one to need her, she feels the ungrateful child is at fault. Unable to strike out against the situation, they may strike at each other. Guilt and anxiety may intensify into hostility and violence. The violence may be physical or psychological. Laing (1967) speaks of the parental violence that masquerades as love: "...Love lets the other be, but with affection and concern. Violence attempts to constrain the other's freedom, to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's destiny. We are effectively destroying ourselves with violence masquerading as love."

CONSUMPTION

Children learn materialistic consumption. Each household owns its own car or cars, its own kitchen equipped with appliances, stove, washing machine and dryer, and vacuum cleaner. It provides a profitable target for the sales of manufacturers. In a society where production has become so efficient that we, overproduce, it is necessary to find a mode of consumption for the commodities produced in order to prevent depressions and unemployment. Advertising attempts to convince us that we really need bigger and more luxurious cars, newer models of everything from deodorant to television sets. The advertisers play upon our fears, our senses of inadequacy, to persuade us that to be a virile man, a sexy woman, a

good mother, or the neatest kid on the block, we must buy, buy, buy!

Someone must perform "consumption work" shopping and purchasing all the items necessary for the care and nurturance of family members. The housewife typically performs this role and, in doing so, performs much of the labor that employers in past years have paid employees to do. More and more, housewives must drive long distances to shopping centers, locate items within stores themselves, and must be familiar with differences among various products and brands. Women must collect, organize and transform products into a home environment which satisfies its members' needs.

Because the family is such an isolated unit, we rarely share any of the things we buy with anyone outside the family, so that everyone has his or her own commodity even if it is rarely used.

The difference is that commodities purchased by families or individuals in families have no productive capacity. While we may feel that we have our own private property, our own home, car, sailboat even, these objects do not constitute private property in the original sense of the term. When the revolutionaries in France and the United States in the late Eighteenth Century fought for the right to private property, they were fighting for the right to own land as a means of production. In the present stage of corporate capitalism, the independent craftsman with his/her tools, have been replaced with factories, tenant farming, and franchises. Private property rests in the hands of a few large corporations who control production and eventually cause even the few remaining petit bourgeois to work for wages when they can no longer compete with monopolies. The "private property" of the home and family, at most, produces in an inefficient manner for the maintenance and reproduction of labor power.

"WOMEN'S WORK" AT HOME AND JOB

The woman who works within the home, receiving no wages, depends upon her husband's paycheck for her self and her children's livelihood. This places her in a powerless position in relation to him as well as the rest of society. As a dependent, she poses no threat economically, in competing for jobs or

psychologically, in relations of dominance. The woman's subordinate position in the home extends to the world of commodity production when she attempts to go out to work. Employers can get away with hiring women for jobs with little responsibility and low pay. Inferior and discriminatory education channel women into home economics programs and typing, underpinning existing prejudice against them. The personality characteristics into which women are socialized, in preparation for their roles as wives and mothers, make them more malleable in the hands of employers who can capitalize on their passivity and patience. Women work away from home in the same ways they work at home, servicing the needs of others as clerks, waitresses, typists, nurses, secretaries, tellers, receptionists. These roles are analogous to the wife-mother role in the family (Parsons and Bales, 1954). Feminists maintain that the hierarchical division of labor between the sexes allows male supremacy to continue in a capitalist society (Hartman, 1976). "Job segregation by sex, I will argue, is the primary mechanism in capitalist society that maintains the superiority of men over women, because it enforces lower wages for women in the labor market. Low wages keep women dependent on men because they encourage women to marry. Married women must perform domestic chores for their husbands. Men benefit then, from both higher wages and the domestic division of labor."

There are historical exceptions. During World War II when most of the male labor force was recruited or drafted into the military, women were needed to work in the factories to keep up the intense production of arms and munitions. Then women were encouraged to go out to work, and neither they nor their employers considered them unfeminine as welders or machinists since their jobs served the war effort. But when the war was over, women were forced to leave their jobs and return to their roles as wives and mothers. One estimate states that "...four million women lost their jobs in the eight months after V-J Day" (Winkler). Child care centers provided during the war closed down, and men took over the jobs. Suddenly it became unfeminine for women to work outside their homes, and the cult of motherhood began to replace patriotism. From ministers' sermons to the les-

sons of Dr. Spock, women received encouragement to stay at home caring for their children.

Earlier in the century, when the country was just becoming industrialized, a similar need on the part of factory owners generated a similar twist in ideology. Women and even children were encouraged to go to work in the factories. The sanctity of motherhood and the family was far from these employers' minds. However, women's participation in industry was largely confined to textile and garment manufacturing — extensions of women's work in the home.

The sexual division of labor within production keeps women from competing with men in traditional male jobs while allowing employers to continue hiring many women in jobs usually far below their level of education or skill. This segregation appears especially in the rapidly growing service sector of the economy in which almost twice as many women as men find employment. Women are almost always hired for clerical work and retail sales work. Only 15 percent of all women workers are professionals, and most (85%) of these are teachers or nurses. Of all clerical workers, 78 percent including four million typists and secretaries, are women (U. S. Department of Labor, 1976). Few women receive any pensions or fringe benefits, and these are typically lower than men's.

When the educational level of male and female workers in the same occupation is equal, the percentage of men to women employed depends upon the occupational category, and within the same category, women always receive lower incomes. For instance, while only 7 percent of all male workers are hired as clerical workers and 35 percent of all women workers are hired in that category, in 1974 the median income for males in this area was \$8,617 contrasted with \$5,551 for women. In other traditional women's fields such as service work, the data is similar. The median income for male service workers was \$6,955, for women \$3,953. In 1974 women in all occupations earned an annual median income of \$6,772, less than 3/5 that of male workers. In addition to occupational segregation and lower wages, women face additional economic burdens in that their income does not stretch as far as a man's since they are often denied credit on the basis of sex (Grif-

feths, 1976).

Women are working out of necessity now in order to maintain their family's standard of living. Two-thirds of all women workers are single, divorced, widowed, separated, or have husbands who earn less than \$7,000 a year (Ferriss, 1971). The numbers of female-headed households have increased to one out of every eight, and one out of ten women workers heads a family (U. S. Department of Labor, 1976). Contrary to popular belief, fifty percent of divorced women receive no alimony or child support while fifty percent receive a median annual payment of \$1,300.

The maintenance of a reserve labor force of women for those jobs deemed unsuitable for male workers does not mean that the jobs are peripheral to the economy. Indeed, they are essential to its functioning and its expansion, but the types of work, the working conditions, and low wages make it a fluctuating arena for the super-exploitation of women who must also contribute indirectly through their labor in the home to the expansion of production. If they are the sole support of a family, their more desperate situation demands that they submit to less than desirable conditions and lower wages.

The work that people do outside the family, as individuals within the economy and society as a whole, invades family life in the actual structuring of home activities as well as the consciousness and roles of its members. Factory workers with little chance for creativity or responsibility or shift workers whose eating and sleeping schedules are constantly changing or even the corporate servant who must reside in the proper neighborhood, whose wife must dutifully play hostess, and who must himself seek to please higher-ups in an atmosphere of pressure and anxiety all experience the invasion of their homes and personal lives by the demands of the marketplace. On the other hand, the family, by withholding labor power from the labor force for the purposes of procreation, socialization, and consumption, limits the mode of production at the same time it contributes to its maintenance in the form of unpaid labor and child care and as a market for consumer goods.

CONCLUSION

In the 1960's, the New Left and counter-cul-

ture recognized some of these problems and inadequacies, and in the 1970's, the Women's Movement developed a critique of the exploitation and oppression of women in the family and at work. During both decades, various groups and individuals experimented with new lifestyles, agitated for child care centers and homes for battered women, and campaigned for the Equal Rights Amendment. Now during the 1980's we witness a backlash to these attempts at social change in the policies of the Reagan administration and the histrionics of the "Moral Majority" who claim that all human values will disintegrate with the liberation of women from confinement in the home. These forces gain strength for good reasons, supported and even led by women who fear the loss of the small status they now claim as wives and mother, and further denigration of the housewife role. They fear too, the dehumanization of an increasingly individualistic mass society in which families break up, and commercial and political values supersede concern for people.

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American society. Farris (1976:501) criticizes "The arbitrary attempt to transfer this rigid clinical approach to the unique problems of the American Indian" as being a "grave professional error."

Endemic to this problem is the scarcity of Indian mental health professionals and the reluctance of urban Indians to speak up and demand their rights (Locklear, 1972). There has been minimal involvement, at best, by American Indians in the development and implementation of programs affecting them. The absolute necessity for Indian participation in programs which "treat" Indians is clearly evident.

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