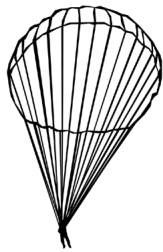




Dismantling the Master's House



excerpts from
The Housing Monster





Macho Shit

"The assumption of one role after another, provided he mimics stereotypes successfully, is titillating to him. Thus the satisfaction derived from a well-played role is in direct proportion to his distance from himself, to his self-negation and self-sacrifice."

Raoul Vaneigem



The macho construction worker is a widely recognized cliché. The construction site is often referred to (and denounced) as a model sexist workplace. Whether construction workers are more prejudiced than men working at hospitals, universities or used car lots is an open question—a question that misses the point.

Construction work remains male. Although the number of women doing construction work has grown, women are still only a very small percentage of construction workers, and it's quite common for there to be no woman at all on any given job. With no women around, construction sites can sometimes have the feel of a

high school boys locker room. Things that would get you reprimanded in most workplaces (and lynched at a university) are common on a construction site.

Of course it's hard to be just one of the guys if you're a woman. Where the work culture is filled with macho shit it can make the lives of women workers absolutely miserable. Often the image of the sexist construction site is enough to keep women from even considering working in construction. The image reinforces the conditions it grows out of.

When a bunch of guys are together in the same place, often the first thing they talk about is women. Getting to know the new guy on the job often starts with asking about his woman. Everyone wants to see pictures of each other's wives and girlfriends—preferably naked ones. Talking about women is an easy way to socialize, because everyone's got something to say. (Openly gay construction workers are incredibly rare, but the old cliché that the most vocally homophobic guy on the site is a repressed homosexual is often obviously true.)

Just being one of the guys is a way to form some community, but it also shapes that community. The limited use of machines to replace tasks done by workers means that the work requires a lot of strength



on the part of the worker. You have to be tough to do the work, and the fact that no one cares if you show up for work unshaven and with a black eye, adds to the image of toughness. Often an important part of getting the respect of the other workers is to prove that you're man enough to do the job. Being macho becomes part of the job—and being able to do the job makes you one of the guys. This happens more with the trades that are more dangerous and physical, like ironwork, but can happen in any construction job.

Being just one of the guys has its uses and appeal. Any time a moderately good-looking woman walks by the site it's time to take a break and check her out. Time spent talking about or checking out girls is time spent not working. Also, in addition to getting respect for skill and experience we get respect for being hard. In this, only the electrician who broke his knee because he got his hand stuck on a feeder wire in the ceiling and had to kick out the ladder from under him is on the same level as the ironworkers.

Like racial or cultural communities, the identification based on playing the role of the macho construction worker creates a community that includes the workers and the boss. Unlike racial or cultural communities, it doesn't function on a construction site to divide the workers against each other, for the simple reason that there are very few women construction workers. It works, but not by playing men and women workers off against each other.

Being a tough guy is not mainly about admiring the developer's assistants' tits or talking about which of the girls who work

at the bar down the road you'd like to fuck. Being a tough guy means working on live electrical wires (rather than stopping work to go down to the electrical room and turn them off). It's not bothering with safety equipment. It's working overtime any time the boss needs you. It's continuing to work when you're injured and not complaining about it. It's lifting heavy materials yourself rather than getting someone else to help with them. Macho shit is profitable. We do things that make the boss more money and are directly against our own interests. All we get in return is the respect of being "one tough motherfucker."

Imaginary respect compensates for real lack of respect and machismo becomes an ideology.

Although it can be very useful for the boss, a macho atmosphere doesn't exist on every construction site. In order to keep up the atmosphere and to be just one of the guys, the boss and the foreman have to play along. This means lifting heavy shit and doing dangerous jobs themselves, rather than always getting us to do them—obviously an unattractive prospect.

Also, in companies where men and women work together and do the same jobs, this kind of machismo loses its coherence. The ability to do the job stops being a sign of being a real man, and the social side of a bunch of guys standing around talking about girls loses its connection to working hard and being tough—it stops being profitable. A machismo that includes women is not impossible, but a far weaker ideology.

Still, construction companies that employ lots of women are rare, and being a construction worker continues to mean being one of the guys. In this atmosphere, the women who do work for any length of time in construction tend to be tough, competent and to have a lot of balls.







A Woman's Place

*"I am a marvelous housekeeper.
Every time I leave a man I keep his house."*

Zsa Zsa Gabor

Not all relations in a capitalist society are value relations. The construction and sale of commodities presupposes and interacts with relationships that have very little to do with production for exchange. The economy develops on top of these relationships, creates the context in which they develop and puts pressure on them to develop in certain ways. The house is a central place where these two kinds of relationships come together.

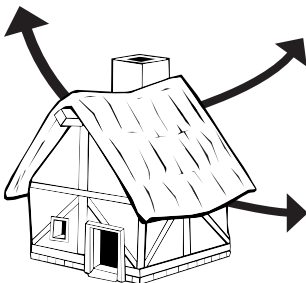
In Medieval Europe, the household was a very different thing than it is today. Most people were small peasant farmers, who lived on or near the land they farmed and produced most of what they needed at home. The craftsmen in the cities would usually live above their workshops. Apprentices lived with journeymen or both lived as part of the household of master craftsmen. And aristocratic households were even larger. They were based around a noble family but included as members of the household cooks, laundry women, stable hands, maids, and a number of other live-in servants. There was a market, money lending, merchants, and labor was even sometimes done in exchange for a wage. But production had not been taken over by the market, and turned into production for exchange. The basic production unit of society was the household. Home and work were usually the same place.

Medieval Europe was patriarchal. Male heads of households were in charge, and



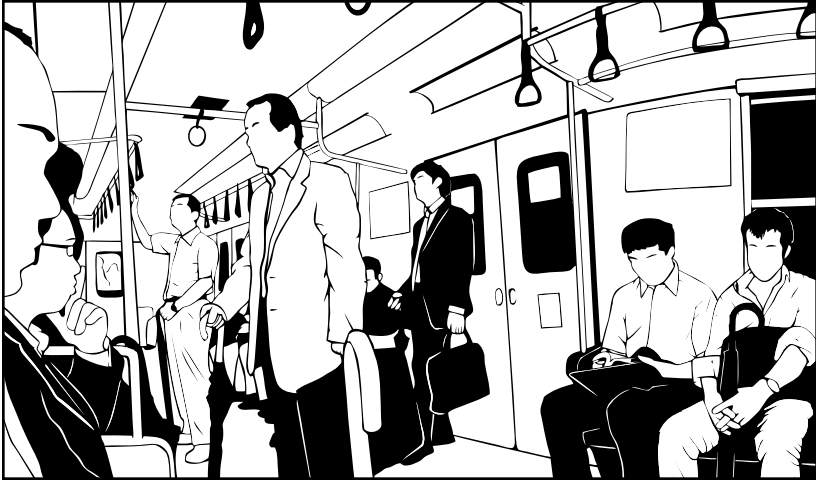
women had very limited property, inheritance, and other legal rights. Still, because production was centered in the household, women participated in productive activity. Aristocratic women were usually under the control of their husbands and fathers, sometimes married away for political purposes, but they also had a central role in managing the household and the servants. Wives and daughters of craftsmen were usually excluded from guilds, but it was assumed that they would take part in the trade practiced in their household (and sometimes wives took over the running of the trade if the husband died). Peasant women may not have done the hard labor in the fields, but they picked up the extra tasks that needed to be done—taking care of the vegetable or herb garden and the poultry, shearing the sheep, milking the cow or the goat, making butter, cheese or bread, brewing ale, making and mending clothes, and taking anything extra to market. Women's work filled in and backed up the productive activity in the household.

As the capitalist mode of production developed, all this changed. Things were increasingly made outside the home. Instead of peasant women using spinning wheels at home, or weavers using hand looms in the home-workshop, the



process of making cloth was broken down into its different parts, each done by different weaving workers in a factory using mechanical looms—water powered, then steam powered. Production became more and more production for the growing market—production of value. The traditional class relations between peasants or servants and their lords, between apprentices, journeymen and master

Early company housing was one response to this. By buying up land around the factory and housing the workers there, workers could spend more time working and less time walking to work. As state-subsidized mass transit systems were created, streetcars and subways moved wage workers quickly from home to work and back. This reduced the need for employer housing and increased the



craftsmen were eroded as the market expanded. Productive activity was increasingly disentangled from other activities and the ability to work became everywhere a commodity. A new class relationship was created—the relationship between wage workers and capitalists. Wherever it was imposed, capitalism created these same relationships. Work separated itself from the rest of life in time and space. The people you ate dinner with were no longer the people you worked with, and the two were done in increasingly distant places.

By separating the workplace from the home, capitalism invented the commute. As property prices in newly industrialized cities climbed, workers were forced to walk further and further to get to work.

distance between home and work. The mass-production of the private automobile pushed this even further.

For thousands of years, women in Western civilization had not had an equal place in society to men. A woman's place was in the home. So long as the basic units of production in society were households, though, women participated in production, and inequality was somewhat lessened. As more and more things were manufactured outside the home, the capitalist firm replaced the household as the basic unit of production. The household was hollowed out. A strict dividing line between work and homework developed and a new capitalist household began to form. To the extent that women were stuck at home and did not participate

in wage labor or the running of businesses, they were increasingly isolated, unequal and cut off from public life.

The capitalist household is a unit of consumption. Commodities that are produced and bought elsewhere are taken home to be consumed together as a household. And the house itself is a commodity that is collectively consumed by

Capitalism creates divisions between mental and manual work, between skilled and unskilled work, between agricultural, manufacturing and service work, between work and unwaged activities. These divisions of labor interact with all the other differences already existing in society, and different jobs get associated with different kinds of people, based on their sex, ethnicity,



the household. Housework may be individual, lonely, hard, tiring, but it is also direct. When meals are cooked for the family, they get from the people who make them to the people who need them without having to be exchanged. They have no value. Cooking, cleaning, washing, doing the laundry, are done for what they produce, not in order to create surplus value and profit. Serving a meal to house guests is like serving food to customers in a restaurant in only the most superficial way—the same way that knitting a pair of socks for a family member is like working in a sock factory operating computerized circular knitting machines. Housework is, by definition, unproductive under capitalism. It does not produce value, and no one profits off it.

immigration status, etc... This creates attitudes of superiority and fear or resentment and anger dividing working people against each other. To the extent that being a woman means staying at home and being a specialist in unpaid activity, the rift between home and work is the basis for inequality. As more and more activities leave the household, being isolated in the house becomes more and more crippling and oppressive.

Like many of the ideals that circulate in capitalist society, "traditional" family values are constantly undermined by the circulation of value. Under capitalism, family life is expensive. The more children a common medieval family had, the more farm hands or apprentices there were to help out. A wage worker can't

bring his children to work with him to cut down on the amount of work he has to do. To the modern worker, children and housewives are extra mouths to feed. The guys working three jobs and always looking for overtime are inevitably the ones with big families. Supporting a full-time housewife is a bit of a luxury, and the further down the income scale, the less possible it becomes. Low wages and long work hours can easily cause family life to disintegrate. And the poorest, homeless parents can sometimes have their children taken away by government social services on economic grounds alone. "Traditional" family values perpetuate inequality, but they are popular exactly because they are constantly under attack by capital.

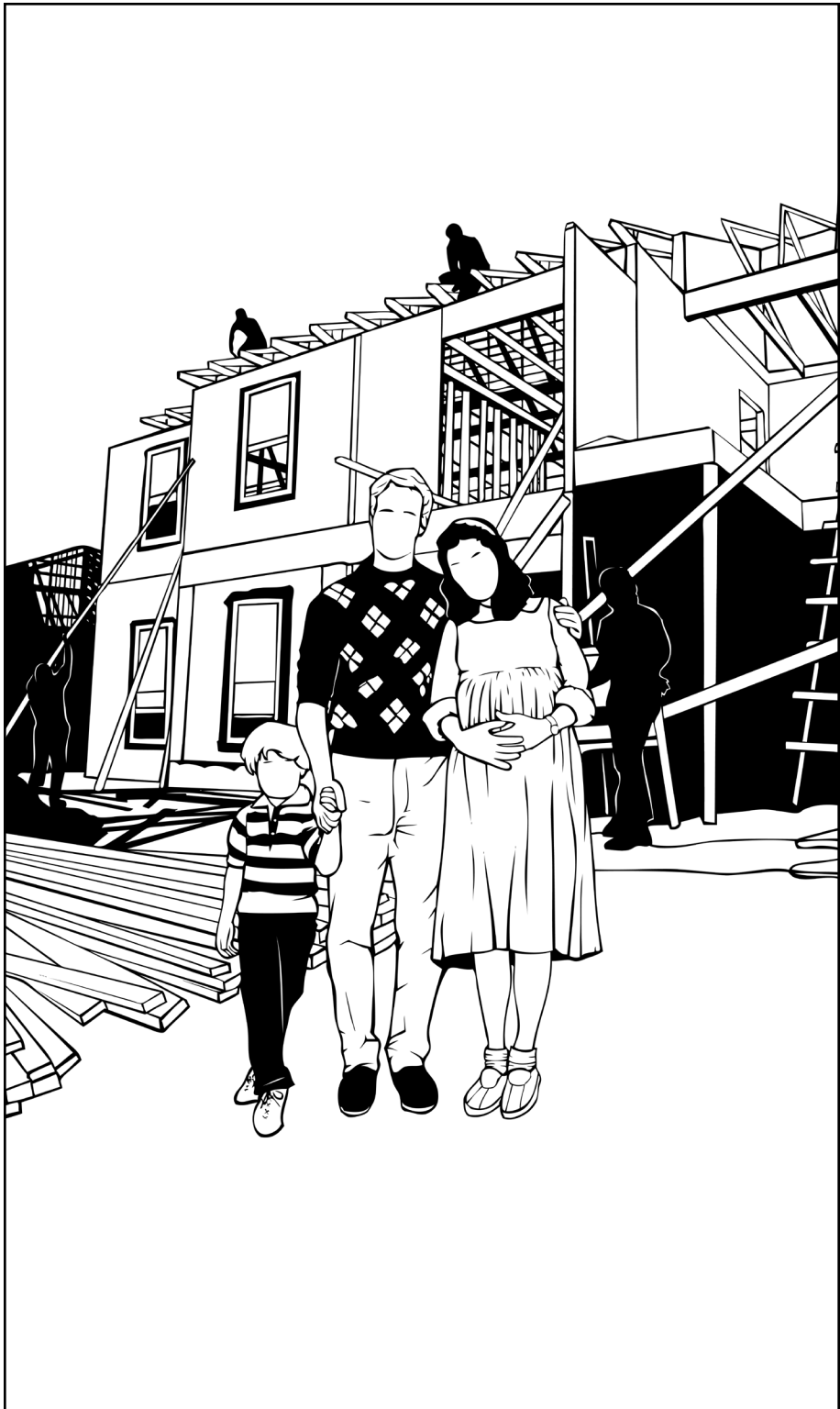
The authority of the head of the household is no longer essential to the system. Now it's workers at work who need to be controlled. The rich woman and the poor woman both may suffer from isolation and exclusion, but there is no sisterhood. Working class women have always had to work—often at low wage jobs and often dealing with the housework after work. For the rich, housework can be dumped on the hired help. What improves the situation of working women and the situation of businesswomen are not the same things. Only the most narrow-minded feminist could imagine that increasing the number of female CEOs and politicians is somehow a gain for working women. Having limited options to participate in exploitation is a completely different exclusion

from being exploited for low pay. Margaret Thatcher was not a step forward for the working women of England.

The market has to keep expanding. Direct relationships have to be commodified. The housewife who used to bake bread, more likely buys it from a bakery. More expensive, canned beans replace dried beans that need to be cooked for hours. With restaurants, cooking is moved completely out of the house. What used to be housework is now someone's job. Productive work is work that creates surplus value for a boss—and there is constant pressure to make everything productive. People aren't born and don't die at home anymore except by accident. No one but eccentric hippies and religious fundamentalists educates their children at home anymore. The cases where work reenters the house, it is an invasion. The woman who assembles plastic toys at home for a piece wage while she watches her children, or the internet sex worker who sets up a camera in her bedroom are not doing housework.

To oppose value relationships from the point of view of the wholesome household is incoherent. The privacy, intimacy and isolation of the household only exist in contrast to the public, impersonal, contact of the market. When we begin to fight for our class interests, we come into conflict with both worlds.





the housing monster

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excerpts on gender and work

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