

Domestic labour and capital

Susan Himmelweit and Simon Mohun*

'... in any given society the degree of women's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation.'

(Engels, 1950A, p. 114)

Introduction

Characteristics of domestic labour

Under capitalism, not all labour is wage-labour. Quite apart from vestigial remains of previous modes of production, there is a whole sector of production central to, but existing entirely outside, capitalist relations of production. This sector is domestic labour, the work of millions of housewives engaged in *private* production within individual families.

The direct products of domestic labour are not commodities; such products as clean clothes and cooked meals are not produced for the market by domestic labour and are not exchanged. Rather, they are produced for the direct satisfaction, without further transformation, of the needs of the producer and her family. In this sense domestic labour is private production. But it is not only distinguished by its location in non-commodity production; it is also private production in another sense. No division of labour exists within its realm. All housewives perform very similar tasks, and they perform them in isolation, unless aided by other members of their families. Neither of the types of division of labour that Marx described as operating within commodity production—the *a priori* division of labour between workers employed by an individual capital through the organising control and authority of the capitalist, and the *a posteriori* social division of labour between workers employed by different capitals which, through the market, operates via the coercive force of competition—neither of these divisions of labour touches domestic labour. The only division of labour to which domestic labour is subject is that it is divided *from* commodity production. Indeed, this division comprises the specific form that the sexual division of labour, in its broadest sense, takes in capitalist society.

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An immediate implication of this division is that the performance of domestic labour is of no direct concern to capital. The method of working and the time spent on particular tasks, that is, the domestic labour process, is under the housewife's own control. Indeed, in her life, there is no rigid work/leisure distinction either in physical location or in time. Domestic labour is performed under relations completely different, both in appearance and reality, from those of capitalist commodity production. The relation is not one of commodity exchange (labour-power consumed in housework does not receive a wage), and is usually seen in emotional rather than economic terms. Therefore substantial variations in standards of and time spent on housework are possible.

While domestic labour does not produce commodities, it does produce many different use-values, which form a substantial component of the individual consumption of all the members of the family. This individual consumption is precisely what is necessary for the production of labour-power (although the exact specification of this is a matter of some controversy, to which we return below). Labour-power, or the ability to work, is something that must continually be produced. It is used up (consumed) or wasted every day, and ceases to exist without the replenishment of individual consumption. For this reason, Marx, and other writers since, talked of the production and reproduction of labour-power. But there is another sense in which labour-power must be reproduced. Labour-power exists only as the ability to work of a particular person, the labourer. But labourers grow old and die, and society's stock of labour-power cannot then be replenished without the birth of potential new labourers. Thus while the birth of children (reproduction of the species) is not in itself the reproduction of labour-power, it is necessary for labour-power to be reproduced that the labourer himself is reproduced. From the point of view of capital, housework is concerned with the reproduction of labour-power both on a daily and on a generational basis.

It is clear that historically the form of domestic labour in capitalist society has changed in some respects. Many use-values previously produced in the home, for example bread or health-care, have been socialised, i.e. are now produced under capitalist relations or provided by the state. Standards of, and emphasis on, the particular use-values produced have clearly also changed. Further, housewives have entered wage-labour in fluctuating, though generally growing, numbers, while their children, who previously would have helped with some aspects of domestic labour, are now at school.

Housework, in the broadest sense, also plays an important reproductive role with respect to ideology. For the family has a crucial stabilising function through the allocation of sexually-defined roles, both in the conditioning of children and in the maintenance of a docile, disciplined and divided working class. The family is one of the most important units for the socialisation of individuals in capitalist society (Mitchell, 1971). Authoritarian relationships in social production (capitalist to worker) are facilitated through their previous observation and acceptance in the home (parents to children and husband to wife). But the ideological role of domestic labour, while important in reinforcing and stabilising capitalist society, cannot, ultimately, be determinant. Our task is rather to examine how domestic labour as *production* is crucial to capitalism, and which aspects are capable of change.

These answers are not only central to an understanding of the material basis for the oppression of women in capitalist society; they are also politically vital in deciding the relation between the Women's Movement and the labour movement.

The emergence of the concept

The necessity to define its position with respect to a feminist movement, at least part of which locates its politics in the Marxist tradition, is a relatively new impasse for the revolutionary left. Women have become the focus for the contradictions between the needs of capital, as accumulation continues, for an increased wage-labour force and its need to maintain the nuclear family. This need is not only ideological, but, as this paper will show, also material. The political expression of this contradiction has been the growth of the contemporary Women's Movement. And just as Marx, at a time when the working class first began to be aware of its own identity, had to demonstrate that capitalist relations of production were not eternal, so the Women's Movement has demonstrated the historical specificity of the modern nuclear family.

To some degree, Marxists have always accepted this. Thus Marx wrote:

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless, modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economical foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes. It is, of course, just as absurd to hold the Teutonic-Christian form of the family to be absolute and final as it would be to apply that character to the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek, or the Eastern forms, which, moreover, taken together form a series in historic development (Marx, 1938, p. 496).

At the same time, Marx seems to consider the destruction of the Teutonic-Christian form of the family regrettable, for he reserves a great deal of invective for the way in which machinery incorporated

under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family, without distinctions of age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family (Marx, 1938, pp. 391–392).

And he sees the effects of this process purely from the point of view of the man:

The value of labour-power was determined, not only by the labour-time necessary to maintain the individual adult labourer, but also by that necessary to maintain his family. Machinery, by throwing every member of that family on to the labour market, spreads the value of the man's labour-power over his whole family (Marx, 1938, p. 392).

But Marx's remarks, while suggestive of male chauvinism, have merely the status of *obiter dicta* in his analysis, and it was Engels who made a much more frontal assault on the problem of the family. Thus he wrote that

According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other (Engels, 1950B, pp. 155–156).

However, it is clear that, while the twofold character of the production and reproduction of material life constitutes the beginning of Engels' analysis, the seeming equality of importance of social production and the family collapses entirely, and the latter is treated as entirely subordinate to developments in the former. Further, the entire

historical analysis is predicated on a sexual division of labour which is nowhere explained, and which hardly develops or changes through history. Finally, since housework is excluded from social production, and since Marxists posit the primacy of the relations under which social labour is performed, domestic labour has been invisible (Vogel, 1973; Gerstein, 1973; Lebowitz, 1976). Thus in many ways the terrain of the family constituted new ground as much for Marxists as it did for others.

The political question which prompted the analysis in Britain of domestic labour was the issue of 'Wages for Housework'. Selma James raised the demand on the basis of an analysis of the divisions within the working class, divisions corresponding to a hierarchy of labour-powers, according to which housewives' inferior position was due to their unwaged status. But such a campaign for wages for housework validates the existence of housework as a category under capitalism by demanding not that it be abolished, but that it be remunerated. Revolutionary significance was claimed by James (1973) and Dalla Costa (1973) for this demand: women had power because they did in fact work for capital. Without domestic labour no surplus value could be produced; thus housework was 'productive' in Marx's sense of being productive of surplus value. The debate about wages for housework, and the related Family Allowances campaign, accordingly focused on the question of whether housework was or was not productive in Marx's sense.

We do not wish to go into the question in detail here—the arguments are incisively summarised by Fee (1976). The basic point is that, for Marxists, the concept of productive labour is historically specific to capitalism.

Productive labour, in its meaning for capitalist production, is wage-labour which, exchanged against the variable part of capital (the part of the capital that is spent on wages), reproduces not only this part of the capital (or the value of its own labour-power), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist . . . Only that wage-labour is productive which produces capital (Marx, 1963, p. 152).

Since productive labour is labour that has a direct relation to capital and produces surplus value, domestic labour is not productive labour. But neither is it unproductive labour, for unproductive labour exchanges not with capital but with revenue, again in a direct exchange; and domestic labour is not performed for direct payment. The categories of productive and unproductive labour relate to wage-labour alone; in the analysis of domestic labour they are irrelevant.

Nevertheless, the debate in Britain was fruitful to the extent that it showed that a study of domestic labour was necessary for the development of correct strategy for the Women's Movement. Initial steps in this direction had already been made in North America. The analyses of Benston (1969), Rowntree and Rowntree (1970) and Morton (1971) had made a start in showing that woman's oppression was not merely a cultural phenomenon but had a material basis in domestic labour, independent of and prior to her 'super-exploitation' in the labour market.

Definitions and methodology

Just as the analyses of domestic labour differ, so do the definitions of the concept itself. Two approaches to the definition are worthy of consideration. First, domestic labour can be defined as *private labour which continues to exist alongside commodity production*. It is labour that produces use-values which have not (for some writers, not yet) become commodities, and consequently it is not performed under capitalist relations. It is this

conception which underpins the analyses of Benston (1969), Harrison (1973), Gough and Harrison (1975), Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh (1975) and Gardiner (1976). But the problem with this approach is that it begs the question as to what determines which use-values are produced by domestic labour and which are commodities. And since it fails to locate domestic labour as concerned with the reproduction of labour-power, there is no immediate reason to identify domestic labour as women's work. It is this reality which gives the analysis of housework its only political importance; while definitions are only starting points, it is as well to start with a definition of the concept which captures the concrete and thereby indicates the political purpose of its analysis.

Accordingly, an alternative approach to the definition defines domestic labour as *the labour that directly maintains and reproduces labour-power*—thus Seccombe (1974), Morton (1971) and Himmelweit (1974). Necessary to the reproduction of labour-power is the reproduction of the living labourer, and child-bearing is a process which is still necessarily performed by women. Thus this definition assigns to women at least a part of domestic labour—but its extension to encapsulate the whole requires explanation for all but a few writers (Engels, 1950B; Carter, 1975; Howell, 1975).

Both these definitions are formulated within a perspective which denies significance to the attempts by bourgeois economists to analyse the subject. For bourgeois economics does not examine production relations as such but only their fetishised appearance in exchange; exchange not as a relation between people and their labours, but as a quantitative relation between the products of their labours. Bourgeois economics abstracts from the concept of the commodity as a product of labour; exchange relations between things are seen as a result of their particular physical properties, from which utility derives, and the concept of production itself disappears. But the absence of markets for domestic labour has not deterred some bourgeois economists (Mincer, 1962; Becker, 1965; Gramm, 1974, 1975) from applying their commodity fetishism to non-commodities. This proceeds by such methods as considering the allocation of a wife's time between housework, wage-labour and leisure to be part of the constrained utility maximisation problem for a household. Like all 'analysis' set in such a framework, this approach is superficial because it does not penetrate the actual relations of *production* involved; it considers only the products, and these only as providers of utility.

For this reason, this paper will survey Marxist writings on domestic labour, writings that do concentrate on domestic labour's relations of production in capitalist society. Through such analyses, categories can be discovered and concepts developed with which one can then proceed to write the history of domestic labour; this paper however, remains firmly anchored in the present. Schematically in this society, all women (plus a few men) are domestic labourers, and all working-class men (plus many women) are wage-labourers when they can find jobs. Finally, the questions we consider are profoundly political ones, for the abolition of women's oppression depends upon a correct understanding of its roots. Our analysis can only be considered successful to the extent that it is useful, through the identification of the potential for unity among all those oppressed and exploited under capitalism, for the formulation of a strategy for the liberation of women.

There are three further sections to this paper. In the next, we describe the various approaches to the analysis of domestic labour found in the literature. We then show how generalisations of received interpretations of value theory have led to some fundamental errors in analysis. These two sections are necessarily largely critical; in contrast,

in the final section we draw out those lines of argument which we consider to be correct and lay the foundations for future research.

Approaches to domestic labour

Production relations or relations between the sexes?

Every mode of production has had its own specific distribution of the labours of members of that society among the different kinds of production, and, only derived from this, a corresponding distribution of products. Nevertheless, the distribution of the labours of members of society according to sex has remained relatively invariant across successive modes of production. This has led some writers to locate as fundamental the relatively timeless relations between the sexes (Firestone, 1971; Delphy, 1970), rather than the relations which structure the extraction (and appropriation) of surplus labour in historically specific modes of production, that is, the relations of production. Indeed to these writers, the relations of production are derivative of the relations between the sexes; the class struggle is an aspect of the sex struggle and the fundamental characteristic of modern society, round which political action must be based, is that it is patriarchal rather than that it is capitalist.

But it is only through labour in production that men and women transform their environment and it is only through such transcendence of their 'natural' condition that the possibility of change in all social relations, including those between the sexes, can be realised. Therefore, the appropriate theoretical category is human labour and the appropriate focus for analysis the social relations of production.

The work of those who do accept this focus for their analysis of domestic labour falls roughly into two groups. First, there are those who see domestic labour as a separate mode of production, co-existent with but distinct from the capitalist mode. Secondly, there are those who, whether or not they consider the categories developed by Marx in *Capital* to be adequate as they stand, situate domestic labour as a particular type of labour, within the capitalist mode of production, whose contradictions can only be understood in relation to those of capital itself.

Housework as a mode of production

For some (Edwards, 1971), housework is a mode of production analogous to slavery: here, the pure model has women as slaves and their working-class husbands as slave-owners. Another approach (Benston, 1969) is to draw the analogy between the family now and its role in pre-capitalist society. The pre-industrial, pre-capitalist family was the basic unit of production. Within it most production was of use-values for the direct consumption of the family, although perhaps some commodities were also produced for exchange. The advent of capitalism, necessarily consequent upon the growth of commodity production, tore most production, and all commodity production, from the family unit. The woman was left responsible for the production of those use-values that continued to be produced in the family. Hence, domestic labour is production that has remained at a pre-capitalist stage. In neither example is it explained how or why such a large proportion of the population should have remained within an otherwise historically obsolete mode of production when it is in the nature of the capitalist mode to subsume all other significant forms of production. While these analyses certainly capture something of the ideological status of women at a particular stage of development of capitalism, their strained nature is readily apparent when the relatively static

character of pre-capitalist modes of production is contrasted with the very radical transformations which the family has undergone with the development of capitalism.

The most well developed of these analyses (Harrison, 1973) rejects historical analogies, and considers housework as a mode of production in its own right, contrasting it with the capitalist mode according to the pace, rhythm and control of its labour process, the low level of specialisation of its production process, its lack of internal division of labour, and its ownership of the means of production. While illustrative analogies are drawn with petty commodity production, the housework mode of production is conceived as fundamentally different because the use-values produced by domestic labour are not produced for exchange but for immediate consumption. Harrison defines a mode of production as the social relations under which use-values are produced, social relations which structure both the way in which nature is transformed and the way in which the product is appropriated. Some modes of production are 'client', in the sense that a client mode is not self-reproducing and continually needs some inputs from the dominant mode for its survival. Harrison notes that housework is such a client mode, since it has to purchase inputs produced in the capitalist mode of production but he fails to point out that his capitalist mode is also not self-reproducing, since capital has to purchase labour-power drawn from outside itself. His structural specification of two mutually dependent and interlocking modes of production therefore fails to show why of the two it is the capitalist mode of production that is dominant.

Finally, Harrison (in common with all attempts to theorise domestic labour as a mode of production) has to see housewives as a distinct class. This conclusion is unconvincing, for where does the proliferation of modes of production, and hence classes within capitalist society, stop?

The origins of the approach of all the writers of this section lie in the attempt to draw an analogy of the role of capital in relation to domestic labour to its role with respect to pre-industrial modes of production in an imperialist world. The analogy, however, is limited to positing the co-existence of different modes of production and a hierarchy of dominance between them, and fails to carry through as far as the dynamic aspects of imperialism are concerned. None of the writers claims that domestic labour as a mode of production is being subsumed by capital. This leaves any conception of the dominance of the capitalist mode purely static and fails to provide any way of relating changes in domestic labour to the laws of capitalist development.

Analyses within the capitalist mode of production

The alternative treatment in the literature conceives domestic labour as an integral feature of the capitalist mode of production, essential to the characterisation of capitalism as a self-reproducing system. One such treatment (Himmelweit, 1974) redefines the concept of a mode of production to include not only the relations and forces involved in the production of use-values but also those involved in the reproduction of the species (reproduction of people). The capitalist mode comprises both commodity production and the production of people—hence a full analysis requires consideration of both, since they are interdependent and mutually influential. While self-reproduction of the whole is correctly seen as crucial, the analysis of how these two productions relate to one another is incomplete. This is clearly an area for future research, to which we return in the last section.

A similar but distinct view has appealing simplicity: Marx's own analysis was concerned with the production of all commodities but labour-power via the consumption of labour-power; but completeness is only achieved by also analysing the production of the single commodity labour-power via the consumption of the means of subsistence (Gerstein, 1973; Vogel, 1973). This then is the material foundation for the existence of domestic labour as a category, different from and equal in status to the category wage-labour. It was invisible to Marx because he considered labour-power from the perspective of capital; what was important, therefore, was the consumption of labour-power in commodity production, and, concomitantly, a negative definition of the proletariat as that class defined by its 'freedom' from the means of production. But if by contrast the proletariat is seen from its own perspective, that of the production and sale of labour-power, that is, if labour-power is seen from the point of view of its own production, of its value aspect rather than its use-value aspect, then not only does domestic labour become a visible category but also Marx's tendency to analyse the family and the problem of equality between the sexes from a specifically male perspective can be both understood and corrected.

However, the fact that Marx did not analyse the (daily and generational) production of labour-power from the standpoint of the proletariat does not by itself provide an argument for so doing. Indeed, there seems no reason why one should begin an analysis of domestic labour (or similarly, for example, labour in the state sector) from the perspective of those who perform it and good reasons why one should not.

In all forms of society there is one special kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialised within it. . . Capital is the all-dominating power of bourgeois society. It must form the starting-point as well as the finishing point. (Marx, 1973, pp. 106–107).

Marx analysed capitalism from the standpoint of capital because capital is both the self-expansion of value and the continuous reproduction of the coercive social relation that defines capitalism as a mode of production. An analysis of domestic labour from the standpoint of the proletariat underestimates its importance because it misses its relation to capital. To assert correctly that it is necessary within the structure of capitalism to analyse the family as an economic unit, and that it is therefore necessary to examine the nature of domestic labour, is not to imply that in so doing one has to abandon capital as the starting point, precisely because within capitalism the existence of the family is central to the reproduction of capitalism itself.

One of the writers who does take capital as his starting-point is Seccombe (1974). His analysis (like that of Benston, 1969) sees the advent of capitalism as splitting the labour process into two discrete units; the unit of capitalist production and the unit of reproduction for capital. The latter is the family whose existence and form are totally dependent on its position with respect to capital. Domestic labour's economic function is the (daily and generational) reproduction of labour-power; its ideological function is the reproduction of the relations of production through the socialisation of children, etc.

For Seccombe, the housewife's relation to capital is mediated through the exchange of the commodity labour-power for the wage. Whether she produces the commodity labour-power directly, or indirectly through the production of inputs necessary for production, her labour becomes part of the congealed labour embodied in (her husband's) labour-power and is brought into relation with the average labour of society

via exchange for his wage. Domestic labour is therefore abstract labour and so creates value. Nevertheless, it remains private labour, not performed for capital and therefore 'outside of the exercise of the law of value'. This, for Seccombe, is the 'special duality which defines the character of domestic labour under capitalism' (Seccombe, 1974, p. 9).

While approving of the starting-point of Seccombe's analysis, it is necessary to take issue with its development. It is only through the operation of the law of value that the labour-time necessary for the production of any particular commodity is established. It is only through this process that the concept of socially necessary labour-time and thus of value derives concrete expression. It therefore makes no sense to talk of value being produced outside of the exercise of the law of value. Seccombe's special duality is a contradiction in terms and cannot be the conceptualisation of any contradiction in reality. This was pointed out by Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh (1975), and also by Carter (1975), who indicated that Seccombe's mistake was to conflate the reproduction of labour-power with the reproduction of the living individual. Domestic labour is necessary in order that the labourer lives; but it does not produce the commodity labour-power, which is just an attribute of the living individual. In this sense, labour-power is not a commodity like any other, in that it is not produced by labour but by the individual consumption of the labourer.

That domestic labour is not subject to the law of value led Seccombe to the conclusion that throughout the history of capitalism there had been no significant structural alteration in the organisation of the domestic labour process. Since domestic labour is excluded from variable capital, capital has no interest in its productivity, and hence as a unit of production, domestic labour is characterised by structural stagnation. This conclusion was very clearly inadequate, as was explicitly pointed out by Coulson, Magas and Wainwright (1975), Carter (1975), and implicitly by Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh (1975), Rowntree and Rowntree (1970) and Vogel (1973). For in Britain, Coulson, Magas and Wainwright (1975) note that the percentage of women (fifteen years and over) involved in wage-labour has risen from 27% in 1951 to 51% in 1970. Similarly, for the USA Vogel writes that the percentage of mothers with children under 18 years involved in wage-labour has risen from 9% in 1940 to 38% in 1967; indeed, of those mothers in the USA with children under six years in 1967, 29% were involved in wage-labour. Necessarily complementary to this expansion of the labour force has been the 'socialisation' of aspects of domestic labour—a partial appropriation by capital or by the state of many of the traditional duties of the housewife (Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh, 1975; Coulson, Magas and Wainwright, 1975), such as feeding, cleaning, education, health-care and some aspects of child care. All of this suggests a different duality of women's position under capitalism: they are both domestic labourers and wage-labourers, roles which are contradictory and provide the specific dynamic of their situation (Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh, 1975; Coulson, Magas and Wainwright, 1975). In his reply, Seccombe (1975) was forced to attempt to modify his analysis in order that it encapsulate these developments adequately. This attempt will be discussed in the next section.

We have seen that many attempts to situate domestic labour in relation to capital were written as critiques of Seccombe's position, and are therefore not complete expositions of the authors' own positions on domestic labour. One article in particular, however, (Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh, 1975), was written independently, and correctly analyses domestic labour as specific to and part of the capitalist mode of

production, as non-value production of directly consumed use-values. On this basis, the immanent relation between the roles of women as housewives and as wage-labourers is posited as historically central. The mediating link between the polarities of this relation is seen as the value of labour-power; for the extent of domestic labour and the number of wage-labourers in the family are among the historical and moral elements which enter into the determination of the value of labour-power. The latter thereby depends in contradictory manner both upon capitalist relations of production and upon the economic structure of the family. (Gerstein, 1973, makes some similar points.) However, although this economic structure is determined by the central immanent relation between domestic labour and wage-labour, with the latter gradually eroding women's role in the former, the question of whether domestic labour can ever be fully socialised under capitalism remains unanswered. Nevertheless, this analysis, unlike those in the next section, does lay a foundation for further essential research, and we return to it in our last section.

Generalisations of value theory

In this section, we shall consider two attempts to relate an analysis of domestic labour to the system of capitalist production. Their choice of mediating link is the same, the effect of domestic labour on the value of labour-power. Though the ways in which they theorise this link are diametrically opposed, their analyses are methodologically rather similar in that their incorporation of domestic labour proceeds in a straightforward generalisation of received interpretations of value theory. As such their analyses are relatively complete, which is why we have singled them out. Since we take issue with their respective interpretations of value theory, it is worth spelling out in some detail why these analyses are misconceived. To the extent that other writers implicitly share either conception of value, our criticisms also apply.

One view (Harrison, 1974; Gardiner, 1976) takes the labour-time involved in the capitalist production of the wage bundle of subsistence goods, and treats it as simply additive to the labour-time involved in domestic production, whereby the wage bundle is transferred into directly consumable use-values. The value of labour-power, measured in labour-time, is thus defined as the total subsistence level of the man. Since the housewife spends more time than is necessary to produce her own means of subsistence, she is seen as performing surplus labour which is appropriated by her husband in the form of his own consumption of the use-values she produces. This enables the capitalist to pay wages below the value of labour-power; surplus labour is thereby effectively transferred from the housewife to capital. We have here a model of unequal exchange, first, between capitalist and worker, over the purchase and sale of labour-power and second, between husband and wife, over the exchange of her labour-time for part of the commodities bought with his wage.

Why then has housework survived? Within this model, the following answer is proposed. If capital is to benefit from the existence of housework as a separate mode of production as opposed to employing both men and women directly, then one of two circumstances must apply. Either, for a given value of labour-power, the level of productivity in housework is higher than it would be in the production of those same use-values in the capitalist mode of production. Or, the existence of housework leads to the formation of a lower value of labour-power (spread over the whole family) than would otherwise have been the case. What is important then in the analysis is the

direct comparison of quantities of labour-time in the production of the means of subsistence occurring in the home and in the factory; and, within the home, the allocation of the housewife's time between production of use-values for herself and production for her husband. (Children are incorporated into the analysis according to sex; the consumption of boys, as future wage workers, is added to that of their father, girls to that of their mother.)

The validity of such comparative statics is doubtful. It is insufficient to argue that this is the best of all possible worlds for capital; rather, it is necessary to explain, from the point of view of the present, the process of historical change. Harrison does, of course, realise this and insists that the history and continued existence of housework as a mode of production, 'are the results of developments at all levels of the social formation'. He is only giving 'certain analytic tools essential for the production of the history' (Harrison, 1973, p. 46).

However, serious criticisms of this kind of theorisation of the articulation of domestic labour with capital can be advanced. The reduction of domestic labour and wage-labour to commensurability in terms of units of time renders capital indifferent between the two forms in which women's labour occurs; but there *are* major differences for capital precisely in the different forms of such labour. Wage-labour is comparatively simple—in commodity production it is consumed in the creation of surplus value. But domestic labour is much more problematic, since it is performed at two levels: not only is the labour-power of the living labourer replenished, and replenished on a daily basis; so also is the labourer reproduced on a generational basis. Now Harrison pursues the logic of his argument and denies the meaningfulness of this distinction between daily and generational tasks. He considers that *all* housework could be performed according to capitalist production relations, for there is no reason why all domestic labour should not be transformed into wage-labour: he cites launderettes and poses the possibility of capitalist crèches and capitalist brothels.

But the universalisation of these last two creates a major *structural* contradiction between the necessity that the free labourer appears on the market to sell his labour-power, and the necessity that in the capitalist labour process the capitalist appropriates such labour-power in the form of commodities over which he has legal rights of ownership. As we have emphasised, labour-power is merely an attribute of the living labourer, and in order that it be reproduced the living labourer must be reproduced. Hence the complete socialisation of domestic labour requires the socialisation of the reproduction of living individuals, and, at the same time, capital requires the 'freedom' of these individuals on the labour market. Suppose capital incorporates under its own relations of production the reproduction of living individuals. If they are commodities, then they are themselves private property, and cannot function as the 'free' wage-labourers necessary for capitalist production. If they are not commodities, then capital is not capital, for the rationale of capitalist production—the expansion of value—has disappeared. Thus, in either case, for capital to produce the living labourer is to subvert its own relations of production. It is therefore impossible completely to incorporate domestic labour under directly capitalist relations of production.

For Harrison, housework, because it is not commodity production, does not create value. We take as our other example Seccombe (1974, 1975), for whom, in seeming contrast, domestic labour does create value precisely because it is commodity production (of labour-power). His work starts by looking at the two value forms of labour-power:

the relative form and the equivalent form. The relative form of the value of labour-power is identified in the labour performed to create it, that is, in the wage labour embodied in subsistence commodities, plus the domestic labour required to convert these commodities into regenerated labour-power; this total embodied labour achieves value when labour-power is sold as a commodity, value being expressed in the equivalent form of the wage. Now, these two forms must measure the same thing; the wage form's appearance is thus shown to be doubly mystifying. First, it appears to be paid for the whole working day, but in reality is a payment for only the portion of the working day which is necessary to produce value equivalent to that of labour-power. Secondly, while the wage appears to be paid for the husband's labour and is in reality payment for his labour-power; that labour-power has value partly owing to his own wage-labour and partly to his wife's domestic labour. Neither of these appearances of the wage-form is, of course, a pure illusion. A man who decided to work only the hours of 'necessary labour' would not get his normal wage, nor would his wife have much luck in demanding the part of his wage that represents domestic labour from his employer directly! The point is that these appearances, like all aspects of commodity fetishism, are both real and deceptive. (See Geras (1971), for a useful account of the Marxist concept of fetishism.)

Seccombe explains the reality *behind* the deception by looking at the reproduction cycle of labour-power. This is a value equilibrating process whereby wage goods from the market are transformed by the household unit into renewed labour-power bound for the market. For Marx, the wage, the means of subsistence it purchases, and the value of labour-power, are all of equivalent value. For Seccombe, this remains true; value is neither created nor destroyed, but merely transferred in the reproduction cycle of labour-power. All that is necessary is to elaborate that part of the cycle which brings domestic labour into relation with the other concrete labours performed in society: the housewife creates value as her contribution to the reproduction of labour-power for capital, and consumes equal value in the form of her own upkeep—value is merely transferred and no surplus value results.

In reply to those (Gardiner, 1975; Coulson, Magas and Wainwright, 1975) who had criticised him for not recognising the importance of women's role in wage-labour, Seccombe restated the problem as one of specifying how women's total labour time is distributed between domestic and wage-labour, and analysing the process whereby this distribution changes with the development of capitalism.

To do this he identifies two main pressures upon the labour-power cycle. First, there are disruptive elements, located outside the family, which disturb value equilibration. These primarily revolve around changes in labour productivity in the production of subsistence commodities, and changes in the husband's wage, and they imply changes in the intensity of domestic labour and changes in the distribution of the housewife's time between domestic and wage-labour. Second, and more important for Seccombe, there are adaptive elements, located inside the family, defined by the highly variable intensity of domestic labour and the ability of the housewife to take a second job. Basically this latter involves the 'exchange' of domestic labour-time for the labour-time embodied in commodities—again an equal exchange of value. But domestic labour is not directly controlled by capital and, not being of direct relevance to the production of surplus value, its productivity is not forced to grow in the same way as that of wage-labour by the search for relative surplus value. Instead, advances in technology have slowly infused domestic labour so that 'average domestic labour time' has fallen:

hence the *possibility* of the substitution of wage-labour for domestic labour is posed. But the productivity of the latter has fallen relative to that of the former, to such an extent that, since the beginning of the long post-war boom, the value of the housewife's wage can exchange for more embodied labour-time in wage goods than the quantity of domestic labour-time forgone when she takes a job. Thus the widening productivity gap between domestic labour and wage-labour pushes increasing numbers of women into the labour market, and the possibility becomes an actuality. Even though most of her productivity gain is appropriated as surplus value, what the housewife does receive more than compensates her for her 'sacrificed' domestic labour-time.

Seccombe concedes that it is impossible to incorporate into the analysis, either in terms of labour-time or in terms of value, the timeless child-guardian aspect of domestic labour. There are, as he puts it, structural limits to the exchange of domestic labour-time for the labour-time embodied in wage goods, since the separation of the working class from the means of production entails the separation of the family unit from capitalist production. But although privatised consumption of the family unit is thus never optional, within these limits, differential productivity levels dictate the distribution of married women's labour-time in much the same way as 'the law of value ultimately determines how much of its disposable labour-time society can spend upon each particular class of commodities' (Seccombe, 1975, p. 88, quoting Marx).

We have already taken issue with the characterisation of domestic labour as value producing. Seccombe attempts to defend his analysis in the following way. First, he claims, in a society of generalised commodity production, it is only the category *value* which can structure the way in which the various separate private labours, including domestic labour, relate to total social labour. Second, unless it is conceded that domestic labour creates value, it is impossible to establish a connection between domestic labour and wage-labour; analysis is rendered dualistic, with domestic labour unaffected by the laws of motion of capitalist development and related to wage-labour only through the consciousness of those women who perform both.

Neither of these assertions is in fact a defence; rather, they point to the difficulties (*not* impossibilities) inherent in the analysis of non-value production and its interaction with value production, in a tradition that has been mainly concerned with developing the categories appropriate for the analysis of value production alone. Domestic labour is not value creating because it is not subject to the law of value. It is only by recognising this difference between domestic labour and wage-labour that the specific relation of each to capital can be grasped.

It is interesting to analyse why Harrison and Seccombe, despite their diametrically opposed starting-points, arrive at very similar conclusions. Harrison considers housework to be a separate mode of production, while Seccombe has housework so much a part of the capitalist mode that it is itself commodity (and thus value) production. The reason both arrive at an analysis which makes labour-time commensurable is that they both specify the relation between domestic labour and capital to be one of exchange. For Harrison, it is exchange between modes of production, for Seccombe, exchange within the family. And each, in his own way, has misunderstood an aspect of exchange. An exchange of commodities is an exchange of labours; an exchange of different concrete labours and an equalisation of abstract labour; both aspects must be present. Harrison appears not to realise this; labour is labour for him. That the reduction to socially necessary labour-time which occurs in capitalist commodity production does not apply to domestic labour, while recognised, causes him no difficulty, for he is adding actual

labour-times in both cases. While he abstracts from particular concrete labours through their measurement in units of time, he fails to recognise that Marx's advance over Ricardo was to show that this abstraction has social significance only when it is actually effected by the market.

Seccombe makes exactly the same mistake, since he too fails to recognise that it is only under capitalist relations of production, through the driving force of the law of value, that the category of value is fully developed. For it is only then that socially necessary labour, the substance of value, becomes a reality. The non-operation of the law of value also makes nonsense of his demonstration that domestic labour does not create surplus value. For only under its operation do the forms of value, relative and equivalent, exist and express the same quantity of value. Without it, there is no reason why the housewife should work longer, shorter, or the same hours as go into the production of her means of subsistence (Gardiner, 1975). There is no process whereby the two are equalised. Seccombe thus makes a double mistake; first falsely to quantify domestic labour, second to claim equality where none exists.

Thus Seccombe's assertion, that domestic labour produces value but no surplus, and Harrison's, that a surplus is produced but no value, both rest on the same faulty foundation: the attempt to quantify domestic labour and wage-labour in the same units.

Conclusion

So far this paper has been largely critical. That this criticism be not merely destructive, in this section we pull out what we consider to be the advances in the literature in order to indicate directions for future research.

We see this research as structured by the following propositions.

1. Domestic labour is the biological production of human beings, their care, maintenance and continued socialisation as living labourers on a daily as well as a generational basis. The ultimate purpose of this production is to provide labour-power for sale as a commodity to capital in order that surplus value be produced.

2. The means through which this occurs is the production of use-values for immediate consumption outside of any direct relation to capital. As production, it is consumption, for the housewife's labour-power is consumed in the production and reproduction of people. As consumption, it is production, for 'every kind of consumption . . . in one way or another produces human beings in some particular aspect' (Marx, 1973, pp. 90–91). This is not to say that domestic labour is unique—rather the opposite. That it comprises both production and consumption activities does not differentiate domestic labour from wage-labour. For wage-labour is involved with the consumption of means of production and labour-power, and the production of commodities. What does differentiate the two is their relation to capital; seen from this perspective, wage-labour is concerned with production and domestic labour with consumption.

3. Domestic labour is integral to the process whereby the capitalist mode of production is a self-reproducing whole, for it 'is the production and reproduction of that means of production so indispensable to the capitalist: the labourer himself' (Marx, 1938, p. 585). But it continually requires raw materials, which are commodities produced under capitalist relations of production and purchased with the wage. Domestic labour is therefore a twofold process; it is both the means of maintenance and reproduction of the worker, and it is the means whereby, via 'the annihilation of the necessities of life' (Marx, 1938, p. 586), the worker is continually 'freed' to reappear in

the labour market. Not only are the participants in the domestic and capitalist labour processes thereby reproduced; so are the respective relations of production.

4. While Marx relegates the performance of domestic labour 'to the labourer's instinct of self-preservation and of propagation' (Marx, 1938, p. 585), at the same time he remarks that 'every specific historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone' (Marx, 1938, p. 645). The investigation of these laws has barely begun (Conference of Socialist Economists, 1976), although soaring divorce-rates, declining birth-rates and unprecedented involvement of the state in reproduction are frequently observed phenomena in advanced capitalist countries. This paper has said nothing about the last in particular, and we consider this a very important area of future research.

5. Also unexplained is the sexual division of labour. Given the current forces of production, two sexes are needed for reproduction. But this is not an explanation of why a sexual division of labour should have extended to include as women's work the education and care of the young, the old and the sick, and the replenishment of the living individual. The division of productions between a public and a domestic sphere requires explanation in terms which do not take the sexual division of labour as an eternal constant.

6. The sexual division of labour under capitalism ensures that the two sexes experience the way in which the family relates to capital in rather different ways (Vogel, 1973). For the husband, this is a value-relation—his labour power has use-value only for others; for him it is the source of the cash which purchases the means of subsistence. For the wife, the same relation has only a use-value aspect, since the wage is transformed into use-values with which her labour maintains and reproduces her family. These different experiences are aspects of the necessary appearances of capitalist society. They structure the contradictions contained within the family under capitalism, contradictions which are exacerbated by the wife's entry into the labour market.

7. Domestic labourers are 'domestic slaves' in a stronger sense than wage-labourers are 'wage slaves', for even the cash nexus itself is absent in their situation. (The language is metaphorical, of course, and has nothing to do with any concept of pre-capitalist mode of production situated within the home.) But women who perform domestic labour are also a major component of the industrial reserve army, attracted and repulsed by capital according to the dictates of the rhythm of accumulation. When capital needs female labour-power, it must ensure that its demands do not endanger women's ability to perform sufficient domestic labour. This it can do in two ways. First, it can increase domestic productivity through the sale to the household of improved means of production. Second, it can provide commodity substitutes for some use-values previously produced in the home. In both cases, the wife's wage is necessary in order to purchase these new commodities.

However, while normally, in times of boom, an increase in female wage-labour is to be expected, crises have not always thrown women out of paid employment faster than men.

8. The value of labour power should be seen as the mediating link with which to analyse changes in women's role in production. It is determined partly by the extent of domestic labour and, relatedly, by the number of wage-labourers in the family. In turn, the value of labour-power determines the extent to which women must work, both in wage-labour and at home, in order to provide an acceptable standard of living for their families.

9. As part of the process whereby it continuously creates the means of its own destruction, capital has an immanent tendency to absorb under its own relations, production performed under non-capitalist relations. Capital therefore increases the production of absolute surplus value through the absorption of housewives into wage-labour. It simultaneously increases the production of relative surplus value through the devaluation of individual labour-power. However, this process has limits, for, as we have shown, capital cannot employ wage-labour to produce as commodities everything that domestic labour provides. For domestic labour produces the living labourer, who cannot be a commodity under capitalism.

The absorption of women into social production is one of capitalism's historically progressive tendencies, but, like all such tendencies of capitalist development, it shows the potential for human co-operation while at the same time creating barriers to its realisation. In this sense the liberation of women and the overthrow of capital as the dominant relation of our society are inextricably linked.

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