

Margaret Benston's "Political Economy of Women's Liberation"

International Impact

by Angela Miles

L'article « The Political Economy of Women's Liberation » publié en 1969 et dans lequel Maggie Benston aborde la question du travail non rémunéré des femmes a eu un impact considérable au Canada et à l'échelle internationale. Le présent texte analyse son impact et livre les témoignages de plusieurs féministes de renommée internationale dont la vie et le travail ont été influencés positivement par l'article de Maggie.

Maggie Benston is known around the world for her classic article "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," first published by *Monthly Review* in 1969 and widely translated and anthologized since that time. The article is a product of the exciting and irreverent feminist dialogue of the time, when women began to question everything, to share and trust our own experiences as sources of knowledge, to name our world from women's point of view, and to dream of a better one.

Even before it was published the article was circulated widely in mimeograph in Canada and around the world by feminists hungry for new [revolutionary] thinking that challenged dominant male-defined and male-aggrandizing interpretations of the world in the name of alternative, women, community, and life-affirming values and possibilities. The article became a major contribution to the process of collective challenge and creation that had spawned it.

A quarter of a century after it first appeared, its impact on those heady debates is remembered by feminists all over the world who were part of them. When she heard that Maggie had died, U.S. feminist and poet Adrienne Rich wrote in a letter, "I remember that article as one of the milestones of my own passage into women's liberation." Brazilian feminist Rosiska Darcy reacted with shock and disbelief, and spoke of the exciting times she had spent with groups of women in both Brazil and Switzerland, debating Maggie's article and writing articles of their own.

When Maggie wrote "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," received opinion was that men do the productive work of society, providing for women and children, and that women's economic dependence on men simply reflects the fact that we are unproductive. Stereotypes of idle housewives eating chocolates and watching tv all day and hen-pecked husbands who hadn't managed to escape the clutches of marriage abounded. Blondie's cartoon relationship to Dagwood's hard-earned income, her inability to comprehend that when you buy a hat for twenty dollars instead of forty dollars you aren't really *making* money, echoed actual conceptions of women as parasites on men. Marriage was popularly and academically seen as an institution for the support and benefit of women, which men paid for with the economically costly loss of their freedom. Social analysts and commentators thought that women dominated the family and men, and called this power "Momism."

In the 1960s, when women began to reflect on our lives as we actually experience them and not as they are defined by the dominant culture, we began to see that housework is actually enormously skilled, demanding, and time consuming. Women are economically dependent on men, not because we don't work, but because most of our work is not paid. The reason that women spend men's money when they do the work of shopping is not because we are idle and parasitic but because society is structured in such a way that all the money is men's.

Later research confirmed empirically what women had discovered together anecdotally. For instance, a United Nations study has shown that, worldwide, women do between 66 per cent and 75 per cent of the work, earn 10 per cent of the earned income and own one per cent of the property. A Canadian government study estimated that the value of goods and services produced in the home is equal to 44 per cent of the Gross National Product.

Both mainstream and Marxist economic theories have supported the cultural invisibility of this work and its value:

- by recognizing as productive only labour that produces goods for exchange;
- by excluding from consideration all unpaid labour producing goods and services for immediate use;
- and by considering only market and wage relations to be economic relations.

Maggie was one of the earliest feminist theorists to use the new light women were shedding on our lives and work to reveal the distortions involved in these theories and to develop alternative women-centred theories and strategies for liberation. She used Marxist

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analytical tools critically to argue that despite the differences among women, we all produce goods and services primarily for use rather than exchange, and therefore "have a shared relationship to the means of production that is different from men's." In this she revealed the material basis of women's common oppression and lent theoretical support to the feminist project of building a common struggle among diverse women.

At a time when feminists tended to presume that women's entry into the labour force would, in itself, be a large step toward equality and liberation, Maggie pointed out that:

equal access to jobs outside the home, while one of the pre-conditions of women's liberation, will not in itself be sufficient to gain equality for women; as long as work in the home remains a matter of private production and is the responsibility of women, they will simply carry a double work-load.

This broadening of the feminist perspective beyond male-defined parameters to place women and women's activities at the centre is absolutely essential for feminism's development as a transformative movement.

Although "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" was the first published feminist theory recognizing women's unpaid work it was snapped up and passed around by groups of women in many different countries who were already dealing with the same questions. The extent of its impact is a measure of both its originality and its timeliness. In the comments that follow, U.S., French, and German feminists, all of whom remember those years and have, themselves, made major contributions to feminist materialist analysis, comment on the importance of Maggie's article and the debates, then and now, around the issues she dealt with.

Betsy Warrior (USA)

The loss of Margaret Benston's strong voice, lucid thinking, and intellectual courage is a great loss to all women, not just to those who personally knew and loved her.

Although I never met Margaret, she

was a presence in my life, and in the lives of many women who read her work. Her name and thoughts will live on—far beyond her time and place. The value of her contributions to women's progress can't be calculated, because her ideas travel now in other women's minds; even people who never knew her name are influenced by her legacy.

When I first read Margaret Benston's "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" in late 1969, it was an energizing and confirmatory experience. I too had been analyzing women's status from a perspective that viewed women's unpaid labour as a central lynch pin of our oppression. Feeling isolated in my particular viewpoint (as many earlier feminists did), Margaret Benston's article on the economy of housework was like a flash of lightning, illuminating the landscape women dwelt in, but that was usually kept obscured by men's self-serving ramblings, ruminations, and bombastic denials. Margaret's article helped give me validation for my own ideas expressed in the article "Housework: Slavery or a Labour of Love?" and later, the booklet *Houseworker's Handbook*. Even on points where I disagreed with Margaret's analysis, her thoughts acted as a catalyst for further exploration and careful analysis of my own viewpoint.

The ideas that Benston helped to gain credence over two decades ago are still being carried forth today. In France, Christine Delphy's "The Main Enemy" speaks forcefully for all women's unpaid labour, and in New Zealand, Marilyn Waring authored the excellent, *If Women Really Counted*. Finally, although without fanfare and somewhat tacitly, the United Nations has recognized women's unpaid, as well as paid, labour by publishing this year, the statistic that women perform two thirds of all the world's work (we women know that this is an underestimation).

The small, but active and influential, feminist group I was part of when "The Politics of Women's Liberation" was published discussed Margaret's article with great respect and seriousness. We quoted it and recommended it widely to others. It was certainly worthy of our respect then, and its ideas should still be heeded today. History has still not caught up with Margaret Benston.

Maria Mies (Germany)

I read a German translation of Margaret Benston's seminal article "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" first in a booklet published by TRIKONT-publishers in Munich in 1971. The editorial collective made it quite clear in their introduction that they had grave doubts whether the new Women's Liberation Movement could be of any use to a revolutionary, class-based, proletarian movement. Being mainly middle class and concerned mainly with sexist men-women relations, the Women's Lib women were seen as lacking the objective and subjective pre-conditions (proletarian class position and class consciousness) for becoming allies in the revolutionary process. It seems, however, that in spite of their arrogant, leftist, rhetoric, they could not ignore the fact that the women's movement not only continued to gain momentum, but also, that feminists began to develop a materialist theory of women's exploitation and oppression. Many who were no longer satisfied with consciousness-raising and protest marches for the liberalization of abortion laws began to study the available theories on class exploitation and oppression. They founded study circles and began to look for theories which would explain what women's oppression had to do with capitalism and whether women's work, mainly housework, was structurally part of capitalist exploitative relations or not, whether there was a material and historical base for women's oppression. In Germany, we would not simply accept Freud's dictum that "anatomy is destiny," nor were we satisfied with the standard explanations of orthodox Marxism which saw the "woman question" only as a secondary contradiction.

It was in this situation that Margaret Benston's article appeared. It was one of the first to analyze women's housework from a new left perspective. It was widely read and discussed, and it contributed to the debate on housework which began around 1975. Margaret Benston showed in this article why housework under capitalism was excluded from commodity production for the market, that it remained in the sphere of use-value-production in a pre-market and pre-industrial stage. Their unpaid work was not only the base for what was called socially productive la-

bour and capital accumulation but was also the reason why women could not achieve equality with men as wage labourers. She also saw clearly the role women as housewives had to play as agents of consumption and thus as stabilizers of the market and the nuclear family.

Margaret Benston's article helped many of us who later analyzed housework and other forms of non-wage labour under capitalism to come to a broader and deeper understanding of what capitalism actually means, namely not only the exploitation of wage labour proper, but also of other "colonies": women, nature, other peoples.

However, whereas Margaret Benston continued to consider housework, small peasants' subsistence production or other such forms of small scale use-value production as "pre-industrial" or "pre-capitalist," some of us understood that these apparently pre-capitalist production relations are part and parcel of the overall capitalist industrial production and accumulation process. Without them, this mode of production would collapse. (Mies *et al.*) I also could not share Margaret Benston's optimism with regard to the collectivization and industrialization of housework as a pre-condition for women's liberation.

Not only had this collectivization and industrialization of housework *not* taken place in the actually existing socialist states, given the growing ecological crises and the further deterioration of the living conditions of people in the South, such industrialization of housework, possible only in the North, could only aggravate these crises.

However, if the understanding that capitalist *and* socialist industrial production and accumulation are based among others on the exploitation of women's unpaid and invisible housework is gaining ground today, it is also due to Margaret Benston's pathbreaking contribution.

Margaret Randall (USA, Mexico, Cuba)

It was painful to hear of Margaret Benston's death. Another of our warriors gone too soon. And we need them now, all of them, each who cares about our world and is willing to put her thoughtful shoul-

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der to the wheel. At a time when some of our dearest dreams seem in shambles and the balance of power is so staggeringly against us, I have pondered insistently on socialism's failure to embrace a feminist agenda.

Beyond the obvious (thus far successful) efforts at political hegemony on the part of a succession of U.S. administrations, we also need to analyze socialism's mistakes. I believe this failure to understand the imperative of a feminist perspective is one of these, perhaps the greatest. Margaret Benston pointed to such an analysis in her 1969 article, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation."

That was extraordinarily early for such vision. I lived in Mexico at the time, fighting my own wars. The first public utterances of an incipient feminist movement in the United States and England were just then beginning to reach those countries where progressives argued other issues: what about the *foco* theory; can Latin American revolutionaries really succeed in creating two, three, many Vietnams; what positions and roles will the traditional Marxist parties take?

As was true for my sisters back home, the choices had seemed sadly narrow: participate with the men, as "one of the men," disdain suggestions that "women's issues" had a place on the agenda of political discourse—or simmer in the stagnation of personal discomfort, because that persistent sense of otherness could surely be traced to one's own inadequacies. The statements and treatises hit us where it hurt. Why not challenge that male privilege that always protects the status quo?

Political scientists like Benston helped us challenge the status quo. I read "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" and took a long, full breath. The fact that women, as a group, have our own relationship to the means of production, was not new. We had read Engels. And Mandel. And Mitchell. And others. But Benston pointed out that it was not "simply [a matter] of getting women into *existing* industrial production but...[of] converting private production of household work into public production." This went further. It let us look at the problem in a new dimension.

The way she distinguished industrialization *per se* from capitalism also seemed

important at the time. "Industrialization is, in itself, a great force for human good," she said. Today one might say the same of the electronic revolution, the Human Genome Project, or a multitude of other scientific "advances." In essence, Benston's explanation still holds good. I wonder, though, if while she lived she had an inkling of how things would go in the different socialist experiments, how their efforts at industrialization would remain pitifully antiquated and/or give in to the competitive demands that relinquish ecological and other concerns to the need for "efficiency" and profit.

"We can speak of *socialized* forms of production," Benston said, and she believed that "advocat[ing] the conversion of private domestic labour into a public industry under capitalism [would be] quite a different thing from advocating such conversion in a socialist society. In the latter case the forces of production would operate for human welfare..." That was certainly what we believed would take place, long before 1969. Does the fact that it did not disprove the thesis, or stand simply as a monument to the greed and corruption—and *the misogyny*—that have held their place in both capitalist and socialist society? I don't know. What I do know is that we must push ahead in our analyses, asking the difficult questions. Margaret Benston has helped me continue to do that.

Benston's essay ends by questioning the nuclear family structure, a brave stand for Marxists back then. She correctly understood that "[t]he stabilizing consuming functions of the family, plus the ability of the cult of the home to keep women out of the labour market, serve neocapitalism too well to be easily dispensed with." Not many have spoken so eloquently of both the economic factors contributing to women's subjugation and its cultural and/or sexual dimension.

Today women are kept out of the labour market by deepening economic crisis, increased unemployment, an erosion of social services, threats to choice and other reproductive rights, homelessness, and an ever more sophisticated cooptation. The typical family is not as "nuclear" as it was in the sixties and seventies; great numbers of women are single mothers, other affectational preferences and lifestyles have come into their own. Neither is the

cult of the home what it once was.

Benston encouraged us to experiment with other social forms. The alternatives she suggested, however, have mainly shown themselves to be bankrupt: communal houses and kibbutzim didn't manage to capture more than momentary or isolated attention. We are still looking for non-exploitative ways to live, as individuals and as nations.

I re-read Benston's essay, and I am struck by her passionate identification with what she was writing about. Unlike most of the scholars of those years, she spoke of *we* and *us*. Women were centre in her work, not some academic "they." In this, as in much else, she was remarkably ahead of her time. In the years since 1969, and out of my own painful experience, I am more and more convinced that we must link a centering retrieval of memory to accurate economic and political analysis. A multicultural perspective must inform our thinking just as class consciousness does. And a gender analysis must complement a Marxist understanding of the relations of production.

Today the last lines of "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" bring tears to my eyes, "[p]ressure created by women who challenge their role...will hopefully make quicker the transition to a society in which the necessary structural changes in production can actually be made. That such a transition will require a revolution I have no doubt; our task is to make sure the revolutionary changes in the society do in fact end women's oppression."

When I first read those words, I believed that I and others like myself would prove equal to the task. Little did I understand how difficult it would be, or how patriarchal thinking and male privilege intersect with class exploitations, race discrimination, and other factors to keep women subservient—under capitalism and—to date—in the socialist experiments as well.

Inveterate optimist that I am, I do not believe we've lost the war, only some heartbreaking battles. I wish that Margaret Benston were around to help us take on the battles yet to be waged. But her intelligence, her passion, her capacity for analysis, and her clarity remain. Can any of us hope for anything more?

Collette Guillaumin (France)

En 1970 paraissait en France un numéro spécial de la revue *Partisans*, intitulé « Libération des femmes, année 0. » Dans ce fameux numéro figurait entre autres, la traduction de « The Political Economy of Women's Liberation » de Margaret Benston. Ce n'était pas un très long article, mais il était l'un des tout premiers à dégager, aux cotés de « L'ennemi principal, » l'article de Christine Dupont (Delphy) paru dans le même numéro, l'un des vecteurs, essentiel à mon sens, du féminisme des années 60/80 : la mise en lumière d'abord puis l'analyse de ce qui construit les classes de sexe, à savoir la structure social sexuelle du travail et de la production économique comme de l'organisation économique. L'article de Benston est donc l'un des articles fondateurs du courant des analyses matérialistes des structures socio-sexuelles. Ce courant, l'un des plus puissants de la vague féministe contemporaine n'est certes pas homogène. Il a été le lieu d'une discussion passionnée. Certes, ce champ est l'un de ceux où la tension théorique a été la plus intense et la plus productive. Le mouvement pour le salaire domestique des années soixante dix relève également de cette mouvance, ou si l'on préfère, du constat que le travail des femmes est un travail « gratuit », qu'il est situé hors de la sphère de la contrepartie monétaire.

Comme le notait Benston dans un raccourci saisissant : pour être différent le travail accompli par les femmes *n'en est pas marginal* pour autant, c'est seulement un travail qui *n'est pas* salarié. Et c'est bien cela la réalité du travail de femme, qu'elle précisait alors (le travail des femmes pouvant, éventuellement, lui, être salarié...). Et nous ne sommes pas marginales certes. Le statut des femmes est central et il a une fondation matérielle, si nous sommes bien discriminées nous sommes d'abord et fondamentalement exploitées, c'est à dire précisément pas marginales. L'une des expressions de cette exploitation peut apparaître à un regard rapide comme une forme de marginalité : le fait d'accomplir *sans salaire* le travail effectué dans la relation « familiale », la relation domestique.¹ Travail dont le produit peut certes être *vendu* (contre monnaie) par le chef de famille, mais qui

n'est pas *payé* à celle (celui) qui l'a effectué.

Ceci dévoile un autre débat de fond entraîné dans la mouvance de l'analyse matérialiste de la sexualité du travail. Qu'est-ce qu'une femme? Toute spécificité d'un rapport social entraîne du coup une spécificité des acteurs de cette relation : être maître et être esclave sont deux choses différentes, elles ne supposent nullement une nature originaire de l'esclave mais sont la résultante de la relation d'esclavage. Il en est de même pour les femmes et pour les hommes dans une relation particulière que j'avais nommé autrefois *sexage*. Et pourtant, par un paradoxe surprenant, la plupart des analyses fondées sur l'exploitation des femmes, sur le travail qu'elles accomplissent (comment? et pour qui?), analyses qui mettent en cause la définition même du sexe, sont depuis les années 80 souvent affrontées au reproche d'*essentialisme*. Comme si parler des femmes était impliquer la primauté de leur sexe anatomique. Je ne vois pourtant pas que parler des ouvriers ou des colonisés, par exemple, soit autre chose que parler d'un groupe socialement construit ; d'une situation sociologiquement déterminée. Il en est de même lorsqu'on parle des « femmes », lesquelles sont là un groupe sociologiquement construit. Sans doute y a-t-il là un point aveugle, ou peut être une « évidence »—c'est à dire une croyance spontanée non mise à l'examen—selon laquelle les femmes, de toutes façons, seraient des êtres naturels. Paradoxe, car comment l'analyse et la description d'un travail et de la relation dans laquelle ce travail est effectué, pourrait-elle de quelque façon que ce soit présupposer ou entraîner que les femmes seraient des êtres de nature? Alors même qu'une telle analyse repose sur l'hypothèse de la construction sociale d'une catégorie (d'un groupe sociale, d'une classe, que sais-je) et non pas l'affectation d'êtres naturels à des tâches qui leur seraient « destinées »? Et de cette perspective, fondamentalement critique du préjugé essentialiste, l'article de Benston est de fait l'un des articles emblématique.

Un quart de siècle après sa parution on peut dire qu'il est, avec quelques autres, un article inaugural.

¹À ne pas confondre, évidemment, avec le travail « ménager » qui n'est qu'une partie (parfois minime—et qui d'ailleurs ne l'est pas toujours) du travail accompli dans la relation domestique.

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Betsy Warrior is the author of "Housework: Slavery or Labour of Love," anthologized in Radical Feminism. Ann Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone eds. Quadrangle Press, 1973.

Maria Mies is the author of Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour. Zed Books, 1986.

Margaret Randall is the author of Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda. Monthly Review Press, 1992.

Collette Guillaumin es l'auteure de Sex, race et pratique du pouvoir: l'idée de nature. Cote femmes, 1992.

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