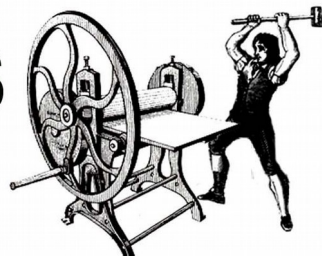


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Up to now, in nearly all uprisings, woman participants have mostly acted as proletarians' wives: in communist insurrection, women will take part as woman proletarians. The woman with a talent for guns will stay on the street instead of taking the kids home, and the man with a strong disposition for cooking will follow his inclination, until roles fluctuate, but there will be a lot more to it. A mere reshuffling of tasks would not eliminate women's subordination any more than multi-tasking would eliminate work. We will only get rid of work and of the family at the same time – or not at all.

Subversion press
subversionpress.wordpress.com



On the “Woman Question”

July 2016
Gilles Dauvé

If, as Marx wrote in 1844, taking a cue from Fourier, the relationship between the sexes enables us to judge humankind's "whole level of development", with this relationship we can also judge the level of development of the revolutionary movement. According to this criterion, past insurrections have done rather poorly, as they have usually let masculine domination prevail.

When faced with this undisputable fact, most radical thought rarely rises up to the challenge. (1)

In the past, anarchism did not treat this issue as a specific one: emancipating the human species would emancipate women as well as men. Lately, since the 1970s and the growth of a feminist movement, many anarchist groups have come to regard women as an important (and long overlooked) oppressed category which must be added to the list of major potentially revolutionary categories.

As for the Marxists, they often start with the perfectly valid assumption that the "woman question" part can only be solved via the "proletarian" whole, and with the equally valid necessity of differentiating between bourgeois women and proletarian women, but they end up dissolving the woman question in the class question. The trouble is, without this part, the whole does not exist. (2)

Unlike most anarchists and Marxists, we think women's emancipation is not a mere *consequence* of general human emancipation: it is one of its indispensable *key components*.

Malicious intent?

The "sex question" is one of the quandaries that have been hanging over radical thought for over a century. As we only wish to suggest a theoretical framework, quite a few aspects will be left out. Among other things, we will not enquire into the origins nor the past of man/woman relationships, only into what they have become in the capitalist mode of production, and we will focus on their most "modern" forms.

Though capitalism is certainly not the cause of women's subordination, which predates it by millennia, today it is the capitalist system that perpetuates this subjection, which can therefore only be addressed and fought in its capitalist form, i.e. as it is reproduced by wage-labour and private property.

As will be clear from this essay, we do not regard the relation between the sexes as the engine of history, neither do we think the "woman question" could bring the long-awaited revelation, the missing piece of the theoretical (and practical) revolutionary puzzle.

So linguistic and legal duality (most of this is happening in the world of words and of the Law) has come along : a biological fact (called *sex*) alongside its social-historical construct (now called *gender*). With the distinction between *natural* sex and *social* gender, a new political platform was born : the demand that this social construct be no longer imposed but chosen.

Demanding freedom for everyone to choose her or his own life instead of obeying the dictates of an alleged "nature" goes with a feel of dissent and protest that pleases some and worries others.

Talking about *gender* is a beacon of modernity, a public sign of open-mindedness which puts you on the side of equality and fairness. The *gender* word helps you think you are going against the current when you are in fact swimming with the now prevailing stream. It's a calling card into those places where academia and radicalism intersect: it proves the impeccable credentials of people who've ticked all the right boxes.

On the contrary, sticking to the word *sex* is supposed to reflect a conservative mind out of touch with the time. It's always the right-winger who avails himself of "human nature", and the progressive who supports reform because things are "social", therefore changeable. Nature versus nurture. But what "social" are we talking about ? Opposing "social" to "natural" only takes us forward if we understand society for what it is, not as an addition of attitudes, lifestyles and choices, but a system of links determined by production relations.

On the contrary, if the women's status depends on a social construction, but if this construction simply results from prejudices, bad habits and people's misinformed free will, the solution is easily found: we only need more and more unprejudiced reformatory education via school and media. "Gender" language has gone mainstream because it is quite consistent with democratic and liberal ideology, which thinks equality is possible in an unequal world. The political relevance of a concept is not measured by its intellectual consistency, only by the extent to which it resonates with its time and can rally people.

While gender talk may help repressed sex minorities and sometimes women to better their condition, we cannot ignore where it comes from. As the 1970s proletarian wave abated, it became far less socially possible to pose the question of work, i.e. of production relations. *Class* went down when gender came up. Gender certainly is a social construct, but so is the gender concept. A notion that becomes a staple in schools clearly fills a need and performs a social task. Prioritising gender (or, in a more refined way, combining it with class) moves the focus away from "wage labour v. capital" to *domination* theory. Men, however, do not dominate women for the sheer pleasure of domination: that pleasure is fuelled by concrete realities. The question is what vested interests are at stake. Domination is installed and perpetuated only because it produces something. And not just the family and women's subordination. If we believe that the capital/labour structure determines present society, we are back at square one: class, and gender does not help much.

Referring to "gender" is a political statement. Any concept selects and sums up a number of determinations, relegating others to a minor place. Insisting on *class* means giving a secondary role to *individual, stratum, category, ethnic group, religion*, etc. Insisting on *gender* is giving priority to sex as a criterion (however finely-tuned the construct can be), therefore minimising prevailing production relations and their possible overthrow.

These last two texts are also available in print: *Everything Must Go! Abolish Value*, Little Black Cart Books, 2015.

(12) Isn't there something missing? **Gender?** "You haven't said a word about gender!", some readers might object. True, and the absence of that key word will be enough to nullify our essay in certain circles. I haven't got the word-code right.

A key word it has become indeed, the question is what door it opens.

"Gender" brings us a distinction. *Sex* means the penis or the vagina as a biological reality caused by birth. *Gender* is what society builds up on that penis or that vagina. Up to now, in general, society has forced the one-with-penis to live in a certain way, and the one-with-vagina to live in an altogether different way. Now, so we are told, distinguishing between *sex* and *gender* will enable us to move away from fixed roles. Gender is social sex, constrained today, liberated tomorrow.

I'd rather say our era has invented the gender concept to rationalise a problem it is incapable of addressing.

As explained in this essay, the millennia-old pressure upon women to be mothers and live a home life is out of phase with the growth of wage labour and the corresponding evolution of social norms. Capital's tendency is to turn everything to profit, to hire anyone who can valorise it, and to sell anything that can be bought. The *Communist Manifesto* is not the only text that emphasises how capitalism undermines the fundamentals of tradition, religion, morals, culture and mores: we can only reproach Marx and Engels with jumping the gun quite a bit when they declare that "Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class", and that "by the action of modern industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder".

One century and a half later, capitalist society has to deal with woman wage-earners fighting for equality: their struggle extends beyond the work-place to many other social spheres, including the home. Therefore political parties, media, the school system, universities, Law, etc., have to make do with a system based on the principle of equality (unlike previous systems), yet which heavily relies on the unequal treatment of half of the population. This contradiction was already present in the age of the suffragettes. With the growth of unisex work, with the advent of woman cops, soldiers and priests, the contradiction has become blatant... blatant and yet intractable. The election of a US woman president would not mean an end to sex discrimination, only shift the demarcation lines.

This is when the gender notion finds its social use. Pre-capitalist societies arranged sex roles according to rigid patterns grounded in "nature". Past women's subordination could find some semblance of justification in the fact that most of them did not do the same jobs as men, and were therefore "different", hence inferior. As this is no longer the case, old norms dysfunction. A woman executive or university lecturer will be in command in her workplace, and rule over men, only to find herself treated as an inferior in the street or possibly at home. Women have a right to be equal, but they can't really be. This discrepancy creates a social schizophrenia, a mental gap that needs to be bridged, ideologically that is, since real change is impossible.

Reproduction & private property

"Reproduction" has become a catch-all word that mixes the reproduction of the natural living conditions on Earth and of the human species, the birth and care of children, capital's reproduction through its cycles, the reproduction of the capital/wage labour relation, hence the whole reproduction of society. (3)

Actually, the man/woman relation is indeed part of that social reproduction, but the point is to understand the linkage between the *social* division of labour and the *sexual* division of society.

Having children is a lot more than giving birth and raising kids. Though not all capitalists are "inheritors", when a child is born in a bourgeois family, his or her parents cannot fail to think about the passing on of the family assets. The bourgeois are quite aware of the imperative to transmit their fortune, to safeguard their personal and collective interests, and to perpetuate themselves as a class.

Like all societies, capitalist society must master its reproduction, and in its case that means maintaining one of its fundamentals: private property.

In our society, the pivotal role of private property goes far beyond the obvious fact that most people own at least a little something. The bourgeois are the proprietors of the essential (the means of production, i.e. the means of livelihood of the immense majority), and there is an ocean of difference between being a 5% Toyota shareholder and owning a flat where one lives (out of 10 homes in the UK, 7 are owner-occupied). A better word for that difference is *class*. Only class analysis explains who holds the real reins of power. And class division reproduces itself. Of course, from one generation to the next, all bourgeois children do not become bourgeois themselves, but the bourgeois class carries on as a meaningful structure, particularly via the family. We do not live in an atomised world of individual bourgeois and proletarians born out of nowhere who do not care about what will happen after their death. Only an eccentric self-made entrepreneur living as a recluse shows no interest in the future of his (or her) capital when s/he is gone.

However, family is not just the institution through which the wealthy pass down their property. A society where the upkeep and care of children would be completely managed by public authorities is still pure science-fiction. Therefore, for proletarians as well as for bourgeois, the family offers a living place providing a modicum of support and solidarity, often extended far beyond teenage years.

Though the stable married "man + woman" model is on the wane, the family institution soldiers on, in all classes, even more so in times of crisis when it provides the deprived with a protection they would rarely find elsewhere. The deeper social crisis goes, the more people ask from family bonds, the more contradictions the family has to bear, and yet the more indispensable it is. No wonder it remains a hot bed of love-hate behaviour.

A family is not a couple. As soon as parent and child live together, we can speak of a family, albeit in different forms from the past, for example the single parent household (where 27%

of US children live) and the blended or step-family (nearly one third of US households). More and more homosexual couples are now living with children (according to US census, over 15% of same-sex couples). Words say it all: vocabulary is moving from conjugal status to *conjuality*, and from parent to *parenting* (“parents” originally meant those who beget and give birth): the abstraction of the terms signifies the impossibility of reducing the contemporary family to a fixed model. “Parent” is no longer synonymous with biological mother and father : it refers to whoever plays a parental role.

However far-reaching this shape-shifting is, the 21st century family loses the appearance and mind-set of the traditional family while keeping its function, and it is only natural that it should claim its concerns and practices. With or without children, and even more so if it is bringing up a child, a same-sex married couple has to deal with the safeguarding and transmission of its assets: it acts as a family, i.e. a place where private property is maintained and passed on. One of the most striking historical facts is the resilience of the family unit, its ability to stand the test of time by absorbing most of its dissolving factors.

I: Women as breeders

If the family plays such a pivotal part, the nagging question is why it comes along with the subjugation of women.

One of the main causes is because capitalism is the primacy of production. To avoid any misunderstandings, let’s be clear about what we mean by that. Any society is based on the (re)production of its conditions of life. Yet capitalism is the rule of the imperative to produce, not for production’s sake, but for producing ever more value. If this system manufactures (and destroys) so much, it is not to stockpile objects, but to beget and accumulate value. Therefore it is bound to treat any material thing or living being as a potential *instrument of production*.

As far as women are concerned, this entails a different and inferior status compared to men’s.

It is a biological fact that only women have the ability to carry a child within their bodies, deliver him or her, breastfeed him or her: a society where everybody first exists as a means of production cannot fail to specialise women in this forced role which becomes a constraint.

Despite thousands of exceptions, and to very varying degrees, even today, a woman is considered as destined to be a mother and, though no longer corralled into a breed-and-feed existence, she is still encouraged to spend a lot more time than men in the domestic sphere. This can also be found among social milieus with a minority sexual orientation: a lesbian will not be equal to a gay. The most open-minded parents and relatives do not expect the same from a daughter and a son. Even in progressive circles, a lot of women are openly or insidiously submitted to social pressure, explicit or unsaid, to have children, and life as a couple (married or unmarried) encourages motherhood.

Feminism prioritises women, as is befitting. Marxist feminism has devised a double priority. What reality is left to priority when there are two priorities instead of one ? What is left of the salience of class if gender is just as salient ? We thought the core of capitalism was the capital/labour (i.e. bourgeois/proletarian) relation. Wrong, TC explains, capitalism is a class society *and* a gender society, both. Is that a contradiction ? Only for the unsophisticated. Arcane subtlety has always been part of TC’s fatal attraction. Sometimes the reader enjoys finding himself numb, awed and appalled in equal measure.

Best to take our leave of TC on a final positive touch. As Théorie Communiste hammers home the point that nobody understands revolutionary thought unless gender is integrated into it, and as this group discovered gender round 2008-2010, we can safely take the first twenty-two issues of TC to the nearest charity shop, and concentrate our energy on following the thread of the class/gender dialectic now expounded in that magazine.

<http://libcom.org/library/gender-distinction-programmatism-communisation>

<http://libcom.org/library/response-americans-gender-theorie-communiste>

Some people might benefit from taking themselves less seriously.

(8) The suffragettes were fighting for equal political rights. Those, like Sylvia Pankhurst, who went beyond democratic demands and turned radical even to the point of becoming communists, only did so by moving to a different social and political ground, for example by opposing the patriotic class reunion in 1914. For S. Pankhurst and her comrades, democratic activity (fighting for the enfranchisement of women) in the London East End resulted in getting more and more involved in working class struggles, then in joining the socialist movement, later to found the first communist party in Britain.

In the very different situation of the 1970’s social unrest, working women fighting for equality at work and in daily life briefly crossed path with middle class women fighting against female subordination. The convergence did not survive the ebbing of the movement, but it gives an idea of the capabilities of a wide-reaching social surge when it starts breaking down sociological barriers.

(9) In the 1930’s, the *Mujeres libres* were an anarchist women’s organisation with up to 30.000 members, who believed that social revolution was inseparable from women’s liberation. The Friends of Durruti group (1937-39) originated in the anarchist movement as a critique of the CNT’s line and of its participation in government.

(10) In her political novel, *Red Love*, published in 1923, Alexandra Kollontai makes the point that a child need not and must not be a burden for the mother. “She would show the other women how to raise a child in the Communist way. There was no need for a kitchen, for family-life and all that nonsense. The thing to do was to organise a nursery, a self-supporting community house.” (<http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/kollonta/red-love/ch14.htm>)

(11) On the revolutionary process:

G. Dauvé: *Communisation*, 2011: <http://troploin.fr/node/24>;

An A to Z of Communisation, 2016: <http://troploin.fr/node/87>

And Bruno Astarian, *Crisis Activity & Communisation*, 2010:

2016:<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n09/jacqueline-rose/who-do-you-think-you-are>(with a short but useful bibliography).

(7) In the “class + gender” recipe mix, fine dosing is essential. Does one of the two dominate the other and, if so, which one ?

That is a false question, **Théorie Communiste** says: history is indeed moved by two contradictions (class and sex) but they are driven forward by a single dynamic.

A sophisticated answer, which amounts to saying that the two coexist.

To prove it, TC argues that “all class societies depend on the increase in population as principal productive force”.

Population ? The 180 million people, infants included, who compose the Nigerian population, cannot *all* be producing value for a capital. So what is it we are being told ?

As it happens, TC revolutionises vocabulary. When TC writes *population*, it does not mean population, only “labour productive force”. Fair enough : without children, there is no renewal of the labour power, no capital. But then why theorise “the population” ? Why make it look like delivering and raising kids was *in itself* productive of value ? Those kids will only be so when and if they are hired by a company to valorise its capital, which of course will not be everybody’s case.

But here’s the thing. Although TC knows that the *proletarians* are the main productive force, replacing them by the *population* makes it possible to introduce the “women group” (not the proletarian women’s group, but women as a whole) into the theory of capital and labour, since it is women who give birth to the population.

As seen in note 3, Marxist feminists regard domestic labour as value-producing work (because it produces children, i.e. future workers) just as wage labour done in a company. Because they are feminists, theoreticians like Silvia Federici wish to prove that women perform “the most productive” labour of all, in order to present women’s subordination as the ultimate foundation of capitalism. So they select in Marx what suits their needs, and leave out what contradicts them (no less than the Marxian analysis of the creation of value by putting people to productive work). Marxist feminists could hardly do without the “reproductive labour” argument.

Force is to note that Théorie Communiste takes up this argument when TC puts women (not only proletarian women, no, *women*) centre stage in history. With this difference that for TC this centre is large enough to make room both for women and (male and female) proletarians. Needless to say, instead of saying “women”, which would be vulgar idealist humanism, TC theorises a “women group”.

TC refuses to speak of a women’s *class*: for Marxists, that would be one step too far. In the past, semi-Marxist feminists like Christine Delphy or Colette Guillaumin did not mind crossing the line. TC does mind: it stops short of *class* and only propounds a “*womengroup*”. Be that as it may, this not-a-class group is given about as much importance as a class : in a future revolutionary process, TC expects this group to terminate sex hierarchy, certainly a strenuous task, and a task that the proletarian class (male and female) is deemed incapable of, because at that time that class will still be under masculine domination.

II: Women & exploitative relationships

A society ruled by work tends to prioritise human beings according to their position in the work world, in production, viz. in the production that “counts”, in both senses of the word: it is both counted up and socially privileged: it produces value by work, by wage-labour.

Like *production* is the previous paragraph, *work* calls for clarification. By “work”, we do not mean the fact of acting on something to transform it: working in the garden, working on a score at the piano in the living room, working out, wood-working for pleasure, etc. Neither do we define work by the fact that it is done under constraint. Wage-labour certainly is the opposite of a free activity: we work because we are forced to earn money as a means of living, and every hour spent on the shop-floor, at the wheel of a lorry or in the office takes place under the control of a boss. But this submission serves a purpose: it ensures that our labour contributes to capital’s growth, that it produces value, that it valorises the company.

As it happens, in the working world, man and woman do not stand in the same position.

As soon as there exists a social difference between two groups, between those who work and those who organise work (even if they sometimes work too), women find themselves in the particular place of auxiliary or in any case non-permanent workers, because of pregnancy and breastfeeding periods. However short this “off-work” moment can be, it creates a difference. The woman’s child-reproductive function forces her to regularly interrupt the part she plays in the overall reproduction of society. While work (exploitation) is central to society, women’s place in it is necessarily a secondary one. Though on the whole women work a lot, it is left for men to take a prevailing part in organisation and command, and such tasks can only be carried out full time. Therefore men take up a larger share of social wealth, and a privileged role in political, cultural and religious life. Whether they are exploiters or exploited, men permanently partake of the exploitation relation: whether exploiters or exploited, women do not. Even in Sweden, where the female employment rate is the highest in the world, most women work part-time, especially in the public and health sectors. It is not motherhood as such that gives women an inferior status, it is the part played by motherhood *in a society ruled by work*.

* * *

As a conclusion to these last two paragraphs, the best hypothesis is that women’s subordinate position is linked to social reproduction and the family: their inferiority is not caused by the family, but this is where it is embedded. Despite medically assisted procreation and surrogacy, kids are still born and reared in families which remain the main locus of the formation of sex roles and female subordination.

The *sexual* division of society is part of the *social* division of labour, which does not mean that the former is a mere reflection, a side-effect of the latter.

Socialised control

Patriarchy is another term for father-family, when family coincided with the most common basic economic unit, and women and children worked under the supervision of a husband and father. Patriarchy is the rule of the heads of the household.

Patriarchy and property long went together. Filiation and wealth transmission were indissolubly bound up: the *pater familias* had to be sure his heir was his son. (4)

Patriarchy is far from over. It is still aggressively present even in the heart of allegedly advanced countries. In Brussels as in Milan, women are put down in many ways, mocked, belittled, infantilised and patronised in established culture.

Patriarchy, however, is not indispensable to capitalism.

Capitalism's novelty regarding the allocation of roles between man and woman is not the fact that women work. They did before, in vegetable gardens, on farms, in shops or in the market square, but always in connection with the family home. Now with wage-labour they work outside the home. Most female labour is not managed by a husband, but by a boss (sometimes a female boss).

Under capitalism, while man/woman relations no longer directly organise production, they still play a part in the division of labour. Capitalism maintains sexual hierarchy and oppression, but promotes them in its own particular way.

Male dominance is a misleading term if it makes us believe that today women's subordination is due to male individuals. Men now act as conduits, and not the major ones. Control over women has ceased to be exercised above all by fathers and by husbands: male individuals come under collective supervision. When dealt with by medical and social services, women are cared for ("for their own good") by a staff which is as feminine as masculine. Needless to say, after her shift, the woman doctor or social worker will be subjected at home or in the street to social constraints and restraints not unlike those she was exerting on other women a couple of hours before.

"Biomedical power" applies to all, but a lot more to women, who are medically monitored from their teens, whether or not they have kids, by a gynaecologist, an obstetrician, midwives, a paediatrician for post-natal visits, then again a gynaecologist.

Such soft tutelage is quite different from Big Brother's brainwashing and torture. Welfare, Social Security and the social State compose an array of institutions which *do* help and protect women. Contrary to what happened in the past, public authority theoretically and sometimes really protects women against their male partners. The State does not prevent domestic violence and brutality, but it regulates them, which sets certain limits. It intrudes on the couple's intimacy and codifies what is proper and improper behaviour, for instance by criminalising marital rape (as well as child ill-treatment). We cannot be nostalgic for a time when sexual abuse was standard practice. But protecting women is also testimony to their subjugation: the Law provides assistance to supposedly weak beings incapable of

opposite to Marx's. After all, why not? If he was wrong, there is no need to show him undue respect. The trouble is, the supporters of this perspective claim to be enriching Marx, not refuting him.

They proceed by duplication. The exploited class unfolds into two: the labour class (male and female proletarians) and the women category or group (the word *class* is usually avoided), defined by reproductive labour. This is no intellectual game. What's at stake is political: the need to expand a supposedly too narrow revolutionary agent. As the "working class" in the traditional sense has proved incapable and/or unwilling to change the world, just extend the notion of work to large sections of the population, and you get at the same time quantity (women compose half of Earthlings) and quality (women's and other minorities' movements will implement real innovative change which the metalworkers of yesteryear were incapable of). That way you are sure to get a broad and deep revolutionary subject. How simple.

For a sample of texts on reproductive labour: Communist Research Cluster, *Revolutionary Feminism* (see previous note), chapters 5, 11, 12 and 14.

For more on the subject, please read my *Federici v. Marx* : <http://troploin.fr/node/85>

(4) Nowadays the male child has lost his privileged right to inherit his parents' estate, and DNA simplifies paternity issues. The husband no longer needs to lock up his wife to guarantee the origin of his offsprings. Besides, gestational surrogacy allows someone to have "his" or "her" child, with his/her own genes and not somebody else's: the surrogate mother merely bears the future child, the embryo is not hers, and the commissioning couple will be sure the child was produced by them and will belong to them. Family property is renewed by Hi-Tech.

Moreover, the surrogate mother can be seen as a service provider, as a service sector worker: for those women who can afford it, the temporary physical unavailability (and therefore the inferiority) caused by maternity is transferred to lower class women.

(5) The normalisation of social mores is running its course: victimisation of domestic violence now takes into account acts committed within same-sex couples, and while wife-beating remains by far the most common form of intimate partner violence, lawyers and sociologists currently debate about husband-battering. Some UK statistics suggest that 2 victims of partner abuse out of 5 are men. Whatever the relevance of such figures, they do not show that the plight of women is improving, rather that both sexes *tend* to be treated and to treat themselves equally badly.

Besides, rights always come with duties. Promoting equal status for women means that women wage-labourers submit to the same obligations as those of their male shop-floor or office mates. The decline of sex discrimination at work can prove a double-edged sword, as in 2000 when the French parliament lifted the ban on female night-work. Capitalist equalisation is equality within the frame of capital/labour relations. Unless of course the drawbacks of equal sex status are compensated for by specific measures for women, taking into account female specificity, which brings women back to a family role, to a mother's role.

(6) Since we mention equality, a quick word on a subject closely linked to the woman and sex questions : **trans** persons. In the US, 700.000 people are said to be transitioning in one form or another. Some argue that "trans" is America's new or next civil rights frontier and issue. See Jacqueline Rose, "Who do you think you are", *London Review of Books*, May 5,

Now the thesis goes a lot further, with no attempt at false modesty. Not only is domestic labour regarded as necessary to capital as work done in the work-place, but it is theorised as even *more* necessary. Because it gives birth to children and brings them up, work at home (mostly performed by women) reproduces the workforce, and because without it no other production could take place, it is deemed the most productive work in capitalism, essential, pivotal work. In short, as stated in Rivolta Femminile's *Manifesto* (1970):

“We identify in unpaid domestic work the help that allows both private and State capitalism to survive.”

(www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/feminism/manifesto.pdf)

If this were true, since a wage pays the cost of production of labour, the male worker living on his own would cost more than his married colleague and he should be paid more. Actually, the same logic would apply to the single female worker, and her boss would have to pay her a better wage than if she was living in a family. Facts do not confirm this. However despicable and oppressive it is for lots of males to watch TV while their wives cook dinner for them, a family is not a factory work-shop. We can call *work* whatever we want, yet the only work that reproduces capital is the one done for a company. Though *homework* can prepare a teenager for a future productive role, at the moment when she/he is studying maths or German, this teenager is not reproducing any capital (yet). When a husband “profits” from his wife, this is not a company profit. Housework neither generates a commodity sold on a market nor results in surplus-value. The wage pays for the cost of reproducing the labour power, i.e. the upkeep of the worker himself or herself and, *if he or she has a family, the upkeep of the family.*

Besides, the “reproductive” labour theory assumes living in a couple to be the norm for workers: that is not true either. There is a large variety of ways of life for wage-earners. Some live in families, others are single, others are housed in big blocks of flats where couples mix with single people, others still in barrack-style dormitories. Whereas traditional miners have a family life close to their pits, open-cast mining has the labour force dwell in arranged accommodation far from home for the duration of the employment contract. The same applies to oil-rig personnel. Millions of Asians, male and female, leave their families to find jobs on building sites or in the service sector in the Middle East, and they have to make do with camps, container settlements, or sometimes stay in their boss's home.

This theory is grounded in the conviction that value is not created only (or mainly) in a particular location by productive labour in what is commonly known as a work-place (an assembly line, a textile workshop, a post office, a cargo ship, a steel mill, a building site, etc.), but all over the place, in the university as much as in a factory or a hospital, and above all at home, because society as a whole is supposed to function as a “social factory”.

Therefore in this conception, *reproduction* encompasses all and everything, capital, classes, population, labour power, bourgeois men and women, proletarian men and women, etc.: just about everything creates value and nearly everyone is a worker. Some are more workers than others, though, those who deliver and bring up kids. Because women produce children without whom there would be neither society nor capitalism, “reproductive labour” theory endows them with a determining role.

This is tantamount to a complete redefinition of work, of value and of capitalism, which runs

defending themselves. And women are granted protection in exchange for their acceptance of a specific role, a mother's role. (5)

We are moving from women's age-old direct and personal submission to a husband, to an indirect dependency, a guardianship hardly perceived as restrictive because it is impersonal, anonymous and diffuse. In the past, women had little choice but to give birth to 4 or 7 kids: now they *choose* to have 1.58 (average fertility rate in the European Union, 2014).

Democracy in the family?

Can we conceive of a capitalism which would reform itself so deeply as to keep the family, yet do away with woman's inferior status within the family structure?

Common wisdom suggests that this egalitarian utopia is already on the way. We are shown serene middle class people living in a safe Stockholm neighbourhood, the adults doing collaborative creative jobs for LGBT-friendly companies or NGOs, the father opting for parental leave, the parents calling their children by gender-neutral pronouns to avoid sexed stereotypes, socialising with friends of similar background and behaviour, and of course equally sharing child care and household duties. The ideal couple, one might say... as long as it manages to remain cut off from the outside world... and from the other classes.

Is this science-fiction? Not entirely. There is no denying an evolution towards greater sex equality in the family, and a growing trend toward a fair distribution of tasks and decisions between partners.

In as much as it exists – within the limits of certain countries, certain milieus and probably not extendable to all 900.000 Stockholm residents -, that lodestar family will not counterbalance the weight of class realities. Since on the whole women get paid lower wages (and have a lower social status) because of maternity, the woman at the bottom end of the scale will suffer more from this disparity than the mother from a privileged background. The woman lawyer or head of department can cast the hard or boring house chores off to another woman. Men and women may be equal before the law, but money pays for equality, not all women are equal before money, and the Swedish Ministry for Integration & Gender Equality cannot do much about it. Pronouns are easier to change than class differences. If the subordination of women remains more visible and stronger in working class homes, it is not caused by the persistence of sexist minds and habits among uneducated loutish “reactionary” proles, but by the conditions forced on to those who live just above the bread line. Enlightenment comes easier with money in the bank and a better social position and image.

Democratic domesticity is not round the corner.

Equality under capitalism

Unlike other exploitative systems which cannot do without fixed roles and identities usually determined by birth, capitalism relies on the meeting of equalised items. It tends to treat everyone not according to an inner “nature”, but to his or her market value and his or her ability to bring in profit. Formal and effective man/woman equalisation is a historical trend, illustrated by the narrowing of the sex gap between wages, and the increasing proportion of woman top executives and government heads. (With a high percentage of female top bosses and senior managers in Asia.) Theoretically, a skilled proletarian is exchangeable with any equally skilled proletarian, and either of the two could be hired and paid the same wage. **(6)**

Theoretically, that is, because capital’s quest for productivity leads to cost-cutting, and one way of lowering labour costs is “divide and rule”. In the real world, companies are never indifferent to origin, race or sex. Even with the same qualification, one labour power is rarely equal to another. Capitalist society divides as much as it brings together, and redresses inequities while it creates new ones. To give just an example among many of the shifting borders of “race”, at the end of the 19th century, there was much debate in the US whether Finnish immigrants should be classified as “White” or “Asian”. Competition sets “national” against migrant labourers, and first and foremost men against women. Whenever they can, bosses take advantage of the traditionally inferior status of women, even in the most “advanced” parts of the world.

Sex inequality is transformed, not abolished: most women will be paid less and be forced into poorer working conditions.

Feminism

Whatever version of feminism you address, there will always be a feminist to point out that your critique does not apply to her or him. Debate is further complicated by the fact that a radical feminist generally refuses to call herself or himself “a feminist”, arguing that the term is only adequate for bourgeois, humanist or liberal feminists. How dare you compare middle class Women’s Lib and anarcho-feminism?! We should consequently not speak of “feminism”, only of a multifaceted women’s movement. Actually, to set itself apart from bourgeois feminism, radical feminism usually takes care to define itself with an adjunct: *class struggle, materialist, sex radical, anti-capitalist, radical lesbian, queer, libertarian, Marxist, intersectional*, etc. feminism.

Whatever the wording, the undoubtedly many faces of feminism share common ground in so far as their political priority is the woman question and the fight against sex inequality, in spite of their disagreements and oppositions on how to define inequality. When radical feminists reject equality feminism as bourgeois and instead advocate women’s self-assertiveness, their prime concern remains women. The difference is that “bourgeois” feminism treats equality as a point of arrival whereas radical feminism treats it as a starting point. Radical feminism starts from women’s condition and integrates it into a global social perspective. In a multitude of ways. Simple variants merely add women’s struggles to the

“None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.”

(Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, 1818)

G.D. (July, 2016) **(12)**

Notes

(1) A number of themes addressed here are also dealt with in a forthcoming pamphlet titled *Feminism Illustrated*. This combines the translations of a 1974 article written for *Le Fléau Social* [The Social Plague], and of a 2015 interview, both signed “Constance Chatterley”, which was an alias I used for that French mag in 1974. Nearly all *Fléau Social* articles were signed under fanciful aliases, and I chose “Constance Chatterley”. In those carefree days, no man or woman in the small circle of friends around the magazine had any objection to a male impersonating a female, even for a critique of feminism. Times have changed... Debates on feminism take place in a highly charged atmosphere. No-one will escape finger-pointing and shaming campaigns. So, “When I am angry I become very calm, and very lucid.” (Louise Doughty, *Dance With Me*, 1996)

(2) The woman/sex/gender question is large enough to fill an infinite library. We will just mention a useful reader: *Revolutionary Feminism*, Communist Research Cluster, 2015: <https://communistresearchcluster.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/release-of-reader-vol-3-on-revolutionary-feminism/> From Engels to Mariarosa Dalla Costa via Emma Goldman and many others, an uncritical yet informative anthology.

(3) About reproduction, we cannot avoid a brief discussion of the idea of **reproductive labour**.

The concept aims at giving us the link between sex and class by integrating women’s subordination into capitalist exploitation. The notion was floated in the 1930’s and 40’s, later given wider currency, and is now one of the tenets common to most radical feminists, or even their core theory.

But there’s more to it. Though its proponents claim to fill a gap in Marx’s analysis, they come forward with nothing less than a new definition of the wage labour/capital relation. It is more than a concept, it is a theory on its own, and an utterly different one from Marx’s, as it presents housework as fundamental to capital. Nothing wrong with dissenting from Marx... providing the theory is right, which is not the case.

The argument goes like this. Domestic work (done by women) lowers the cost of labour power: if the male worker had to eat out or buy pre-packaged meals, take his washing to the launderette, etc., he would be spending more than if his woman partner does the cooking and the washing for him. Thanks to the unpaid activity of that woman, so the thesis goes, the boss saves money: he benefits from this work, as it offloads the cost of maintaining and raising male wage-workers on to the women. Therefore housework is a form of *labour* which the capitalist benefits from without paying for it, and one of the essential permanent sources of capital valorisation.

What this analysis does is to extend the notion of *surplus labour* (the part of the working day that comes after the hours when the worker has earned his keep, viz. a “gratuitous” part and the source of the boss’s profit) to unpaid domestic work.

Sexes & revolution

In a future revolution, everything will depend on what male and female insurgents do. **(11)**

Family is no couple: it locks the woman into a specific function because family evolves around its own reproduction, therefore around children and motherhood, and up to now a woman is first and foremost a mother, willingly or unwillingly specialised in “her” domain. An insurrection that will break with private property, with work as such, will suspend and destroy a “feminine” role that is actually a *family* role.

This may be hard to picture today, but history is not a peaceful evolutionary flow: it is scarred by deep discontinuities. “In the space of a week, we have lived a century”, commented a participant in the 1789 French riots after the storming of the Bastille. Insurrection times jostle ways and habits: people no longer eat or sleep “at home”, kids no longer belong to “their” parents, the young often evade control, and changing the child/adult relation impacts the man/woman relation. Confronting capital and State does not automatically dissolve the other oppressions, but it disrupts deeply entrenched roles: the woman insurgent stops acting as man’s supportive auxiliary, and children’s irruption on the public scene defies the shackles of convention.

Up to now, in nearly all uprisings, woman participants have mostly acted as proletarians’ wives: in communist insurrection, women will take part as woman proletarians. The woman with a talent for guns will stay on the street instead of taking the kids home, and the man with a strong disposition for cooking will follow his inclination, until roles fluctuate, but there will be a lot more to it. A mere reshuffling of tasks would not eliminate women’s subordination any more than multi-tasking would eliminate work. We will only get rid of *work* and of the *family* at the same time – or not at all.

On the other hand, if a movement remains within the confines of labour/capital bargaining or of democratic demands, even by violent means, women will not do much more than men, and will eventually be driven back to a “woman’s place” : the home, in one form or another. The return to domesticity could take the intermediary stage of a communal leaderless yet *woman*-managed canteen or child care centre. Women would be once again relegated to a politically innocuous private sphere.

Male hegemony will not wither in a day or month. Nor will it die a quiet death. Its process will equally involve man/woman conflicts and tensions between (male and female) radical and reformist proletarians in general. Latin America *piqueteros* and Oaxaca insurgents gave examples of the necessity and difficulty of solving such conflicts. A revolution that proves unable to face up to the challenge will also be unable to do the rest.

The way revolution will ensure its own reproduction – and the reproduction of its participants – will determine its future.

Just because capital/wage labour relations structure the present world, it does not mean that this interrelation is the only element that holds the world together. In that relationship the family plays a necessary part, and female secondary status is one of the pillars of the system: therefore we have to challenge it to get rid of capital and wage labour.

other struggles. Sophisticated variants recombine sex and class, or sex, race and class. **(7)** In any case, as they all regard women’s place in history as essential, it is legitimate to consider these positions and currents as feminist.

There is nothing disparaging in calling a person or an activity *feminist*. For us, resisting the subjugation and oppression inflicted upon women is a necessary fight. Only the proponent of the “All or Nothing” policy remains unmoved by what can improve the life of women. On that basis, as much as other forms of resistance, feminism is inseparable from the general movement towards human emancipation. On that basis too, like other forms of resistance, we need to assess its scope and perspectives. **(8)**

Bitter victory

Despite the fact that there has always been resistance among women, it was not until capitalism that a feminist movement emerged, because the capitalist system brings in a hitherto unknown contradiction :

Though the persistent subordination of women allows for a lot of them to be paid less and clustered in low-skilled and undervalued jobs, their mass entry on to the labour market puts them alongside male wage-earners and encourages them to demand sex equality in the workplace (equal pay for equal work) as well as in the rest of life (sex equality at home, in the public place, in politics, etc.). In 2014, 55% of British trade-union members were women. The inferior status carries on, but it is questioned. Women remain subjugated yet they live a “unisex” condition as a woman boss or a woman proletarian. In the most “progressive” countries and zones, they are *far less unequal* to men than before, especially at work, but they still have to assume a role of child-bearers and care-givers, and the myth of innate maternal instinct still prevails, albeit highly challenged.

As long as a proletarian movement – made of women and men – lacks the ability to confront capitalism and do away with both capital and work, feminists will be forced to act within this contradiction, and to fight for women to be treated as equal to men, in the working world as elsewhere. Feminism is part of the politics of human equality.

As equality is far from being an achievable goal in a structurally inequitable system, even in so-called modern countries, we can foresee a busy and often frustrated future for the whole range of feminist groups, moderates and radicals, each variant positioning itself as the upholder of “true” feminism. And as their effort comes up against stumbling blocks it cannot overcome on its own, it is inevitable that it should give primacy to Law (equalising entails legalising), education (teaching gender at school and in the media as well as in the political milieu), academia (redressing the master narrative of **history** and combing through literature for evidence of sex bias), not forgetting language correction (sanitising and de-sexing the vocabulary). To *that* extent, feminism has gone mainstream (of course a lot more in New York than in the Bible Belt, not much in Moscow, and hardly at all in Sanaa).

Out of the labour room

Past insurrections generally showed little concern for women's submission. True. But neither did they really challenge the core of the capitalist system. They did not fail to include the woman question in their agenda because they were led by sexist men (though many risings were), but because of the shortcomings of the agenda itself. The programme was to free labour from capital and create a community of equal and associated producers. Both limitations – social and sexual – went hand in hand. Groups (usually organised by women) which tried to strike at sex-based hierarchy found themselves as much battered from all sides as the groups which tried to push for the abolition of wage labour. In 1936-39, both the *Mujeres Libres* and the Friends of Durruti ended up as a shrinking minority. **(9)**

This was not for lack of intentions, and sometimes practical undertakings. The critique of the family, for instance, is a recurring theme in the history of anarchism and communism, as proved by the experience of libertarian communities in Europe, America and Asia. In the early years after 1917, the Russian revolution spawned efforts to change the life of couples in order to terminate the oppression of women: kindergartens, canteens and communal laundries were supposed to free women from the burden of domestic chores and enable them to take part in collective activities. **(10)** This was top-down, party-controlled, organised with meagre means, and the experiment was cut short when the regime re-imposed traditional family values, but at least it had located a tipping point in the daily man/woman relationship.

Likewise, Engels demonstrates a genuine commitment to superseding the family. One of the main concerns of *The Origins of the Family, Private Property & the State* is to explain how the monogamous family came about, how capitalism undermines its foundation, and how it will be dissolved under socialism.

According to Engels, however, whereas the former development of productive forces (agriculture and early industry) enslaved women, modern industrialisation *potentially* liberates women from male control by forcing them into wage-labour alongside men, and socialism will make this liberation *effective*.

For him as for the vast majority of communists up to the last quarter of the 20th century, revolution would dispossess the capitalists of their property and extend self-managed and planned work on everyone, with no market and no boss.

To sum up, nearly all Marxists (and quite a few anarchists) hoped to solve the *specific* woman question in the same way as the *whole* social question, and the solution for emancipating proletarians and women was the same: “a free and equal association of the producers”, in Engels' words. Sex equalisation would result from communal cooperative work.

No doubt a critique of work and of the economy as such could hardly be expected then: despite exceptions and illuminating insights, the proletarians aimed at liberating work, not liberating themselves from work. (When the abolition of work was contemplated, it was

usually in a way that bypassed the issue, often thanks to technology: work would still exist, only it would be performed by machines.)

The life of a society is determined by the way it organises the production of its conditions of existence, i.e. its social relationships, its material bases and the generational renewal. Therefore every society must regulate its reproduction, including the reproduction of children, and there again it would be futile to deny this reality by imagining transferring the burden of production from mothers onto machines, by having babies born in test-tubes and children taken care of by robots. The question is the part taken by production in our lives.

Let us leave aside (in this essay anyway) so-called primitive societies and pre-capitalist worlds. Since the advent of industrial capitalism, the production of the material conditions of existence has become this overwhelming reality called *the economy*, increasingly autonomised from the rest of life, and now grown into a separate sphere, with a split between the time-space devoted to earning money (work) and the other activities. Any productive act is only productive, i.e. value-productive. The millions of hours spent on DIY at home, gardening, helping the neighbour repair his bike-shed or volunteering at the local food bank only exist on the margin of wage labour, the central activity without which all other “free” pursuits would be impossible.

We all bear the brunt of the social division of labour, but it weighs even more on women : because of their ability to give birth, they find themselves specialised in that role, even if (as is more and more the case) they work outside the home. Language tells it all : in the maternity unit, *labour* precedes delivery. As long as we are dominated by the production of our means of living, which includes the production of children, society will exercise firm control over women and compel them to fulfil this specific role (which does not replace other roles but remains a forced one), and women will be kept in an inferior position.

The solution does not consist in having machine-tools and 3-D printers produce for us, but in creating a society where a productive act is not exclusively productive, which also applies to “producing” children. Whose children, by the way ? In communism, even if a baby comes out of a woman's body, it will not have to be “hers” with all the pressures and obligations it now puts on the two of them. In a world with no private property, no-one will own the child, not even her or his parents, biological parents or not, though we can safely assume that he/she will have a special relationship with them. We need hardly stress that this perspective seems today as far remote as the possibility of a world without money and without State: yet mutual mother and child conditions are no more incontrovertible “facts of nature” than the maternal instinct.

The answer to the “woman question” is not to be found in the man/woman relation :

Only by producing without production bearing down on society can we ensure that women stop being defined by the reproductive function of children. A child will still be delivered from a woman's womb, but this fact will no longer circumscribe women. It remains to be seen what will define “men” and “women”. In any case, motherhood will no longer come with subordination. Biology will cease to be destiny.