

Sexism, Capitalism & the Family

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(This paper was written for the Womens Liberation Conference, London, November 1972)

The relation between sexism and capitalism is often expressed as an opposition: is it a sexist society or a capitalist society? Are we interested in feminism or socialism? We see socialist women denouncing feminism as 'bourgeois,' feminists criticising socialism as 'male dominated'. In my view the present society is both capitalist and sexist. I can't pretend to be offering here a 'theory' of the inter-relationship of these two structures, but I hope to show that one fruitful way of approaching the problem is to analyse sexism as the structure which dominates the world of reproduction and capitalism as the structure which dominates the world of production. Further, that these two worlds are divided along a sex axis: the world of production is the world of men, the world of reproduction the world of women, and that male domination of the world of production by men is an instrument for the economic oppression of women. At the centre of the world of reproduction lies the patriarchal family, within which male domination and female oppression are constantly reproduced. This family system, as we know only too well, is generally thought of as a 'natural' human structure. In fact it is by now an extremely artificial unit, dependent on a high level of economic development to maintain it.

The objective of Women's Liberation as a feminist movement should be the abolition of the sexist structure, and of the patriarchal family. This is not exactly the same as a struggle to abolish capitalism. The history of socialist revolutions has shown that socialism can coexist with the patriarchal family. If the object of socialism is to make men more equal, women can not be expected to have a great interest in it.

As a focal point of this account of the relationship of the patriarchal family to capitalism, I want to take the working class family, and try to analyse the situation of the woman there. For the sake of simplicity of exposition, I assume a family within which a classic sexual division of labour exists: the man is the wage earner (bread-winner), the woman a housewife and mother.

Sexism, Capitalism and the Housewife

The worker's weekly wages are usually divided into two parts - one part the man keeps for his own private use; the rest goes to the woman to provide the means of maintaining the whole family. She is responsible for budgeting, shopping, cooking, cleaning, mending and so on. It is her 'job' to ensure that in so far as it depends on her household management the husband will be able to continue in work. In repayment she receives board and lodging: she is in the situation typical of an economic dependent. The man's work is important to her because this supports the whole family. He is a wage-slave; she resembles much more a real slave. Tied to her husband economically and legally, bearing his name, often living in a house which is under his control, and isolated within the home, looking after their children; the housewife is tied to her particular man by much stronger ties than a worker to a given factory. The ideal which this economic reality produces is an ideal of good service. Many women have spent their adult lives trying to achieve this ideal, dedicating their existence to performing menial tasks for their husbands and children.

It is against this perspective that we should look at the demand that women be paid for the housework they perform. Does this do any more than demand that instead of being an unpaid servant a woman should be a paid

servant? What right does it encapsulate other than the right to have a paid servant? Is the right to a paid servant the kind of demand that we, as a womens liberation movement, should be making? That anyone who calls themselves a revolutionary should make? Surely one of our tasks is to work out ways in which housework, domestic labour in the home, as a task performed by one person for others, can be abolished. If the modern household can only survive by reducing one of its members to being the servant of the others, then that modern household must be abolished and replaced by different forms of communal living. Paying housewives (and that is what the demand concretely means) would serve merely as a new buttress to the patriarchal family.

Economically, the patriarchal family is of great assistance to capitalism. First, it is within the family that labour power is maintained and reproduced, at a relatively low cost. Secondly, the family has become a unit of consumption for the products of capitalism. Advanced capitalism has opened up the working class as a market for consumption - the "consumer society". This policy was determined by the capitalist experience of over-production crises, which culminated in the Great Depression. 'Easy payment schemes' - which mean that you pay more over a longer period of time, live your life in semi-permanent debt - took care of the worker's inability to produce lump sums of money.

The pressures to buy are directly mainly at women, and are expressed through an ideology which reinforces the home and the individual household. What is being hawked is not so much a product as a whole life-style. The individual family, with its individual kitchen, its individual TV, washing machine, is an ideal environment for capitalist marketing, which aims at getting the maximum of its products sold. The women who are held captive within those kitchens hate and resent them. But that doesn't prevent them from being held out as an ideal to which other women can only aspire. In capitalism's fantasy of itself as an 'affluent' society, woman remains in her 'proper' place - chained between the kitchen and the bedroom.

It is at this point of consumption that the housewife has her only direct contact with the capitalist process. During shopping she exchanges wages in the form of money for wages in the form of commodities. It is one of the mystifications of capitalism that somehow the process of consumption and the process of production are separate from each other, rather than inter-connected aspects of the same process. Politically this mystification has been expressed as a division between the worker and the 'consumer', whose interests are supposed to be antagonistic to each other. It is a similar distinction to the one about workers and 'the public'. In the portrayal of the consumer, the housewife is often picked out as the one who 'suffers' as a result of the selfish actions of the workers. What is, of course, missing from this schema of housewives versus workers is the intervention of the capitalist system. The government has already commissioned reports on the attitudes of housewives to strikes. The implications of such studies are clear - they assess the potentiality of the housewife as strike breaker. Capitalist ideology is always prepared to represent the cause of capitalist crises as the importunate demands of the working class. In the present economic crisis the standard of living of the worker is being forced down, and is meeting with resistance both at the level of

wages and at the level of prices. The only way in which the situation can be turned to its own advantage is if the housewife-as-consumer can be turned against the husband-as-producer.

It is because, given the present sexual division of labour, the shopper is almost always a woman that housewives play such a central part in price campaigns. Popular agitation against the rising cost of living has always been an aspect of rebellion against capitalism. But we must treat price campaigns very carefully, if only because in the recent past this agitation has been treated as the limit of women's political potential. The last election was partly fought over the issue of rising prices, with open appeals being made by the conservatives to the housewives. I'm not suggesting for one moment that because price campaigns are instrumentalised with such hypocrisy by political parties that this means that women in Womens Liberation should play no part in them. But we must be quite clear about the limitations of such campaigns, which are campaigns for an improvement in the conditions of existence within capitalism, and do not necessarily challenge either the capitalist system or the sexual division of labour. Price campaigns and rent strikes are to the housewife what wage demands and labour strikes are to the worker. Neither are intrinsically revolutionary.

A further complication lies in the fact that historically the only periods in which the capitalist state has been at all able to intervene to control prices (and even then not with outstanding success) have been periods of war and periods of fascism. And in both situations crippling limitations have been put on the political and economic freedom of the working class - strikes are illegal both under war-time regimes and in fascist regimes. The capitalists are here prepared to accept some restriction of their own 'freedom' to maximise profits, but only in return for increased repression of the working class. For the capitalist system only has basically one answer to rising prices which is to keep wages down. Restricting the economic activity of the working class is one way of doing this, and both in the present government and the Labour Government attempts by the state to introduce and practice regulation of strikes, wage restraint, and so on, have met with vigorous opposition from within the workers' movement.

We must be clear that it is inconceivable that the capitalist market will transform itself into a rational distribution system, mass-producing the material necessities of existence cheaply and at uniform prices, with the aim, eventually, of providing them free. The capitalist system is based on competition, not on co-operation; the aim of the capitalist is to make a profit, not to perform a useful service. Once we start talking about socialist distribution in an economy based on co-operation we are involved in a discussion about the need to destroy the capitalist system and to create a socialist society in its place. To accomplish the overthrow of capitalism we need to develop a revolutionary politics which raises the question of state power. Capitalist power will be suppressed as the result of mass political struggle, not as the result of a withering away of capitalist market relations.

I have tried to show why I think that it is important to maintain our critical analysis of the division of labour between worker and housewife, and the refusal of housework which was expressed in the Peckham paper at the Oxford conference. We must take a hard look at the conditions which make housework a full-time job. Bad housing conditions turn the housewife's day into a constant battle against dirt and demoralisation. Price fluctuations as a result of competition make shopping a time-consuming business when we have to shop around for the cheapest buy. The long working hours of the man exhaust him daily. Remember that demands for a shorter working week are often concealed wage demands: they are demands for longer overtime. But by far the most important factor is maternity, and the mother's constant care of small children.

Sexism, Capitalism, and the Mother

Ideologically this society seems to see pregnancy and maternity as mysterious natural processes which only women are really capable of understanding and knowing about, linked as they are to the vagaries of female psychology. There is nothing intrinsically mysterious about pregnancy. It is a biological process which, given the right conditions, most women can go through. But it is a biological process which is overburdened by a heavy ideological weight. Female biology is only 'mysterious' to the extent that it is ignored; the contempt shown by male doctors for 'women's illness' bears witness to the lack of care and seriousness a male-dominated society has for women's bodies. It is worthy of attention only to the extent that female psychology is: as a deviation from the male norm. Through an analysis of maternity we can see the twin aspects of the present system - patriarchy and capitalism.

The most striking feature of biological reproduction in the present system is that the woman, whose part is the longest, most arduous and involves most responsibility, does not have control over her own reproductive capacities. Women, socially, do not control their own reproductive capacities. Instead, decisions which affect reproduction are made by an agency of the male-dominated state: the National Health Service. It is significant that medicine is a profession which is proud of the exclusion it exercises against women - only 10% of medical students are women, because they operate a quota system. The main function of women in medicine is to service the doctor and protect him from the patient. These are the men who make the decisions about whether we're to have children, what contraceptive we should use, whether or not we can have an abortion (answer: only at a price) and if and when we should be sterilised. The birth rate has been a state concern in France for generations. In countries in the grip of neo-colonialist exploitation (like India) 'population control' (i.e. the regulation of the breeding capacities of a whole nation) is not merely the problem of national agencies, but of international agencies. At the other end are states whose problem is not overpopulation, but a fall in the rate of reproduction - i.e. girl children are not being born at a sufficient rate to replace the present generation of mothers. Thus Rumania, faced with this problem, has repealed the provision of free abortion and contraception on demand, and introduced new and stringent requirements to qualify for abortions. The problem of biological reproduction is very clearly a matter of state policy, and certainly not a question of the individual woman and whether or not she herself feels in a position to bear that particular child. Pregnancy itself is a traumatic experience for many women. Inadequate ante-natal care, births performed in over-crowded and understaffed maternity wards of authoritarian hospitals, where you are treated like one object producing another object. No wonder so many people suffer from post-natal depression. This male medical system has to be challenged. Hackney Women's Paper has already shown us what can be done in the way of exposing local medical facilities and hospital conditions from the point of view of women.

After the hospital, the woman returns home with her child. What is the situation of the mother in the present patriarchal family? Early capitalist development in England created a vast new army of the propertyless, who were forced to travel to new areas in search of work. Geographical mobility in search of work has been joined recently by the search for a house. The family remains a biological unit. One of the curious taboos within present society is that against intervening between mother and child unless one is a biological relation. The mystic biological link which is supposed to exist between the two is almost universally respected in practice. Women are forced into a close relationship with their children, creating a pattern of emotional interdependence and jealous mutual possession within which the struggle for domin-

ation and submission are carried out. Within the family the child goes through its first socialisation into the rules of survival in a patriarchal and capitalist society. It is within the family, in those early years, that the child learns about authority, power, control, competition, and inferior and superior beings. It is the early experience within the family which structures the individual's emotional development, and the present patriarchal family is a breeding-ground of neurosis. Some sisters seem to think that the working class family is somehow different, but this is not the case. The working class family may not have very many material goods to be inherited, but in the present patriarchy individuals are regarded as property, the marriage and family system is a system of mutual possession. Neurosis is a mass phenomenon, and not the problem of a few tortured members of the bourgeoisie.

Female neurosis is so widespread that it is taken for granted. The modern patriarchal family drives women to the point of madness. Total responsibility for the child is hers. Not only is she supposed to ensure that her child is socially integrable, she is also supposed to teach learning skills in order to equip the child for school - fashionable educationalists no longer talk about 'unsuccessful children', they talk about 'unsuccessful mothers' instead. The modern mother lives with an intolerable burden of guilt and anxiety. Can we really accept that paying her is any solution to the problem at all?

If the situation of the mother within the family is bad enough, that of the mother outside the family is even worse. Locked between the difficulty of finding a job because she has a child, and the difficulty of finding adequate care for her child if she finds a job, often the only alternative is social security where she receives an ex gratia payment in return for being spied upon by an inspectorate whose task is to ensure that she doesn't co-habit with a man. Moreover, social security, like all the appurtenances of the 'welfare state', which are paid for out of working class taxation, are represented as the charitable benevolence of a paternal state, in a final turn of the hypocritical screw.

The capitalist and patriarchal state undeniably prefers making individual payments like family allowances (which it is at present organising to have paid to the man with his wages rather than to the woman) to social provision of adequate creche facilities. The emphasis is on the individual making 'private arrangements' such as finding a trustworthy private baby-minder rather than the socialisation of child care. Our tasks as a women's liberation movement in this area seem to me to be two-fold. First we must continue our work in creating alternatives to the patriarchal family for women and children to live within: women's living collectives and communes are of inestimable importance. Second, we must continue our campaign for adequate and freely available creche facilities. The lived reality of the patriarchal family points to the need for its abolition as a unit of social organisation. We must organise and press for alternatives.

So far in this analysis of women and the family I have described two ways in which women are in a situation of economic dependence - within the family on an individual man, outside the family on the male-dominated state. I now want to examine the alternative which allows women the possibility of some economic independence - work outside the home.

Sexism, Capitalism and Women Workers

When women work outside the home, this work is in addition to housework and child care: this is what is sometimes described as 'women's double oppression'. Once women do work outside the home for the same hours as men, it is difficult to find any semblance of rational argument to justify her doing the housework and child care as well. Appeals to biology don't work.

There is nothing 'biologically inherent' about doing the washing up or changing nappies; as for the 'biological link' between mother and child, isn't the father a biological partner too? The only appeal that can be made is to a 'natural' division of labour. It is certainly possible to see some remnant of an artisanal division of labour within the family - men still tend to do occasional repairs of potter around the garden, if they have one. But here the man's work is sporadic, the woman's constant. And there is nothing 'natural' about this division - it is determinedly social. The very process of 'humanisation' which takes place in the patriarchal family trains women to expect to have to serve men, and trains men to expect to be waited on by women.

The spectre of the independent working woman who neglected her household duties and left her children to run wild terrified early capitalism. The advent of factory production destroyed the domestic economy which preceded it. In the domestic economy not only were women legally tied to their husbands, but the husband also controlled the labour of the family as a productive unit. It was the husband who organised and supervised the work and who mediated the relationship between the family and the small capitalist who gave outwork to them. In industrialised capitalism women continued to spin, but in a factory, no longer in the home. Capitalism raised the possibility of mass female employment for the first time: this was the advance which it represented over the economic mode which it replaced. Of course, work in a capitalist economy liberates no one, men or women, but woman's economic independence of men is one of the conditions of her liberation. Factory women were lower paid than males - there was never any golden age of economic equality in early capitalism. Dr Ure, writing in 1834, celebrated this with all the pompous complacency of the male chauvinist:

Factory females have in general much lower wages than males, and they have been pitied on that account with perhaps an injudicious sympathy, since the low price of their labour makes household duties their most profitable as well as agreeable occupation, and prevents them from being tempted by the mill to abandon their off-spring at home. Thus Providence effects its purpose with a wisdom and efficacy which should repress the short-sighted presumption of human devices.

In early capitalism women were in competition with men for factory employment; their already existing inferiority was translated into an economic inferiority - they were seized upon as a source of cheap labour and used to undercut male wages. The mill girl, with her immorality and vulgar freeness horrified bourgeois society. Women, when given the chance to turn the tables on men, took it, and male reformers shook their heads over the sad reversal of the natural order. Engels noted, in his *Condition of the Working Class in England*, that 'very often the fact that a married woman is working does not lead to the complete disruption of the home, but to a reversal of the normal division of labour within the family. The wife is the bread-winner while her husband stays at home to look after the children and do the cleaning and cooking... One may well imagine the righteous indignation of the workers at being virtually turned into eunuchs'. And later on: 'We shall have to accept the fact that so complete a reversal of the role of the two sexes can be due only to some radical error in the original relationship between men and women. If the rule of the wife over her husband - a natural consequence of the factory system - is unnatural, then the former rule of the husband over the wife must also have been unnatural. Today, the wife - as in former times the husband - justifies her sway because she is the major or even the sole bread-winner of the family. In either case one partner is able to boast that he or she makes the greatest contribution to the upkeep of the family.'

Factory legislation restricted the work of both

women and children within the new factories, and industrial production became a sector dominated by male labour, their interests protected by male trades unions, from which in the nineteenth century women were often openly excluded. By the end of the nineteenth century a movement was in train to teach domestic economy to working class women. The other main alternative to factory employment - domestic service - conveyed to the women working there the 'proper' management of a patriarchal family. In this century the teaching of domestic science has increased rather than diminished, with women's magazines and courses in school supplementing the training they are supposed to receive in the home. The patriarchal family, which constructs woman as wife and mother through a process which blocks women's psychological, intellectual and sexual development, is deeply rooted within the human personality produced by the sexist system: this family is internalised, we carry it around with us.

Economic necessity still drives women out to work; in present day Britain most working class women do some work outside the home, in a situation of economic inferiority: the average wage of a woman worker is £13, that of a male worker £26. Working women still sell their labour power at a cheaper rate than do men. The so-called equal pay bill will hardly change anything, since only a minority of women workers can be proved to do the same jobs as men. Even those women affected will probably not get their increase, since the employers have decided that wage increases for equal pay should be restricted by a £2 wage restraint.

The exclusion of women from industrial production effected by early capitalism continues. To find employment women have to go to the servicing sector of the economy, a sector which is itself dependent on the point of production. The sexual division of labour within the economy mirrors with startling clarity the division within the family. The mass-production of clothing employs female labour overwhelmingly, similarly food packaging and preparation, canteen work and cleaning. Nursing is almost wholly women's work and teaching is gradually becoming a woman's profession (with a consequent diminution in teachers' salaries) and the social services which prop up the family are staffed by women. Both the consumption and service sector and socialisation are maintained by women. Their relationship to the situation of women in the home, which I described earlier, is amazingly clear. Apart from that, women still work in textiles (traditionally a female occupation), in light industry (usually producing goods for the consumer market) and as clerical workers servicing the needs of male administrators. Here the patriarchal family and capitalism mutually reinforce each other. In the home and outside, women's work bears a heavy ideological weight. The term itself can be used to attribute a kind of femininity to the work itself as much as to the worker.

It would be a mistake for us to underestimate either the importance of the economic base or the importance of the sexual division of labour. We should insist that women's 'right to work' means not the right to work inside the home, or the right to work outside the home at jobs determined by the patriarchal system, but the right of women and men to perform the same work, at the same rate of pay, and to control their conditions of work in a society based on co-operation. Women's Liberation must develop a strategy aimed both at the patriarchal family and at the sexual division of labour in the economy. Both of these conditions of the oppression of women are built into the capitalist system. The situation of women in the Soviet Union indicates that they can be built into a socialist system too - patriarchy can survive changes in the mode of production.

The conditions of employment for women are usually much worse than for working class men. In 'normal times' female unemployment is much greater than male unemployment, and is one of the forces which keeps women in the home. Women usually compete for jobs with other women in a low-paid sector with appalling

work conditions and a low level of unionisation. The struggle of women for unionisation rights - which mean the same rights to mutual protection which male workers have - bring women up against male working class privilege, just as do demands for equal pay and equal job opportunity. A generalised struggle means that our movement should be able to articulate all the levels at which women are combating male privilege, in the home, in the state, in the factory.

The possibility of marriage and the family is constantly held out to women as the only attractive alternative to full-time employment. And it does have its attractions: at least you're involved in relationships with other human beings rather than with machines. Moreover, through the childhood experience of the family, women have been conditioned to regard marriage and the family as their natural destiny. Represented as the way of fulfilling and channelling female creativity, the questions often only begin after women discover what the real conditions of family life are.

Nineteenth century reformers were quite straightforward about their determination to preserve the patriarchal family as at least one place in capitalist society where 'human values' could still be expressed. This had created a deeply-rooted fear that the abolition of the patriarchal family would mean the destruction of 'human values' themselves. To preserve these 'human values' women are coerced into putting the home and family first, almost to save men the trouble of having to think about them, and live with the burden of this imbalance. So great is the power of the ideology of the family that many unmarried women, faced with bad work conditions, choose marriage rather than organise against them. The sexual competition, compulsive heterosexuality and repression of female sexuality which this entails are too large a subject to go into here. But passive female acceptance of the roles of wife and mother contribute to the continuation of women's oppression just as much as the workers' acceptance of capitalism as the only economic system possible contributes to their continued exploitation. Feminism - the political movement of women to abolish their oppression - is a precondition, the main condition, of a woman's revolution. To construct a feminist movement means developing a new form of female creativity, in solidarity and sisterhood with all women, against their day-to-day oppression and the structures which determine it.

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