

WOMEN: STATUS, CASTE and CLASS

by Margaret Benston

Introduction

In an earlier paper I offered the thesis that women as a group have a fundamentally different relationship to the means of production than do men as a group.¹ If this is true (the argument is summarized below) then women do not 'cut across all classes' as is often asserted. Such assertions obscure the need for an analysis, in detail, of the specific and unique economic position of women in this society. Instead of such an analysis, biological or psychological factors are put forward as the present cause of the situation of women; such factors certainly enter but in a complicated relationship with the underlying economic structures.

The paper referred to above began the broad outlines of such an analysis, by showing that a ~~specific~~ ^{non-wage work in the home,} general economic area/is reserved for women. This implies that the class categories suitable for describing men in industrialized society are not appropriate for women. It does not imply that women constitute a single class; the situation is more complex than that. For example, women who work outside the home and the non-wage earning wives of working class men are often lumped together as working class women. This is clearly seen as incorrect when objective class situations are examined. The non-wage earning wives of working class men, women who work only in the home, have quite different economic situations from their husbands and should not be described ^{in the same way} as working class. Even ~~the~~ women who do work for a wage however and are ^{clearly therefore} working class have a situation which differs from that of men workers. They are not merely women who are workers (and hence exploited since the surplus of their labor is expropriated by others); they are workers who are exploited more ^{economic} because they are women. For both wife and ^{wage} ~~wage~~ worker the situation is fundamentally determined by their being women. This means then that even though women are not a single class they must be dealt with as a group with its own unique characteristics. This implies that there is a caste-like element in the situation of women.² Maintenance of women as non-wage workers in the home or super-exploited wage workers ^{outside} can take place because, in

Berreman's words, a woman is "a person (who) is a member by birth of an identifiable and socially significant group which is so ranked, relative to other such groups that its members have differential access to goods, services, prestige and well-being." ³ ~~and~~ Within this caste-like group some women perform different economic functions than do other women; it can easily be shown that there are different economic roles within the basic area allotted to women as a ^{group} ~~whole~~. Identifying these and showing their inter-relationship to the rest of the society are central to any real class analysis of women in North America.

This essay will be an expansion of the themes outlined above. I will try to (1) give very basic definitions of class and status and discuss the relationship between the two with particular application to women, (2) review the general economic function of women as a group, i.e. begin the class analysis, (3) review definitions of caste and the application of generalized ideas of caste to race relationships in the U.S.; show the compatibility of caste and class concepts and their application to ~~the~~ ^{the group Women} and (4) begin to detail, within the group ~~women~~, specific sectors which ^{have} different economic roles within the main economic areas.

Status and Class

Objective class refers to one's actual relationship to the means of production. For example, there is an objective difference in class terms between someone who must sell his labour for a wage (^{this person is} working class or proletarian) and someone who does not employ others but is self-employed (^{who is} middle-class or petty bourgeois). In industrialized, generalized commodity production for private profit (this describes a part of the capitalist system but not all; ^{of it} peasants in Latin America are an integral part of the system also ⁴ as are women doing unpaid domestic work in the home) the other major categories are those who own the means of production and hire others (these are capitalists or the bourgeoisie) and those who form the 'reserve army of labour': the unemployed, the beggars, those on welfare (these are lumpen-proletariat). ⁵

This is a very schematic and over-simplified description; sub-segments within each class exist for example. Blue collar and white collar workers are instances of such sub-segments of the working class. Both longshoremen and university professors are objectively working class. Such general characterizations of 'objective class situation' may appear so broad as to be meaningless but this is not ~~the~~ ^{so}. From them follow basic relationships to ones work and to society. The political and ideological superstructure which flows from and supports these class distinctions may vary in different specific circumstances, i.e. the economic relations do not, of course, mechanically determine these factors, but the economic conditions are prior and hence essential in understanding the superstructures. Relationships between the sub-segments may also be of crucial importance; for example, if some of these sub-segments can gain short term benefits at the expense of other sub-segments it may obscure the long term identity of their interests.

Even for other groups usually lumped together in one area of production, one can also distinguish a number of different objective classes. Take the peasants for example. For our purposes we will define peasants as those people engaged in pre-industrial agriculture whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers.⁶ In this area, there exist, according to the description by Alevi: the so-called rich peasant or 'capitalist farmer' who owns a substantial amount of land and hires others to work it with him; the middle peasant or independent small holder who works his own land without hired help; the poor peasant or sharecropper who does not own land and is a tenant on the land of others; and the farm laborer or agricultural proletarian who works for a wage.⁷ This diversity of economic roles in a single area of production will have a strong analogy below in the detailed discussion of women's economic functions.

These objective factors are then overlaid and interwoven with the superstructural factors mentioned above. The dominant ideology, for almost

everyone in North America for example, comes from the ruling class and embodies ideals that serve their interests. Many people believe in a great many "truths" and "virtues" which are in fact against their objective class interests (that moon landings are important for national prestige; that "Progress is Our Most Important Product," etc.) This relates/ the question of "consciousness",
to
class
that is, whether or not one perceives one's objective/situation correctly. Some members of the, objectively, working class sector have a consciousness of themselves as "middle class" and are so perceived by others. Their life style, values and aspirations may in fact be identical with those of objectively middle class people while their real interests may be in fact quite different in terms of how the society actually functions. ⁴An important factor in the true or false consciousness that people have of their objective class position is the fact that status and class do not necessarily coincide. Status refers to one's position in a social system with its attendant rights and obligations. These rights and obligations in different positions do not necessarily balance out--the preponderance of one over the other determines the relative differences in status. Automobile workers have working class status--there is no confusion. White collar workers, who also sell their labour for a wage, have in general a higher status and often are simply called 'lower middle class' or some such thing, without the realization that it is status and not class that is being considered. University professors, for example, traditionally have middle class status. ⁸

Both ranked status groups

The question of status is very important where caste-like groups exist.

~~The quote in the Introduction from Berreman will serve as a definition of a caste-like group; in this case one's fundamental status comes from group membership and can never be changed. This fundamental status is shared by all other members in the group although there may then be different~~

relative statuses and possible different class positions within that group.

This is true ^{even of} \wedge castes in India, where members of the same caste may belong and have different statuses.⁹ to different classes. It is also true of the caste-like groups such as U.S. Blacks, Canadian or U.S. Indians ~~and~~ women in North America. Membership in the group is the major determinant in one's life; within the group though there is possible diversity. The classic U.S. expression of this situation is found in the statement "I may be poor white trash but at least I ain't no nigger." The translation of this: the white is lumpen-proletariat and low status in terms of other whites but his identity as a white makes him superior in status to any Black ^{whether} ~~whatsoever~~, worker, middle-class doctor or diplomat.

For women the same considerations hold--being a woman is a well-defined ascribed status. Rights and privileges as Woman are well defined: doors are opened, seats on buses are offered and whistles occur when dress and makeup are well done. Obligations are also well defined: to make a man happy and raise good children. Women are taught how to act their role as Woman (to be technical again, a role is simply the acting out of the rights and obligations given by a status) from the time they are born.

The fundamental status is that of Woman and this status is lower than the fundamental status conferred by being a member of the group Men.¹⁰ Ordinarily however, when we speak of "women's status" we accept this fundamental status as a given and look at a woman's status relative to other women only. This relative status is determined, for most women, by their husbands. Thus a working class man with working class status has a wife with working class status relative to the wife of a doctor. *The doctor's wife* has 'middle class status' relative to other women. Single women usually get their relative status from their fathers. (These are generalizations of course, referring to regular, ~~perceived~~ ^{expected} social behavior, i.e. social norms.)

This lower status of women, as a group, does not mean that all men have, in reality, higher status than all women. It does mean that the criteria are different however. There are clearly cases where the wife of a high status man, say a Rockefeller, has in a real sense higher status than a garbage collector. But hers is a qualitatively different kind of status in that membership in the group Women is never ignored. This comes up very clearly where women have achieved a normally masculine position. There is no trouble with how to treat a doctor's wife: hers is a well-defined status (although her class will be discussed below). But for men or women to deal with a woman doctor is quite different. Is she to be treated as a woman or as a doctor? The status of a woman doctor is not well defined relative to either men or women (although her class position is clear). A most striking example is found with professional wives groups attempting to relate somehow to women in the same professions as their husbands. At Simon Fraser University the "Faculty Women's Association" is in reality the faculty wives organization but it offers membership to all women faculty automatically.

Usual in the discussion of the position of women is a confusion between the status of women relative to other women and the real class positions of women. This confusion is the source of the statement that 'women cut across all classes'. As has been indicated and will be discussed in more detail later, the real economic functions of women, i.e. their class positions, are rooted in the caste-like stratification into Men and Women. Membership in a lower ranked caste-like group renders a person more vulnerable to economic exploitation than a member of a higher ranked group. The caste-like position of women both makes possible and is a result of the general economic rôle they play. This economic rôle is outlined in the next section. Following that section is a more detailed discussion of caste as a concept useful in treating the woman question.

General Economic Functions of Women as a Group

There is a definite economic area which is the unique responsibility of the group Women. This area is the production of simple use value in caring for the nuclear family. This domestic work in the nuclear family consists of essentially ^{pre-commercial} pre-industrial/production since no exchange value is produced. As such, this labour is of a qualitatively different kind than work in the market place which involves production of commodities (items with both use-value and exchange value). The introduction of commodity production has far-ranging implications since it leads eventually to a rationalization and socialization of the means of production (and also under capitalism to the appropriation of surplus value by a capitalist class). This production of simple use value in the nuclear family is estimated to have a value in industrialized society about 44% of the Gross National Product of such countries.¹¹ This work is the responsibility of women and women alone. Because of the necessity for making sure that the work does get done, the normative definition of women is in terms of this economic function alone: Woman's Place Is In The Home. This is the public, 'official' definition of women; the one they are taught in schools and learn from their mothers. It is the social norm. This normative restriction of women's economic function and their secondary status in society are mutually reinforcing--lower status is used to keep women in the home and the special area of work reserved for women has lower status than commodity production outside the home. This secondary status, plus structural discrimination described below, severely limits women in access to education, economic success, positions in public life and often even a living wage. One of the prerequisites for women's liberation then is the socialization of domestic work--the conversion of private domestic work into a public industry.¹²

As a direct result of this "relegation" of women to the home is their special vulnerability to exploitation in the market place. Most women

regard the circumstance of their having to work outside the home as exceptional, as a deviation from the norm. Women themselves do not define themselves as workers, even though they may work 40 hours a week for 25 years or more.

For most married women, even if they work, household duties are a priority. This is the major structural factor, referred to above, in the vulnerability of women in the labor force--in many cases they must take part time jobs or suit their work or career to their husband's needs. ^{Young} /unmarried women expect to marry and again regard their work as temporary or a stop-gap. This leads to a situation where all women, even those who are heads of households, can be treated as transitory and vulnerable members of the labor force. Notice that the strong supporting factor in all of this is the fact that the normative definition of women does not include their participation in the labor force. The self-definition of women is in terms of the definition that society gives them--wives and mothers. Hence the priorities in terms of domestic work.

Thus, as a consequence of this definition, women do not see themselves as 'real' workers entitled to the same rights and benefits (higher wages, pensions, etc.) that men workers have achieved through long struggle. Still less do women demand the kind of benefits (work place daycare, special consideration for shift work, etc.) which would specifically aid them as women in present society. Because of the structural factors which limit their participation in the labor force mainly to low-skill jobs and because of the lack of consciousness of themselves as real members of the work force at all, women as a group constitute one of the most exploited sectors of the labor force. Everyone knows that women were exploited on a large scale in early industrialization. The extent to which such exploitation still continues is only now becoming visible as research in this area revives.¹³

For all of these reasons, women function as an important super-exploitable part of the labor force. They also function as an important reserve labor army, particularly since they can be tucked away in the home when they are not needed. The normative definition of women as "those responsible for producing simple use value in caring for the nuclear family" is thus incomplete. As mentioned above, it is partly because ^{this normative,} ~~the~~ ideological definition does not include ~~women~~ "women

also function as a super-exploited part of the work force and as a reserve labor army" that women function so well in these capacities. This is a very clear example of how the dominant ideology serves the interests of the ruling class.

As a result of the dual economic function of women as a group--unpaid pre-industrial domestic labor in the home and availability as flexible cheap labor in the area of commodity production--details of a class analysis become quite complex. Specifically, there is not only the possible existence of several classes within the group doing only unpaid domestic work in the home but many women combine two essentially different kinds of labour. In addition, a woman's economic role often changes several times during her life. Before attempting to deal with these problems, the overall question of women as a caste-like group and the relationship of caste and class must be investigated.

Caste and Class

Gerald Berreman, in a paper which describes the analogies between caste in India and racism in the United States, particularly in the South, uses the term color-caste to describe the situation in the U.S. He defines caste for this purpose as a "hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent."¹⁴ Clearly such a definition does not apply to women since endogamy--prohibition of marriage outside of one's own caste--is meaningless in this context. He further goes on to say though that "here hierarchy includes inequality both in status and in access to goods and services." In a later reply to a critique of the paper, ^{he} says "I would point out that, for the study of social processes, the significant thing about membership in a caste is that a person is a member by birth of an identifiable and socially significant group which is so ranked relative to other such groups that its members have differential access to goods, services, prestige, and well-being."¹⁵ Clearly, caste is an extreme, rigid form of social stratification with an

economic function. It not only makes the members of the upper caste feel better (they have higher status) but it gives them more. One of the main effects of caste is the economic exploitation of lower castes relative to higher ones.¹⁶ A caste or caste-like system provides a structural vulnerability to such economic exploitation.

The way in which the definition of women as a group functions to define them as a 'sexual caste' and hence exploitable both in the home and in the job market is detailed above. It is for this reason that it is important to emphasize that women as workers are objectively different than are men as workers. Women as workers are more vulnerable to exploitation because they are women. They do not need to simply achieve true working class consciousness; they can only achieve full consciousness of their exploitation as workers simultaneously as they understand the full extent of their exploitation as women.

It was mentioned above, in the section on status, that the existence of a caste-like group does not necessarily preclude status and class differences within the group. Within the group of Blacks for example there are a very few members of the middle class (probably not more than a few per cent); the bulk of the Blacks are objectively working class or lumpen-proletariat.

Historically sharecropping (i.e. being a peasant) was also an important category but this has diminished steadily since the First World War as migration from the rural South to ~~the~~ ^{both Southern and Northern} cities has occurred.¹⁷ Regardless of class position or status within the group however, the primary interaction with the rest of the world is in terms of being Black. This supercedes all other considerations, even in cases where the person has ostensibly "made it". And these cases of apparent escape from the usual consequences of being Black are so exceptional as to be irrelevant. They serve only to justify and legitimize the rhetoric of 'equal opportunity' so important in U.S. ruling class ideology.

The Blacks perform~~s~~ essentially the same economic roles as whites at present; they are however made much more exploitable by the color-caste system. This can be seen in the proportionately greater numbers of the lumpen-proletariat and blue collar workers among Blacks than among whites, the smaller proportion of white collar workers, the very small numbers of middle class Blacks and the essentially non-existent Black capitalist class.¹⁸

Classes Within the Group Women

The case of women is not so straightforward and the analogy with color-caste only provides a starting point. Women are not only made more vulnerable in the market place (the number of objectively middle class women is only a few percent and the ratio of female to male earnings is always around 50% in Canada regardless of educational level¹⁹) but they also do unpaid domestic work. The same woman may in fact be performing two quite different economic roles at the same time. This dual function of women has often been noted²⁰ but is not usually analyzed in class terms.

A second complicating factor is that, even when a mother does not work outside the home while the children are young, she increasingly expects to work when the children are older. Thus for many women, regardless of husband's occupation, a typical life pattern is: work or college before marriage, housewifery with emphasis on motherhood after marriage for five to twenty years and then return to work outside the home (still keeping the responsibility for the housework of course).

Thus the possibilities for different relationships to production in the home and in the market place are many. One extreme is that of the unmarried working woman. In this case her household duties are so minimal as to be irrelevant and her class position is dependent on her being a woman in a specific work situation. An unmarried woman who sells her labor for a wage is a working class woman. Don't forget however that the whole phrase must go together.

She is not simply working class, she is a working-class-woman. The importance of considering both the woman part as well as the working class part is the point of the whole concept of sexual-caste. An unmarried woman doctor is unambiguously a middle-class-woman, etc. This extreme is the clearest; it is not the most important numerically simply because a majority of women are married.

A second extreme we can consider is that of the married women who do not work outside the home (about 70% in Canada in 1967²¹) There is an important difference between this case and the preceding one however since many of these women have worked outside the home before or will do so in the future (or both). In describing this period in these women's lives, we can find several possible ways in which household work including child care can be done. One way, the most common, is where the woman does all of it herself. The wives of blue collar workers and lower paid white collar workers are certainly in this category. It probably includes also most of the wives of higher paid white collar workers as well. A second possibility is that part of the work is done by hired help: a cleaning woman or housekeeper. In this case, the woman still does a significant part of the work herself. Wives of affluent white collar workers and middle class men are possible members of this group although no doubt many of these also do all of their own housework. A third group would be the wives of the bourgeoisie who act as household managers; they do not do any of the work themselves but they are responsible for supervising those who actually do it. The confusion between the first and third cases, along with the relative status differential, is probably the cause of questions like: "What do you mean, all women are oppressed. You can't tell me that Jackie Onassis needs liberating." Jackie Kennedy Onassis is oppressed relative to the men around her. Her life is filled with trivia; it is limited to shopping in New York or Athens for furs and jewelry while her husbands wheel and deal or shop for empires. Having noted her oppression, I will note also that Mrs. Onassis needs (and deserves) very little sympathy.

The importance of the time factor in women's lives is in the structural liability in terms of jobs outside the home. This was discussed above. It also ^{without a} doubt makes a difference in the way that different women react to their situation. For example, the non-wage-working wives of blue collar and white collar workers do objectively exactly the same work at this period in their lives. Even the non-wage-working doctor's wife may be in the same boat. However, their history and their expectations are different: the wife of the white collar man or the doctor's wife probably has more education, will more likely work outside the home as the children get older, expects a different kind of job, etc. compared with the wife of a blue collar worker.²²

A third case is a combination of the two above when a married woman, possibly with children, works outside the home. Such women then do two jobs since the care of the home and children are still their responsibility. Even if there are no children, caring for house and husband still constitutes a significant amount of labour.²³ In this area there are some interesting questions one can ask which elude easy description in the usual class terms. What is one to make, for example, of the woman doctor who spends her day doing her objectively middle class work and then goes home to cook hubby's dinner? In the example given in the Introduction comparing women who work for a wage with wives of working class men, we can now be quite specific. The non-wage-working wives of working class men are definitely not working class women. The two phrases constitute two different descriptions of how women can relate to the means of production. One woman can engage in both activities, either simultaneously or sequentially. Therefore, either one or both of these entire phrases are necessary for the class description (remember too the the inclusion of the word woman is crucial) and simple, single class descriptions are not sufficient for the situation of women. This is not a unique situation, it is for example somewhat analogous to

the situation of peasants in Brazil where a man who farms a very little land, often inadequate for his needs, may become in addition a wage-laborer or share-crop additional land as is necessary.²⁴

What I have tried to show is that the idea of women as a caste-like group does not imply class homogeneity but rather is a powerful tool in analyzing the various class relationships that exist with the group. The value of the caste concept is in showing clearly that women must come to a consciousness of their various exploitations as women. The characterizations made above of differences in the ways that women relate to the means of production are very tentative and incomplete. The question of welfare mothers was not dealt with for example. Such characterizations do show however that class descriptions of women must be done very carefully and that such descriptions must be very flexible and often dual. I have not tried to do more than outline and characterize the economic basis for women's oppression. To be useful, such an outline must be filled in with specifics, particularly specifics about the way in which superstructural factors like the educational system, psychological oppression, the media, and the legal and political systems influence in different ways the different sectors of women. Only when we have such specific understanding will we be able to work most effectively to show women how they must organize themselves to end their own oppression.

References and Notes

1. Margaret Benston, "Political Economy of Women's Liberation," Monthly Review, September, 1969.
2. The concept of caste has been applied to women a number of times before. Helen Hacker in "Women as a Minority Group", Social Forces, Vol. 30, 1951, p.65. compares the caste status of Blacks and women in the U.S. She also gives references to earlier work. No class analysis is done. Roxanne Dunbar and Vernon Grizzard in "Caste and Class" in No More Fun and Games #3, available from 371 Somerville Ave., Somerville, Mass 02143, deal with "caste as a barrier to class consciousness" and do not examine details of the relationship between caste and class and the consequent kind of consciousness required.
3. Gerald Berreman, Letter to the Editor, American Journal of Sociology, March, 1961, p. 511. This is Berreman's very general approach to the concept of caste.
4. A. G. Frank, Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America, Monthly Review Press, New York (1969).
5. An opposing thesis (which I present very schematically) is that the capitalists, i.e. owners, are no longer important and that it is managers and technocrats who now wield real power. For the most recent arguments showing that the power still rests with a capitalist ruling class, the owners of the means of production, see G. William Domhoff, Who Rules America, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, (1967).
6. Eric Wolf, Peasants, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey (1966), pp 3-4.
7. Hamza Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution" The Socialist Register, 1965,
8. The difference between status and class in such a case was dramatically shown at Simon Fraser University this October when a strike involving faculty in the Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology Department was broken by the use of traditional labor injunctions. Such injunctions had only been used before in labor disputes involving the traditional "working class."
9. Alan Beals, Gopalpus, A South India Village, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York (1966). Chapter 4.
10. That this belief is held by men needs no documentation. That everyone, male and female, in this society accepts it is shown by the P. Goldberg study where women rated scholarly papers in all fields higher if they thought men had written them than if they thought women were the authors (see Phillip Goldberg, "Are Women Prejudiced Against Women" Transaction, April, 1968, 5, p. 28
11. British economist Colin Clark, quoted by Sylva Gelber of the Canadian Labor department. Reported in the Vancouver Sun, Wed., Sept. 24, 1969. p. 51.
12. Margaret Benston, op cit. See also ^{Friedrich}~~Frederick~~ Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. Progress Publishers, Moscow (1968). Chapter IX.
13. Alice James, "Poverty: Canada's Legacy to Women" available from the Vancouver Women's Caucus, 307 W. Broadway, Rm. 6, Vancouver, B.C., Canada. The figures for Canada compare very closely with these for the U.S.
14. Gerald Berreman, "Caste in India and in the United States", American Journal of Sociology, September, 1960. One of the reasons Berreman uses the concept of color-cast is to show that the present position of blacks is not based on "genetic differences." Similar I wish to use the concept of sexual-caste to show that "biology" is not the basis for the present position of women.
15. Gerald Berreman, Letter to the Editor, op. cit.
16. Although some of the traditionally higher ^{status} castes in India have, over time, lost their original economic dominance. The basic principles still persist however. See Alan Beals, Gopalpus, op. cit.

References and Notes (cont.)

17. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Bantam, New York (1968) p. 239.
18. ibid. p. 254.
19. Alice James, "Poverty" op. cit.
20. Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, Women's Two Roles: Home and Work, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, (1968). is a good example of this. Also see the Women's Section of your local newspaper.
21. Alice James, "Poverty" op. cit.
22. ibid. I am indebted to Liz Briemberg who pointed out the importance of ~~this~~ whole time factor and particularly this point.
23. Margaret Benston, op.cit.
24. A.G. Frank, Development and Underdevelopment, op. cit., see Chapter IV.

INTRODUCTION

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IS THE WIFE OF A WORKING CLASS MAN A WORKING CLASS WOMAN?