

12. Is Housework Soluble in Love?

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This paper discusses two connected yet distinct points: on the one hand the status and value of domestic and family activities, and on the other the question of the control of these activities. While these two points can be thought of as distinct, it is important to stress the connections and links between the two.

The problem of housework appears as such with the beginning of industrialization and the concomitant separation between productive and domestic spaces and times. For Marx there is on the one hand production work and on the other the work of reproduction: reproduction of life and the labour force. This separation is registered in the sexual division of work and reinforces it: production work is constituted in a separation from the reproductive work which historically has been assigned only to women. Factory work is thought, in its temporality as in its organization, by underlying the separate existence of family and domestic work: it is work full-time, without interruption, using physical and mental capacities to the maximum, since one can rest once back at home.

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As Danièle Kergoat, among others, defines it, the sexual division of work rests upon “the priority assignment of men to the productive sphere and women to the reproductive sphere.” Productive work is organized according to the temporality of male workers (who are freed from all family and domestic concerns), despite the fact that since the beginning of industrialization women have been present in waged production. Domestic activities have been relegated to the private sphere and are unpaid. Viewed from the market, these activities are neither recognized nor visible: housework is only visible when not done. Let us recall that until the 1970’s Swiss statistics had a single category for “shareholders, housewives and other inactives”.

Are domestic activities differentiated from productive work only by the fact that they are not paid, or are they of a different nature? Is it the fact of producing, of transforming nature that defines work (Marx), or is it the framework of norms and measures in which these activities are inserted which determines the “work” quality?

This question can be illustrated by thinking through the example of sexuality: sexual relations with a prostitute (a sex worker, as they define themselves) fit clearly into the logic of work: there is a contractual negotiation which defines the time, the conditions and the remuneration. There is also what the Latin-American feminists call transactional sex, i.e. a sexual relationship associated – explicitly or not – with a symbolic or real remuneration. At the other extreme, there is a sex act which is part of a relation of desire and affection. In these three cases, the actions and activities are the same, and it is indeed the framework in which they fit and the type of relations

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which result from this which are determinant. The same applies to child-care or to housework itself.

Domestic and family activities are thus characterized as tasks carried out in one's own home (or surroundings) concerning oneself or one's family and unpaid. One could also add that they are mainly carried out by women. Dominique Méda for instance argues that human activity has different forms: "productive activities (work) which at the same time aim at producing and obtaining a remuneration. . . . family activities, love, friendship. . . the logic of which is clearly unrelated to the one of work: the family community and the relations instituted between its members differ radically from the relations established between workers and their boss, the activity is not forced in the same way, it does not pursue the same goals." (Presentation seminar, Paris 1).

According to this logic one we would describe family activities as more of the order of gift exchange, as described by Mauss. They would aim, through gifts and counter-gifts, to develop and maintain social bonds between the members of a family, which is why it is only when the bond breaks that one starts [counting], and that one demands and obtains a form of remuneration (e.g. alimony).

However this apparent separation is problematic since it supposes the existence of two separate spheres, driven by irreconcilable logics. It partly obliterates the question of domination and the social relations of sex, and it naturalizes in a way family activities. The social relations of sex are constructed in the private as well as in the public and professional spheres. Housework and paid work cannot be analyzed as two separate entities because they form a system. "The time of wage-earning is placed and

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conditioned by the time of housework” (Hirata and Zari-fian) and viceversa. Professional life and family life are articulated to one another because they participate in the same logic of relations of sex and of the sexual division of work. The professional trajectory of women and/or men, as well as their family trajectories, are thus narrowly dependent on the dominant conceptions concerning relations between men and women in society.

Productive work does not exist without the incommensurable contribution of reproductive and domestic work. Enterprises thus valorize this “human capital” that they themselves never accumulated, but which they nevertheless regard as forming an integral part of their fixed assets. This “capital” was constituted by the common and daily unpaid activities, which make up the activity of reproducing one’s life in an inhabited area. (Dalla Costa, Fortunati, Gorz)

To end the invisibility and the non-recognition of domestic activities, the feminist movements of the 1970’s strongly asserted its status of “work”. As D. Kergoat and H. Hirata write: “it then became obvious that an enormous mass of work is done for free by women, that this work is invisible, that it is done not for oneself but for others and always in the name of nature, of love or maternal duty. . . . as though the fact that it is done by women – and only women – was self evident, and that it should be neither seen nor recognized”.

Inspired by the work of Mariarosa Dalla Costa (Italy), Selma James (England), Silvia Federici (USA), a feminist movement for wages for housework appeared in Italy, the USA, England, Switzerland and Germany. With a Marxist vision of social relations, it demanded wages for this work,

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in order to show, on the one hand that it is invaluable, on the other hand to reinforce through this claim the social power of women, the level of wages reflecting here the existing balance of forces. The demand for wfh also aimed to put an end to the capital's theft of women's unpaid labor and subvert the division capitalism has created within the workforce through the differential between waged and unwaged work.

Another feminist current, of a more neo-liberal inclination, seeks to calculate the monetary value of domestic activities and to include them in the calculation of the GNP. In this logic, the only light which can reveal this "black and invisible" economy is that of the commercial economy. However, the very nature of this lighting and its socio-economic vocabulary can only reveal its transformations and the extent of its penetration by capital and the state. As Louise Vandelac puts it "only what is recognizable according to the analytical grid and patterns of thought of the commercial economy (i.e. similarities and reductions already effectuated by the dominant economy) makes visible this shadow economy".

To analyze everything through the grid of the commercial economy implies that it is the only explanatory framework for human activities, and to that extent it partakes of the neo-liberal ideology, which affirms that the merchant logic must penetrate all aspects of our lives. On this subject, one can also note that women's desire "to free themselves" from part of this work was largely instrumentalized in order to widen the range of consumer goods. Women's demands encouraged the creation of services and goods which, on entering the domestic sphere, accelerated the transformation of work itself. Family work remains

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‘free,’ unpaid, but is more and more expensive. An important part of our wages are used to pay for these products and services. As Monique Haicaut says: “housework thus becomes increasingly expensive, technical and specialized. It is increasingly dependant on commercial innovation and public services.”

That brings me to the second point of the article, i.e. the question of control, the standardization, or even professionalisation of the domestic sphere. Indeed, to accord domestic activities with commercial logic (spaces of production and/or consumption) it is necessary, exactly as capital does for paid work, to control productivity and standardize activities.

From time immemorial, religion [has] codified and controlled social relations and more particularly sexuality. With the separation of public / commercial and private / domestic spaces and times, control has been differentiated. If there is not yet an office of “time and methods” in private houses, there are various authorities which propose normative frameworks for domestic activities. From the 19th century on, the medical discourse has replaced little by little the religious one, always targeting sexuality, but also the education of children (to fight against the “degeneration of the race”) and hygiene, as Genevieve Heller showed in her book “Propre en Ordre” (trans. « Nice and Tidy »).

In addition, these normative injunctions are directed first of all towards women. Today, with the diversification of the medical disciplines, the normative discourse is also conveyed by psychologists, nutritionists, pediatricians, discourses and rules taken up and dramatised by the media (e.g. TV shows like *Super Nanny*, *My house is dirty*).

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The state too plays a big role, mainly through compulsory schooling, which imposes a temporal framework, but also through standards of cleanliness and for education of children. For example: until the 1960's, it was obligatory in some Swiss cantons for young girls in secondary education to spend some months doing « home economics », while their male school-fellows did their military service. Let us note in passing the parallel between service to the nation and service to the husband, between obedience learned by training with weapons or with the ironing board.

As I already mentioned, housework has deeply changed: women must now manage a variety of machines, transport their children for leisure or extra-curricular activities, juggle with the programs of all the family members. If manual work has decreased (mending socks, preparing jams etc.), the organization of space, of activities and family programs has become more and more complex, without bringing any change in the social relations between sexes. The sexual division of work is recomposed according to “a sexual semantics which does not show any signs of deep and durable changes” (Mr. Haicaut).

Consequently, one observes a growing porosity between productive and domestic spaces, or rather an extension of managerial modes into family and domestic spaces: planning, negotiation, arrangement, establishment of objectives become domestic requirements. The couple has to be managed. One must have educational objectives for his/her children, plan one's stocks. Standards of efficiency and productivity, rules concerning know-how, tend to impose themselves and standardize practices, and thereby control them.

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By this extension of commercial and managerial relations to all the aspects of living together, capitalism tries to force into the “market” all the human capacities, and that which still escaped it - the forms of collaboration or human solidarities which resisted a purely financial or “managerial” approach, i.e. the non-profitable (F. Bloch).

In conclusion, the question is how to make housework recognized without inserting it into commercial, thus controlled, categories. How to obtain recognition for activities centered on concern for the other and the creation of social bonds, without having them be analyzed only from the point of view of the commercial economy, and finally how to recognize that a great part of human exchanges are outside market relations? Perhaps it is a question of reconsidering the analyses and social organizations centered on productive, paid work and an economicistic vision of the world. This vision has constantly devalued living, non-commodified work. Economists, Marxists as well as neo-liberals, when they finally accepted - under the pressure of the women’s movements - the existence of housework, tried at all costs to see it in relation to the productive sphere, which remains the only measure of social recognition and power.

How to struggle against social exclusion and the exploitation of this production-reproduction relation? How to fight so that women do not pay such a scandalous price, how to fight the poverty and solitude of the mothers, while avoiding reinforcing a productivist logic, the logic by which the sexual division of work and male domination were developed? It is a question of putting reproductive work at the center of the debates and perspectives of alternatives to neo-liberal thought, such as those developed in

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the networks of the social and solidarity economies? We must collectively find the means of socializing housework through associative, co-operative, mixed, self-managed networks of friends, without becoming exhausted in the fight for the sharing of tasks on the level of the couple, and while debating the role of the state. As Gorz says “Social relations withdrawn from the influence of value, from competitive individualism and from commercial exchange reveal these, by contrast, in their political dimension, as extensions of the power of capital. This opens up a front of total resistance to this power. It necessarily overflows towards new practices of life, consumption, collective appropriation of common spaces and the culture of everyday life.”¹

¹André Gorz, *économie de la connaissance, exploitation des savoirs*, Entretien avec Carlo Vercellone et Yann Moulier Boutang, 2004, *Revue Multitudes* N°15.