

WHAT DEFINES WOMEN?  
The Family as a Production Unit

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The "woman question" seems more difficult than many others when analyzing the class nature of society because it is not usually considered that women have any unique relationship to the forces of production. The category seems instead to cut across all classes; one speaks of working class women, middle class women, etc.. The status of women is clearly secondary<sup>1</sup> but analysis of this condition usually falls into discussing socialization, psychology, interpersonal relationships, or the role of marriage as a social institution.<sup>2</sup> Are these the primary factors however? In arguing that the roots of the secondary status of women are in fact economic, one must be able to show that women as a group do in fact have a definite relationship to the forces of production and that this relationship is different than that holding for men. The personal, psychological factors should then follow from this special relationship to production and a change in the second will be the necessary (but not sufficient) condition for changing the first.<sup>3</sup> If this special relationship of women to production can be shown, the analysis of the situation of women fits naturally into a class analysis of society.

The starting point for discussion of classes in a capitalist society is the distinction between those who own the means of production and those who sell their labor for a wage. As Mandel says:

The proletarian condition is, in a nutshell, the lack of access to the means of production or means of subsistence which, in a society of generalized commodity production, forces the proletarian to sell his labor power. In exchange for this labor-power he receives a wage which then enables him to acquire the means of consumption necessary for satisfying his own needs and those of his family.

This is the structural definition of wage earner, the proletarian. From it necessarily flows a certain relationship to his work, to the products of his work, and to his overall situation in society, which can be summarized by the catchword alienation. But there does not follow from this structural definition any necessary conclusions as to the level of his consumption... the extent of his needs or the degree to which he can satisfy them.<sup>4</sup>

Notice that Mandel states specifically that this is a fundamental, a primary definition. The conclusions which can be drawn from it will depend on other factors, specific to each situation.



The corresponding definition for women, one which will serve as a starting point, has been neglected. What is needed first is not a complete examination of the symptoms of the secondary status of women<sup>5</sup> but instead a statement of the material conditions in capitalist (and other) societies which define the group "women". Upon these conditions are built the specific superstructures which we know. An interesting passage from Mandel offers insight into such a definition:

A commodity... is a product created to be exchanged on the market, as opposed to one which has been made for direct consumption. Every commodity must have both a use-value and an exchange-value.

It must have a use-value or else nobody would buy it....A commodity without a use-value to anyone would...be unsaleable, would constitute useless production, would have no exchange-value precisely because it had no use-value.

On the other hand, every product which has use-value does not necessarily have exchange-values, It has an exchange-value only to the extent that the society itself, in which the commodity itself is produced, is founded on exchange, is a society where exchange is a common practice....

In capitalist society, commodity production, the production of exchange-values, has reached its greatest development. It is the first society in human history where the major part of production consists of commodities. It is not true, however, that all production under capitalism is commodity production. Two classes of products still remain simple use-value.

The first group consists of all things produced by the peasantry for its own consumption, everything directly consumed on the farms where it is produced....

The second group of products in capitalist society which are not commodities but remain simple use-value consists of all things produced in the home. Despite the fact that considerable human labor goes into this type of household production, it still remains a production of use-values and not of commodities. Every time a soup is made or a button sewn on a garment, it constitutes production, but it is not production for the market.

The appearance of commodity production and its subsequent regularization and generalization have radically transformed the way men labor and how they organize society.<sup>6</sup>

What Mandel does not notice is that his last paragraph is precisely correct. The appearance of commodity production has indeed transformed the way that men labor. However, as he points



out, most household labor in capitalist society (and in the existing socialist societies for that matter) remains in the pre-market stage. This is the work which is reserved for women and it is in this fact that we can find the basis for a definition of women.

In sheer quantity, household labor, including child care, constitutes a huge amount of socially necessary production. Nevertheless, in a society based on commodity production, it is not usually considered even as "real" work since it is outside of trade and the market place. It is pre-capitalist in a very real sense. This assignment of household work as a job of a special category "women" means that this group does stand in a different relationship to production than does the group "men". We will tentatively define women then as that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple-use-values in those activities associated with the home and family. Since men carry no responsibility for such production, the difference between the two groups lies here. Notice that women are not categorically excluded from commodity production; their participation in wage labor is allowed but they have no responsibility in this area and such participation is ordinarily regarded as exceptional. Men, on the other hand, are responsible for commodity production and they are not, in principle, given any role in household labor. When they do participate in household production it is regarded as more than simply exceptional, it is demoralizing, emasculating, even harmful to health. (A human interest story on the front page of the Vancouver Sun in January, 1969 reported that men in Britain were having their health endangered because they had to do too much housework).

The material basis for the secondary status of women is to be found in just this definition of women. In a society in which money determines value, women are a group who work outside the money economy. Their work is not worth money, is therefore valueless, is therefore not even real work. And women themselves, who do this valueless work can hardly be expected to be worth as much as men, who work for money. In structural terms, the closest thing to the condition of women is the condition of others who are or were also outside of commodity production i.e. serfs and peasants.

In her recent paper on women Juliet Mitchell introduces the subject as follows: "In advanced industrial society, women's work is only marginal to the total economy. Yet it is through work that man changes natural conditions and thereby produces society. Until there is a revolution in production, the labor situation will prescribe women's situation within the world of men." The statement of the marginality of women's work is an unanalyzed recognition that the work women do is different from the work that men do. Such work is not marginal however; it is just not wage labor and so is not counted. She even says later "Domestic labor, even today, is enormous if quantified in terms of productive labor." (Can she really mean that it is non-productive



Such production is originally not for exchange; if exchange of commodities becomes important enough, then increased efficiency of production becomes necessary. Such efficiency is given by the transition to industrialized production which involves the elimination of the kin-based production unit. A large-scale, non-reduplicative production unit is substituted which has only one function, the economic one, and where prestige or status is attained by economic skills. Production is rationalized, made vastly more efficient and becomes more and more public -- part of an integrated social network. An enormous expanse of man's productive potential takes place. Under capitalism such social productive forces are utilized almost exclusively for private profit. These can be thought of as capitalized forms of production.

Applying the above to housework and child rearing, it is clear that each family, each household, constitutes an individual production unit, a pre-industrial entity in the same way that peasant farmers or cottage weavers constitute pre-industrial production units. The main features are clear; the reduplicative, kin-based, private nature of the work is the most important. (It is interesting to notice the other features: the multi-purposed functions of the family; the fact that desirable attributes for women do not rely on economic prowess, etc.) The rationalization of production given by a change to large-scale production has not not taken place in this area.

Industrialization is, in itself, a great force for human good; exploitation and dehumanization go with capitalism and not necessarily with industrialization. To advocate the conversion of private domestic labor into a public industry under capitalism is quite a different thing from advocating such conversion in a socialist society. In this second case the forces of production would operate for human welfare, not private profit, and the result should be liberation, not dehumanization. In this case we can speak of socialized forms of production.

These definitions are not meant to be technical but rather to differentiate between the important aspects of industrialization. Thus the fear of the barracks-like result of introducing house-keeping into the public economy is most realistic under capitalism. With the removal of the profit motive, and attendant alienated labor, there is no need in industrialized society why communality should not mean cheerful and comfortable surroundings.

The argument is often given that, under neocapitalism, the work in the home has been much reduced, but this is not structurally relevant. Except for the very rich, who can hire someone to do it, there is for most women an irreducible minimum of necessary labor involved in caring for home, husband and children. For a married woman without children this irreducible minimum of work probably takes 15 to 20 hours a week; for a woman with small children the minimum work week is probably 80 or 90 hours a week.<sup>1D</sup> (There is some resistance to regarding child-rearing as a job. That labor is involved, i.e. the production of use-value, can be clearly seen when exchange-value is also involved---when the work is done by baby sitters, nurses, child-care centers or teachers.) The possibility of so reducing housework to a minimum is also strongly dependent on income. In any case, household work remains structurally the same---a matter of private production.



Popularly, the main function of the family is the satisfaction of emotional needs, the need for closeness, community and warm, secure relationships. This society provides few other ways of satisfying such needs; for example, work relationships or friendships are not expected to be nearly as important as a man-woman-with-children relationship. Even other ties of kinship are increasingly secondary. This function of the family is important in stabilizing it so that it can fulfill the second purely economic function discussed above. The wage-earner, the husband-father, whose earnings support himself, also pays for the labor done by the mother-wife, and supports the children. The wages paid to a man buy the labor of two people. The crucial importance of this second function of the family can be seen when the family unit breaks down in divorce. The continuation of the economic function is the major concern where children are involved; the man must continue to subsidize the labor of the woman. This is usually secured even at the cost of preventing the future satisfaction of emotional needs of man and woman.

As an economic unit, the nuclear family is a valuable stabilizing force in capitalist society. Since the production which is done in the home is paid for by the husband-father's earnings, his ability to withhold his labor from the market is much reduced. His flexibility in changing jobs is even much limited. The woman, denied an active place in the market, has little control over the conditions that govern her life. Her economic dependence is reflected in emotional dependence, passiveness and other 'typical' female personality traits. She is conservative, fearful, supportive of the status quo.

The structure of this family is such that it is an ideal consumption unit. This fact, which is widely noted in Women's Liberation literature, should not be taken to mean that this is its primary function. If the above analysis is correct, the family should be seen primarily as a production unit for housework and childrearing. Everyone in capitalist society is a consumer; the structure of the family simply means that it is particularly well suited to encourage consumption. Women in particular are good consumers; this follows naturally from their responsibility for matters in the home. Also, the secondary status of women, their general lack of a strong sense of worth and identity, makes them more exploitable than man and hence better consumers.

The history of women in the industrialized sector of the society has depended simply on the labor needs of that sector. When labor is scarce (early industrialization, the two world wars, etc.) then women function as an important part of the labor force. When there is a surplus of labor (as now under neocapitalism) the cult of the home makes its reappearance and is used to channel women out of the market economy. This is easy since no one, man or woman, takes women's participation in the labor force very seriously. Women's real work is, in theory, in the home; this holds whether or not they are married, single or the head of a household. At all times the household work is the



responsibility of the women. When they are working outside the home they must somehow manage to get both outside job and housework done or they must supervise a substitute doing the housework. Women, particularly married women with children, who work outside the home simply do two jobs; their participation in the labor force is only allowed if they continue to fulfill their first responsibility in the home. This is particularly evident in the ~~socialist~~ countries like Russia and those in Eastern Europe where the expanded opportunities for women in the labor force did not bring about a corresponding expansion in their liberty. Equal access to jobs outside the home will not in itself be sufficient to give equality for women; as long as work in the home remains a matter of private production and is the responsibility of women they will then simply carry a double work load.

The prerequisite for women's liberation which follows from the above analysis is the ~~conversion~~ of the work now done in the home as ~~private~~ private production, into work to be done in the public economy.<sup>11</sup> This means that child-rearing should no longer be the responsibility solely of the parents. Society must begin to take responsibility for children; the economic dependence of women and children on the husband-father must be ended. The other work that goes on in the home must also be changed---communal eating places and laundries for example would be a major step. When such work is moved into the public sector then the material basis for discrimination against women will be gone. For example, with public communal eating places,\* the distinction between those who cook in restaurants and those who cook at home will be gone.

These are only preconditions. The idea of the secondary status of women is deeply rooted in the society and will take a great deal of effort to eradicate. But once the structures which produce and support that idea are changed then, and only then, can we hope to progress. It is possible for example that a change to communal eating places would simply mean that women are moved from a home kitchen to a communal one. This would be an advance however, particularly in a socialist society where work would not have the inherently exploited nature it does now. Once women are freed from private production in the home, it will probably be very difficult to maintain for any long period of time a rigid definition of jobs by sex.

The changes necessary to get women out of the home are, in theory, possible under capitalism.<sup>12</sup> One of the sources of the women's liberation movements may be the fact that the alternative capitalized forms exist now. Day care is widespread, convenience foods, home delivery of meals and inexpensive cafeterias are available; laundries and cleaners offer bulk rates. However, cost usually prohibits a complete dependence on such facilities and they are not available everywhere, even in North America. These should therefore probably be regarded as embryonic forms



rather than completed structures. However, they clearly stand as alternatives to the present system of doing such work. Particularly in North America where the growth of 'service industries' is important in maintaining the growth of the economy, the contradictions between these alternatives and the need to keep women in the home will grow.

In practice, it seems unlikely that complete capitalization of housework will occur. For one thing, such a structural change implies the complete breakdown of the nuclear family and the stabilizing-~~and~~ consuming functions of the family, plus the ability of the cult of the home to keep women out of the overcrowded labor force, serve neo-capitalist society too well to be <sup>so</sup>dispensed with. In addition, even if these necessary changes in the nature of household production were achieved under capitalism it would have the unpleasant consequence of including all human relationships in the cash nexus. The atomization and isolation of people in Western society is already sufficiently advanced to make it doubtful whether such complete psychic isolation could be tolerated. It is likely in fact that one of the major negative emotional responses to a women's liberation movement may be exactly such a fear. If this is the case, then possible alternatives--cooperatives, the kibbutz, etc--can be used to show that psychic needs for community and warmth can in fact be better satisfied if other structures are substituted for the present nuclear family.

At best the change to capitalization of housework would only give women the same limited freedom given most men in such a society. This does not mean however that women should wait to demand freedom from the discrimination against them. There is a material basis for women's status; we are not merely discriminated against, we are exploited. At present, our unpaid labor in the home is necessary if the entire system is to function. Pressure created by women who challenge their role will reduce the effectiveness of this exploitation. In addition, such challenges will also reduce the effectiveness of the present family's role and may make the channeling of women out of the labor force much less effective. These things 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 that revolutionary changes in this society do in fact end women's oppression.



Bibliography and Notes

1. Marlene Dixon "Secondary Social Status of Women" Available from U.S. Voice of Women's Liberation Movement, 5336 S. Greenwood, Chicago, Ill., 60614. 1940 Bissell
2. The biological argument is of course the first one used but it is not usually taken seriously by socialist writers. Margaret Mead's Sex and Temperament is an early statement of the importance of culture instead of biology.
3. This of course applies to the group or category as a whole. Individuals can and do free themselves from their socialization to a great degree (and they can even come to terms with the economic situation in favorable cases) but the majority of women have no chance to do so.
4. E. Mandel "Workers Under Neocapitalism" Paper delivered at Simon Fraser University; available through the PSA Department, SFU
5. J. Mitchell "Women; The Longest Revolution" New Left Review, December, 1966. This paper deals almost exclusively with the superstructures affecting women; it does not deal with the fundamental causes in production which create these superstructures.
6. E. Mandel "Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory" Merit Publishers (A Young Socialist Publication) New York, New York.
7. Mitchell, op. cit.
8. The paper itself condemns most of the Marxists for being 'overly economist'; 'an adjunct to socialist theory, not structurally integrated into it.' This follows I presume because, after her introductory remarks, quoted above, about the need for a revolution in production, she goes on to say "But women are offered a universe of their own: The family." Her whole paper then deals with this world; her analysis I think suffers fatally from this initial failure to carry through the relation of women to production adequately.
9. F. Engels "Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" Progress Publishers, Moscow (1959) Chapter IX, p. 158. The anthropological evidence known to Engels indicated primitive woman's power over man. This is not now felt to be correct but what is true is that the position of women was more nearly equal in the matrilineal societies used by Engels as examples and this is sufficient for his arguments to hold.
10. Such figures can easily be estimated. For example, a married woman without children is expected each week to: cook and wash up (10 hrs), clean (4 hrs), do laundry (1 hr) and shop for food (1 hr). The figures are minimum times required each week for such work. The total, 16 hours is probably unrealistically low; even so it is close to half of a regular work week. A mother with young children must spend close to 12 hours a day, 6 or 7 days a week, at work.
11. This is stated clearly by the early Marxist writers. Relevant quotes from Lenin are included in an Appendix to this paper.

for treating  
the problem of  
women as



APPENDIX  
Lenin - "ON THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN"  
Progress Publishers, Moscow (n.d.)

Large-scale machine industry, which concentrates masses of workers who often come from various parts of the country, absolutely refuses to tolerate survivals of patriarchalism and personal dependence, and is marked by a truly "contemptuous attitude to the past". It is this break with obsolete tradition that is one of the substantial conditions which have created the possibility and evoked the necessity of regulating production and of public control over it. In particular,.....it must be stated that the drawing of women and juveniles into production is, at bottom, progressive. It is indisputable that the capitalist factory places these categories of the working population in particularly hard conditions but endeavors to completely ban the work of women and juveniles in industry, or to maintain the patriarchal manner of life that ruled out such work, would be reactionary and utopian. By destroying the patriarchal isolation of these categories of the population who formerly never emerged from the narrow circle of domestic family relationships, by drawing them into direct participation in social production,....industry stimulates their development and increases their independence.

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Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery. The real emancipation of women, real communism, will begin only where and when an all-out struggle begins (led by the proletariat wielding the state power) against this petty housekeeping, or rather when its wholesale transformation into a large-scale socialist economy begins.

Do we in practice pay sufficient attention to this question, which in theory every Communist considers indisputable? Of course not. Do we take proper care of the shoots of communism which already exist in this sphere? Again, the answer is no. Public catering establishments, nurseries, kindergartens---here we have examples of these shoots, here we have the simple, everyday means, involving nothing pompous, grandiloquent or ceremonial, which can really emancipate women, really lessen and abolish their inequality with man as regards their role in social production and public life. These means are not new, they (like all the material prerequisites for socialism) were created by large-scale capitalism\*. But under capitalism they remained, first, a rarity, and secondly---which is particularly important---either profit-making enterprises, with all the worst features of speculation, profiteering, cheating and fraud, or "acrobatics of bourgeois charity", which the best workers rightly hated and despised. Page 61-62

You all know that even when women have full rights, they still remain downtrodden because all housework is left to them. In most cases, housework is the most unproductive, the most savage and the arduous work a woman can do. It is exceptionally petty and does not include anything that would in any way promote the development of the woman....



We are setting up model institutions, dining-rooms and nurseries, that will emancipate women from housework....

We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves. The working women must themselves see to it that such institutions are developed, and this activity will bring about a complete change in their position as compared with what it was under the old, capitalist society. Page 68

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\*Please note that Lenin is not advocating the maintenance of the individual productive unit of housework or of any sharing of this work by man and woman. He is specifically suggesting that this work move into the public sector as has all other production.