1. Trabajo doméstico no remunerado

Donado por Isabel Reyes

Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate

It is nearly a decade since the first texts in the recent domestic labour debate appeared, and since then over fifty articles have been published on the subject of housework in the British and American socialist press alone.[1] This interest in domestic labour has arisen from a wide range of orientations, both feminist and Marxist, yet despite this variety they all involve a common underlying assumption: namely that investigation of this previously neglected topic can contribute to an understanding of women's subordination and to the formulation of a politics adequate to its supercession. Two main concerns can be identified in this literature. The first aims to show how the subordination of women, variously described as oppression, subjugation or exploitation, is, although often seen as 'extra-economic', in fact founded on a *material* basis and is linked into the political economy of capitalist society. This approach has attempted to demonstrate housework's *economic* contribution to maintaining the capitalist system by providing labour necessary for the reproduction of labour power. It has raised the question of to what extent the development of capitalism has

itself created the present domestic system and has, in particular, created 'housework'.[2] This perspective has often involved the attempt to apply to the sphere of housework concepts previously restricted to the analysis of the more general, conventional and public, features of the capitalist economy.

A second concern is the more directly political one of identifying the actual and potential role of women within socialist struggle. Analysis of this problem was alternated between a pessimistic view and one which is more positive: the former emphasises the allegedly demobilising and conservative role of housewives in relation to political activity; the latter emphasises the political potential of women, whether they be housewives or wage earners.[3] On this second, more optimistic, view women are said to share with the proletariat a common exploitation by capital and hence a common objective interest in overthrowing it.

Although these approachs represented an important contribution to the debate on women's subordination, I shall argue in what follows that the theoretical work so far produced on domestic labour has not adequately addressed the problems which they identified. In particular, the attempt to produce a theory of the political economy of women, the more analytically viable of the two concerns, has been characterised by one or more of the following limitations: first by a tendency to economic reductionism, secondly, by a recourse to functionalist modes of argument in constructing the relationship between capitalism and domestic labour; and thirdly, by a narrow focus on the *labour* performed in the domestic sphere at the expense of theorising the wider familial/household context. This latter focus has led, among other things, to over-emphasising the importance for the male wage worker of the labour performed by the housewife, and to the virtual neglect of that performed on behalf of the next generation of workers in the work of rearing children. This only one aspect of domestic labour, arguably the least important, is given serious consideration in this debate, a deficiency not overcome by the occasional generic references in the literature to the housewife 'reproducing labour power'.

The following reassessment of the domestic labour debate has two main sections. The first is an evaluation of a specific and challenging contribution to the debate, namely the 'domestic mode of production' thesis. In this part, two contrasting theories, one Marxist and the other non-Marxist, are criticised in the light of their use of the concept mode of production.[4] Certain misconceptions and assumptions both specific to these theories and, in some cases, common to the debate as a whole are discussed. In particular, the common assumption that domestic labour necessarily lowers the value of labour is questioned; instead, it is argued that the maintenance of the domestic sphere as the main site of biological reproduction under capitalism is economically possible only where the value of labour power is sufficiently high for wages to cover the cost of the family's reproduction. This then leads on to the second section where the two texts are situated within a general critique of some other assumptions underlying the domestic labour thesis. This latter section concludes with an attempt to conceptualise the relationship between women and the domestic sphere on a broader basis.

Christine Delphy: Women's work is never paid

In *The Main Enemy* a pamphlet which was published in Britain in 1976 and which has now gained a considerable following in the British and French women's movements, Christine Delphy criticises the way in which Marxists have traditionally seen the oppression of women as secondary in importance to the class struggle, the latter 'derived exclusively as arising from the oppression of the proletariat by capital'. The root of the problem is the Marxist derivation of classes from their place in the production process. This, she argues, takes no account of the 'specific relations of women to (non-capitalist) production in the home'. According to Delphy, this labour, commonly and erroneously seen as valueless, is not in any intrinsic sense different from the socialised form of domestic labour existing in the commodity sector. The only difference is that the staff of laundrettes, restaurants and nurseries are paid for their labour, whereas the housewife is not. Thus married women, in performing housework for free, are being exploited by the beneficiaries of this situation—their husbands. It is this mode of exploitation, arising on the basis of housework conceived as production that gives rise to Delphy's conception of an autonomous domestic *mode of production*.

In justification of this argument she advances a number of theses concerning women's work. (1) Women's labour in the family has always made an essential, if unacknowledged, contribution to the economy. Historically women have almost always performed labour in addition to housework without being paid for either. This is especially the case where the family is the unit of production, for example on small farms, in retail businesses and in workshops: even today there are in France over a million women classified as 'family aides', i.e. unpaid workers, most of them in the agricultural sector. (2) As a result of industrialisation and the decline of subsistence agriculture, women's

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[1] The first draft of this paper was presented to the Anglo-French SSRC Women's Group in June 1975. I wish to thank all those who helped in its realisation, in particular Harold Wolpe, Barbara Taylor, and Helen Crowley, for their valuable comments.

[2] For an account of this 'history' see Chris Middleton 'Sexual Inequality and Stratification Theory' in *The Sociological Analysis of Class Structure* (ed) F. Parkin London 1978.

[3] Despite their different conclusions both analyses share a tendency to economic

[4] J. Harrison 'The Political Economy of Housework' *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, Winter 1973. C. Delphy *The Main Enemy*, Women's Research and Resource Centre 1976. There has been a revival of interest in the notion of a domestic mode of production over the last few years. The editorial of the *Union of Radical Political Economy*'s last special issue on women (Vol. 9 No. 3 1977) argued, following Harrison, that housework was to be conceived in terms of a client mode of production, a position also adopted in recent conference papers on women's subordination

labour [illegible] no longer be fully exploited within the family unit; some women [illegible] are therefore absorbed into wage work, while the rest remained full-time housewives, deprived of their former involvement in production for the market. However, women's entry into wage work did not, for two reasons, significantly alter their overall position. First, all women, regardless of any extra-domestic work, continued to do domestic labour for free. Secondly, if women entered wage labour their wages were likely to be controlled by their husbands and would most probably be spent on paying for such services (e.g. childcare and laundry) that used to be performed by the women themselves. The only difference, then, is that whereas before taking up wage work women performed their domestic labour in return for *subsistence*, those performing wage work now do it for *nothing* because they earn their own subsistence in the wage sector. (3) What sustains this situation is the marriage contract into which most women enter at some point in their lives. This common contractual position is the basis of the common *class* condition of women. Through marriage women are deprived of the right to 'control their own labour', in that they are not free to sell it. And what they do with their labour and its products is subject to the will of their husbands. Men therefore exploit women's labour and in so doing constitute their class oppressors.

Delphy derives two main theoretical and political conclusions from these theses. First she argues that in contemporary society there are *two* modes of production: an industrial mode of production defined by capitalist property relations and capitalist exploitation, and a patriarchal mode of production defined by patriarchal familial relations of production and patriarchal exploitation (i.e. of women by men). These modes are distinct and *autonomous*, as shown by the fact that the overthrow of capitalist relations does not result in the abolition of women's oppression. Delphy further argues that in terms of this second, patriarchal mode women constitute a distinct class, united by their common oppression by men, and irrespective of their occupation or their husband's class position. She concludes that women should mobilise *autonomously* to overthrow patriarchy and the society in which it is embedded.

Some initial problems

Some of Delphy's arguments and observations are, in a general sense, true: domestic labour *is* an important yet grossly undervalued activity, it remains a locus and contributory cause of women's oppression, and, despite class and cultural variations, men can be said to benefit in certain obvious ways from women's work in the home. However, the theoretical edifice which she constructs in order to substantiate her assertions and advance her political conclusions is inadequate in a number of ways. As some of Delphy's conclusions are similar to those of Harrison, these will be considered together in a later section. Here we will confine the discussion to those points which are more specific to Delphy's approach.

To begin with, Delphy's theory of women's subordination is founded

men appropriate women's surplus labour. But how adequate is this as a theory of woman's oppression? Not all women are subsumed under marriage relations, and not all marriage contracts and practises within marriage are identical;[5] on the contrary, they can vary markedly between different societies and entail very different labour obligations for both women and men. Much of Delphy's argument concerning the appropriation of women's labour is based on an analysis of the position of French women in farms, workshops and other family enterprises, and does not compare with countries where this form of women's unpaid labour is relatively insignificant. Thus any claim that Delphy has produced a theory of universal relevance must be tempered by some recognition of the specificity of her data and the empiricist derivation of her theory. A further problem with her approach is that, in reducing the subordination of women merely to the marriage relation, she leaves out of account the oppressive aspects both of motherhood, and of women's place on the labour market. Her narrow focus on the appropriation of *labour* within marriage also reduces the problem of women's oppression to purely economic concerns; it thereby fails to consider the ideological and psychological dimensions which are crucial if any understanding of why marriages occur at all is to be gained.

Another major point which should be raised in relation to Delphy's text is its critical stance vis-à-vis Marxism. For her text is devised essentially as a polemic against Marxism, but it is a somewhat oversimplified and caricatured version of Marxist theory that comes under attack. This may be due in part to the fact that *The Main Enemy* was first written in 1970, but it is now at the very least in need of some revision in the light of developments within Marxist theory and the efflorescence of a Marxist-Feminist body of literature. The vulgar Marxism which she so roundly denounces has long been abandoned by many Marxist Feminists as well as by Marxists in general, yet Delphy continues to engage with it rather than with the more recent work in the Marxist tradition.

This leads us to Delphy's own use of Marxist theory. On the one hand she attacks it as an obstacle 'holding back' the women's movement, while, on the other, she attempts to assimilate its language and concepts, albeit with a view to effecting some major revisions. For instance she deploys such terms as 'relations of production', 'mode of production', 'labour power' and 'exchange value', but in every instance transforms them into empiricist, common sense, constructs which are quite at variance with conventional definitions. Relations of production, are, for example, defined as 'ways of earning a living'. No theoretical explanation is offered as to why these concepts rather than others should be used or why they require substantial redefinition.

Delphy does not claim to be a Marxist, and it is therefore perhaps unfair to catalogue the numerous problems with her deployment of Marxist concepts. However her revisions are not accidental but are

[5] As M. Barrett and M. McIntosh, in a trenchant critique of Delphy, ask: 'can women escape subordination by the simple device of remaining unmarried?' 'Towards a Materialist Feminism', *Feminist Review*, Issue No. 1, January 1979.

necessary to her argument. For it is her reformulation of several fundamental Marxist concepts (exploitation, mode of production, value, production) which enables her to advance her separatist political conclusions. Without these revisions she is unable to sustain her major thesis that men are the main class enemy; if the Marxist definitions were adhered to, her arguments would either collapse or require substantial reformulation.

Harrison: Housework, a 'client mode'

John Harrison begins 'The Political Economy of Housework' by distinguishing between the world capitalist system and the capitalist mode of production, and between the social formation as a whole and the modes of production within it. He argues that within a determinate social formation there may be subordinate modes distinct from the dominant, constitutive modes. He points out that this pertains in transitional epochs; in these there may be relics of the past, what he calls 'vestigial' modes, or anticipations of future ones, which he calls 'foetal modes'. He adds to these yet another kind of mode, a 'client' mode of production. These are neither dominant, nor relics of the past, nor seeds of the future. 'They are either created or co-opted by the dominant mode to fulfil certain functions within the economic and social system. They are dependent for their survival on the continued existence of the dominant mode because their reproduction is bound up with the reproduction of that mode.' Harrison states that within capitalist society 'housework and large areas of state activity' fall into this category, as do certain non-capitalist sectors within peripheral social formations. The 'housework mode of production' is in many ways similar to petty commodity production: both are marked by the absence of a division of labour, a low degree of socialisation of labour, and the fact that the producers work on an individual basis. But unlike petty commodity production and unlike capitalism itself, housework does not produce use values for exchange. Moreover although it provides use-values for the reproduction of the labourer it is not, as Margaret Benston and others have suggested, directly productive of the commodity labour power.

The function of the housework mode, then, is in the first instance to contribute to the reproduction of the labour power of the wage worker by providing use values necessary for (his) subsistence; but in return for her labour, Harrison argues, the wife receives only her subsistence, while she herself contributes a surplus of labour which appears in the capitalist sector as surplus value. 'The mechanism by which this transfer of surplus labour from housework to the capitalist sector takes place is the payment by the capitalist of wages below the value of labour power.' This is possible because through her labour the housewife reduces the value of labour power; she provides services which if bought in the market would inflate the cost of subsistence and hence also ultimately affect wages. The existence of the housework mode has other effects for capital but these are double-edged: on the one hand by keeping women out of the labour force it improves the bargaining position of male workers; on the other, it creates a reserve army of

Harrison concludes by arguing that because their work is performed *outside* the capitalist mode of production women form a separate class: consequently those women who are housewives *and* wage earners fall into two classes. He calls for a struggle against both forms of oppression—that of capitalism and that of the family.

Although Harrison provides a less assertive, more elaborated, argument than Delphy, his analysis raises further theoretical questions, and there is one specific area of problem which requires some discussion here: namely his conceptualisation of the relation between capitalism and housework. Since this has been extensively discussed elsewhere, we shall be brief;* suffice to say that Harrison's argument concerning the transfer of surplus labour from the domestic to the capitalist sphere (where it appears as surplus value) is founded on a false premise: this treats as equivalent, and therefore comparable, the concrete labour in the domestic sphere and the abstract labour time of commodity production. Yet they are *not* comparable labours since housework is not subject to the general equalisation of labour; hence there is no basis for the calculation of a transfer of surplus labour-time between the two spheres unless the law of value is redefined. This problem is compounded by Harrison's designation of housework as non-capitalist. As one writer has put it: 'how can the concrete labour of a non-capitalist mode, which as Harrison argues, does not take a value form, appear in the capitalist sector as additional value, a value which has no material base in the capitalist process of production?'[1] Harrison's theory of the relationship between domestic labour and capitalism is therefore flawed at the very centre.

Housework and the Value of Labour Power

These problems aside, there remains the widely-held thesis that housework depresses the value of labour power by providing ('for free') the labour necessary for its day-to-day reproduction. Without unpaid housework, it is argued, this labour would have to be purchased through the market out of increased wages. Harrison's analysis rests on this premise, and it has gained considerable support throughout the domestic labour debate; indeed the 'subsidy' from housework is often seen as capitalism's main reason for maintaining women in a subordinate position within the home. The question posed is certainly a valid one, since it represents an attempt to address the problem of the determination of the value of labour power. But the manner in which the argument is presented, and some of the assumptions on which it is based, lead to erroneous conclusions, in particular because two elements which it is essential to distinguish are conflated. These are: first, the question of whether domestic labour necessarily lowers the value of labour power; and secondly, whether this alleged lowering of

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* See for example J. Gardiner *et al.* 'Women's Domestic Labour' BCSE, Vol. IV, No. 2., S. Himmelweit and S. Mohun 'Domestic Labour and Capital', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 1, 1977, and P. Smith 'Domestic Labour and Marx's Theory of Value' in A. Kuhn and A. M. Wolpe (eds) *Towards a Materialist Feminism* London 1978.

[1] P. Brown 'Marx's Capital and Privatised Labour under Capitalism', MA Disserta

the value of labour power convincingly establishes capitalisms' stake in maintaining women in a subordinate position in the home. Although generally accepted as valid, both of these arguments are, on closer examination rather questionable.

The value of labour power is ultimately determined by the value of the 'bundle of commodities' necessary for the reproduction of labour power. But it is not simply reducible to this economic calculation, since other factors, of equal importance, also intervene. The literature on domestic labour commonly assumes that the value of labour power can be discussed in general terms, and that domestic labour exists in an invariant relation to it, whereas in fact the value of labour power can only be determined in relation to specific societies and periods of history. It is subject to a variety of cultural and political conditions which establish what the standard of living for different strata and categories of the working class might be. It not only varies according to the different categories of labour (skilled/unskilled, black/white, male/female), but also according to the different circumstances which affect the bargaining position of labour at any given time, such as labour supply and the level of class struggle. In addition, the value of labour power is affected by other factors such as the general level and rate of accumulation, the level of profits in a given enterprise or sector of production, the relation between Departments I and II, and the general technological level.* Within this multiplicity of determinations, the contribution of *housework* to establishing the value of labour power plays a relatively minor role. Indeed it cannot be assumed *a priori* that housework plays any significant role in this determination at all.

For the relation domestic labour/value of labour power is also subject to historical/cultural variations. It is true that in the advanced capitalist countries the value of labour power for most categories of workers has risen to a level which could cover the cost of reproducing a context in which domestic labour is performed, that is a 'home'. And if the market price of the inputs required for day-to-day reproduction is high, then it is likely that a certain amount of unpaid domestic labour (cooking, cleaning, laundry) would be undertaken, whether by men or women, for a combination of ideological and economic reasons. In these circumstances we could speak of this labour as helping to maintain the value of labour power at a lower level than if all the labour inputs were commodityized. However, this cannot be regarded as axiomatic, and it requires empirical evidence to show that it costs workers less to perform their own domestic labour than to purchase what they require on the market. For whether this is so is at least contingent on the non-availability on the market of low-cost services, and subsistence goods requiring little or no transformative labour for their consumption. Certainly, it cannot be argued that these conditions do not exist; even in the advanced capitalist countries, let alone in the third world, there is a significant dependence by workers on the market for reproductive needs, and it is not necessarily only the better paid workers who do so. On the contrary, it is precisely where the value of labour power is lowest that the input of domestic labour is often most minimal. Single workers, and migrants, whose labour power is usually reproduced on a daily basis without the benefit of female domestic labour, are invariably paid below average wages. Even supposing that they were able and willing to afford the necessary appliances, such categories of worker live in conditions (slums, hostels, shanties) which make it difficult for them to perform their own domestic labour; as a consequence they tend to rely on services and food obtained on the market.

The wage bargain that is struck in these circumstances will not therefore presume a significant input of domestic labour. And it is at least an open question whether the value of labour power would fall if, instead of purchasing subsistence goods ready-made on the market, workers transformed their own in the home. It could, for instance, be the case that acquiring conditions which make possible the cooking and cleaning entailed in privatising consumption and establishing a home might itself be contingent on a higher value of labour power. In other words, because the value of labour power is subject to such historical and cultural variations, no invariant relation between domestic labour and the value of labour power can be assumed. This renders problematic any more general claims for the importance of domestic labour to capitalism, and certainly undermines any argument to the effect that such labour is in some sense essential to it.

The second conventional proposition is that the contribution of housework to the value of labour power helps to account for the position of *women* in the home. This argument, like the above, is premissed on a conception of the value of labour power which is also too static and ahistorical. It should *not* be assumed, as many writers do, that the value of labour power *necessarily* includes the cost of reproducing the working class *family*. Whether it does or not is dependent on variant factors similar to those mentioned above. At the very least, the value of labour power must be equivalent in value to the bundle of commodities required for the reproduction of the wage earner's labour power. However, in the advanced capitalist countries the value of labour power of some sectors of the working class has been established at a level which covers the cost of a dependent family, and this has produced the phenomenon of the so-called 'family wage', i.e. a single wage which is sufficient to maintain a working class family at a certain standard of living. At the same time, for substantial numbers of workers, the value of labour power and wages fall below this minimum, and the male wage does not then cover the cost of the family's subsistence.

The implications of this difference between the two cases is of vital importance for the position of women. If the wage is a family wage in the sense defined above, it is possible for it to maintain married women outside of the labour force as full-time housewives. If not, then the family will be under pressure to secure additional income in order to reproduce the family at an acceptable standard of living; a common

* In the same way, wages are also subject to a multiplicity of determinations, and even though theoretically they represent the purchase of labour power at its value [illegible] and relationship between the two is subject to changes and vari-

neither case, however, is it the performance or non-performance of *domestic labour* as such which explains the position of women in the home. Where it might be of importance is in cases where the value of male labour power has fallen below the family wage and the dependent housewife, unable or unwilling to enter the labour market, redoubles her effort to stretch the family wage. This does not *lower* the value of labour power *in itself* but is rather a response to an already given situation, which *might*, however, result in maintaining the value of labour power at that level, if other factors remain constant.

Hence, even if we accept that domestic labour can lower the value of labour power in certain circumstances, this is insufficient to account for the position of *women* in the home. If the argument is sound and housework *is* beneficial to capital, it must also be explained why it is generally women who do this work. Of course, in reality it is not only women who perform domestic labour; single males, children and others also do so, and households sometimes share it out between the members. But as long as the work is performed, capital is surely quite unconcerned as to the social relations under which it is performed, and the agents who perform it. It could still be argued that the existence of full-time housewives is the most beneficial to capital, since they perform more surplus labour, invest more labour time and work harder in general to stretch the family wage. Yet this too is hard to sustain as a general rule, for we must remember that while the housewife's domestic labour may indeed help to stretch the family income, she herself must also be reproduced, along with any children in the family, and the additional complement of domestic appliances necessary for privatised domestic labour must be purchased and maintained. If the housewife is a wage earner then these costs are met, in part, from her own wage packet. But it is a different matter if she is a full-time housewife. In this case, it is not simply a question of the housewife's labour entailing a hidden benefit to the capitalist in lowering the value of the husband's labour power, but rather that the maintenance of the domestic ensemble and of the individuals within it also entails a *hidden cost*, which in this case is covered by the provision of a family wage to the husband. The benefit to the capitalist enterprise is therefore questionable.

What is therefore significant about domestic labour in the advanced capitalist countries is not the economic value for capital deriving from its 'unpaidness'. It is rather that the existence of full-time housewives performing this labour depends in the first instance on the capacity of a wage sufficient to maintain wives outside wage work. This does not hold for all classes let alone for all strata of the working class, even in non-crisis situations; but in periods of economic recession, where inflation lowers the value of labour power, large numbers of women are encouraged to take up paid work precisely because of the inadequacy of their husband's wage and of such state benefits as may exist. The question is not therefore one of the housewife's domestic labour simply depressing the value of labour power, but rather of the extent to which the housewife's conditions of existence might raise or at least maintain it.

women in the home, but not in the way suggested by Harrison, and by most authors in the domestic labour debate. What needs further explanation are the variant forms of this relation, the specific political, historical and economic reasons which result in 'family' wages being paid to members of some classes and strata and not to others, to men and not to women, and by some capitals and not others.

Similarities and Differences

Having discussed certain aspects of these theories individually, we can now identify the similarities and differences between them. The main difference is, of course, one of theoretical approach: Harrison's analysis tries to locate domestic labour within a consistently Marxist perspective, in a sense to append a 'domestic mode', with its specific forms of exploitation, to a conventional class analysis. Here capitalism, at least by implication, remains the main enemy. Christine Delphy, on the other hand, while condemning capitalism and calling for its overthrow is hostile to Marxist analysis. Whereas Harrison is concerned to show how *capitalism* might benefit from housework, Delphy is concerned to demonstrate that the main enemy (for women) is *not* capitalism but men. Again, whereas Delphy is interested in the relationship between men and women, Harrison is interested in the relation between housework and the value of labour power. Indeed the theoretical object of his text is not so much women's oppression as capitalism. At the very least such a fundamental divergence between these two supporters of the domestic mode of production thesis suggests that the mere application of this concept cannot illuminate the problem of the political practice of the women's movement. Beyond this fundamental divergence, however, there are three main positions which these theories have in common and which require further discussion: the first is their characterisation of women as a class; the second is their designation of housework as non-capitalist, and the third is their characterisation of the domestic sphere as a mode of production.

1. Are Women a Class?

Marxists have on the whole tended to resist the idea that women form a distinctive class, in part because no economic class position, at once specific and common to all women, has been convincingly established. Harrison and Delphy however are concerned to demonstrate that there does exist an economic basis for conceptualising women (or at least some women) as a class, although their arguments in support of this contention are widely divergent. Delphy's arguments concerning class are somewhat unsatisfactory. In the space of one page women are described as being in a relationship of 'slavery', being 'essentially proletarians' and being involved in 'serf relations'. Be that as it may, she deduces class from the *exploitation* she sees taking place within the marriage relation. We have already noted some of the problems associated with the universalising and privileging of the marriage form and the failure to take account of important differences in the women: domestic labour relation, but there are additional difficulties with her designation of women as a class. Her concept of exploitation for example, although borrowed from Marxist discourse where it has

specific theoretical application is given a looser definition by Delphy, as 'the appropriation of labour'. However, in Marxist terms even if this appropriation can be observed to take place, it is not sufficient to establish the existence of classes; some surplus labour is always performed in all societies on behalf of certain categories of individuals without the relations so constituted necessarily being exploitative. Moreover, classes cannot simply be derived from the empirical observation of relations between human subjects. Class exploitation involves relations which are given at the level of the relations of production and is not reducible to the simple fact of surplus labour 'appropriation'.[9] As Delphy's thesis concerning class is not theoretically grounded she can advance no convincing argument to sustain it, and if her own definitions are scrupulously applied, they lead, as we shall see, to conclusions which contradict her main argument.

A further difficulty arises from Delphy's claim that there is a *universal* class of women. Women, she suggests, all belong to the same class because marriage is a common condition of all women and overides differentials of wealth and position, and presumably also cultural differences in the marriage contract. Yet when her argument is analysed a crucial inconsistency appears. In order to counter idealist theories of womens' subordination, Delphy insists that all women-wives labour under the same 'relations of production' and perform the 'same tasks', thus stressing the *materiality* of their common oppression. This supposedly materialist emphasis is fundamental to her whole argument, yet it is not convincingly sustained when she tries to assimilate more privileged women into her schema. For here she argues that it does not matter what form domestic labour takes; it can consist either of the physical labour of the proletarian's wife, or simply of the 'work of social display' forced on the wife of the bourgeois. Yet is what sense can we speak then of women being united by common 'relations of *production*' i.e. by a common *material* exploitation rooted in 'production'? In what sense is 'social display' production? Clearly the wife of the bourgeois who employs servants to do the housework and to care for the children does *not* share the *material* oppression of the less privileged women; nor is this contradicted by the fact that her privileges may derive from her husband's wealth or that she may one day be deprived of them through divorce. She may, of course, be oppressed and discriminated against in other ways which would be common to all women (and could form the basis of certain campaigns) but these are not of immediate concern to Delphy who is interested in the materiality of women's subordination defined in terms of the exploitation of women's *labour*.

2. Housework and its relation to capitalism

In analysing housework's relation to capitalism, both authors agree that housework is distinct from capitalism, and is essentially non-capitalist. However, they differ in regard to how much autonomy from capitalism to accord it. On this point Harrison has a more nuanced position than Delphy. He acknowledges that, while non-capitalist, the domestic mode is integrated into, or articulated onto, capitalism – as his rather uneasy formulations about its being a 'client' or 'truncated' mode suggest. Indeed the housework mode, like the state mode, was 'created by' capitalism to 'fulfill certain functions'. The crucial question here is whether such modes can be said to constitute modes of production at all, given their highly contingent and dependent character, and we shall return to this point later.

Delphy, however, argues that the familial and patriarchal modes are *autonomous* entities which *bear no theoretical relation to each other*. Yet the degree to which housework can be conceived of as autonomous from capitalism is questionable, since its articulation with capitalism extends to the provision of the entire family's subsistence, the latter being paid for by means of an income derived from the capitalist sector. The very performing of domestic labour, the provision of services and subsistence goods, is therefore dependent on using and or transforming commodities produced and purchased in the capitalist sector. Since all housework's inputs except labour are derived from the capitalist sector, in what sense, if any, can housework be seen as autonomous from it? Even Delphy, having asserted this autonomy, nonetheless argues that it is *capitalism* which 'erects family duties as a pretext to exploit women in their outside work'. So, if patriarchy conspires *with capitalism* to oppress women, what kind of 'autonomy' do these systems have? This ambiguity shows up most clearly in Delphy's tacit admission that, to liberate women, a revolution in the family mode of production is *not enough*; rather, the overthrow of the whole society is required. Delphy does not elaborate upon why this dual revolution is necessary, for to do so might take the argument uncomfortably close to the position she rejects.

There is a further problem here which neither Harrison nor Delphy adequately confront, namely the question of the historical and cultural specificity of housework. Whereas Harrison implies that housework is a specific creation of capitalism, the autonomy accorded to the domestic mode by Delphy implies that it should be conceived as independent of the specific phases of development of the principal modes of production such as feudalism, capitalism and socialism. Neither of these views is satisfactory since, while there are few historical and even fewer comparative accounts of housework and of the family, some of the domestic labour theories do not take adequate account of the little evidence which exists on this issue. The attempt to date oppressive domestic labour from the beginnings of modern capitalism, in particular from the decomposition of the family as the main productive unit, is often greatly oversimplified. Even where the family was a unit of production there still exists a distinction between domestic labour for domestic consumption (e.g. food preparation, cleaning, washing, weaving, sewing) and childrearing, and production for exchange in the market or by barter. This distinction is found in the least technologically advanced societies; in other words domestic labour, (even *privatised* domestic labour) and the sexual division of labour *predate* capitalism, and 'would seem, if not to be universal, then to

[9] This point is discussed at greater length in an earlier article of mine 'Androcentrism

his does *not* mean however that the domestic sphere is eternal and immutable: while some of the 'labour processes' might appear similar, here have been important changes over the centuries, many of them onnected with changes in the dominant mode of production. The ansition to capitalist agriculture, for example, increased the amount f food purchased by families rather than consumed out of their own roduction, as Delphy herself acknowledges. Within this century here have been changes in most spheres of domestic life: the develop- ent of better housing has been accompanied by the incorporation of nore services into the home (heating, water, lighting) at the same time s there has been a growth of other services on the market. Technical levelopments such as the refrigeration and canning of cooked food, or he availability of labour saving utilities, have their consequences – or otential consequences – for domestic labour. The state too, has ssumed some responsibility for health, education and childcare. What these developments demonstrate is that far from housework constitu- ing an *autonomous* entity the labour processes and social relations involved in housework have been affected in a number of ways by changes in the economic organisation of the dominant relations of production. This is not to say that housework is simply determined by the latter since the effects of such changes on domestic labour and on the position of women have been on the one hand *partial* and on the other *contradictory*. Some aspects of housework have been and will continue to be resistant to change. But insofar as housework has a history, this has not been an autonomous one.

3. Can there be a Domestic Mode of Production?

There is one important sense in which housework is correctly characterised as 'non-capitalist', namely that it lies outside the sphere of commodity production proper and is therefore not itself governed by the law of value. It is Harrison's recognition of this which leads him to conclude that it must therefore constitute a separate mode of production and it is this conclusion with which we shall now take issue.

The starting point for any theory of a Domestic Mode of Production (DMP) must be the definition of what a mode of production is. Delphy does not offer a definition; rather she uses the term as an analogy for 'a way of producing' and makes no attempt to define it further. She therefore disengages the concept 'mode of production' from its Marxist context and instead appends it as a descriptive device which sums up her inventory of the characteristic features of housework. Harrison on the other hand employs what has come to be identified as the Althusserian conceptualisation in which three elements are combined: a mode of transformation of nature (or labour process); a mode of appropriation of the product; and a determinate distribution of economic property.[10] Since he bases his concept of a mode of production on that elaborated by Balibar, we shall see whether Harrison's application corresponds to it.

In Marxist usage the concept 'mode of production' generally refers to two levels of analysis: first to the elements of the productive structure (i.e. forces and relations of production) and secondly to the laws of motion of the mode concerned. These two together form the theoretical object of Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy: here we find on the one hand a set of elements and social relations specific to capitalism (its labour process, forms of possession and separation), and on the other, a theory of the reproduction of the capitalist economy which is at the same time a concept of its unity—conceived as a system in which the circuits of capital, the relations of distribution and production, and the forms of linkage between enterprises form part of an integrated system of production. The mode of production conceived in this dual sense is a highly abstract conceptualisation of determinate economic systems and their social relations. The conditions of existence of a given mode, those not specified in the general concept but which are necessary to secure its reproduction, pertain to a different level of analysis—that of the social formation. While these conditions may be deduced from the abstract concept of the mode of production concerned, this can only be expressed in very general terms, since the precise mode of securing them in determinate social formations may be subject to considerable variation.

According to Balibar's reading of Marx the concept 'mode of production' functions in two ways: both as a unit of periodisation, in Marx's words, distributing history according to 'epochs in the economic development of society' (capitalist, feudal, socialist), and as a concept on which our knowledge of determinate social formations depends—because it is a theory of its *constitutive economic and social relations*. But it is at once evident that the housework mode of production cannot fulfil this requirement of a mode of production. Harrison's emphasis on the 'client' character of the DMP *by definition* precludes such a mode from providing the basis of a knowledge of the social formation in which it exists. Indeed, on his own terms, knowledge of the DMP itself is *conditional on knowledge of the capitalist mode of production*: 'Its reproduction is dependent on the reproduction of the capitalist mode, it is something of a truncated mode of production with an unusually complex, symbiotic relationship to capital.' It is therefore also by implication, subject to the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production and lacks any such laws of its own. In what sense then can the domestic mode of production provide a knowledge of a determinate social formation?

The same problem arises when we consider if the housework mode of production could function in terms of the other criterion, as a unit of periodisation. In formulating the concept of 'client' modes, Harrison notes that a social formation may contain within it more than one mode of production. His concepts of 'vestigial' and 'foetal' modes would correspond to such an analysis. However, these other subordinate modes differ in one crucial respect from the 'client' modes: this is that they would have been, or will become generalised. Client modes such as the DMP, however, could never become generalised because they would never constitute the economic and social base of a social formation: in other words they lack a productive base of their own. It

formation or part of one governed by the housework mode of production. This absence of a productive base, and the absence of any social production within the DMP, renders problematic the very use of the term 'production' in this context.

Further problems arise in attempting to identify the constituent *elements* of a Domestic Mode of Production. There is a labourer (the housewife) and there are objects of labour; but what are the means of production of a mode in which there is no social production and the product is in the form of some of the housewife's surplus labour? It is doubtful whether the creation of use values for private consumption, whether by cooking or gardening, justifies the use of the concept 'means of production' to designate the implements utilised in such activities. To recognise that domestic labour is of social significance does not entail that it be equated with social production, or even with production in the sense generally implied by Marx. The 'relations of production' of the DMP are characterised by Harrison in terms of the unity of the labourer with the means of production; yet even if we accept his use of these concepts, it is not clear how these relate to the mode of appropriation of the product (in this case the housewife's surplus labour), or how the housewife is subordinated to these exploitative social relations.

The concept 'mode of production' also includes what Balibar calls (perhaps misleadingly)[11] the 'non-labourer' and here there are further difficulties. The 'non-labourer' is the agency which appropriates the surplus labour or surplus product, and the question therefore arises as to what agency appropriates the 'surplus labour' in housework, i.e. in Harrison and Delphy's definition, that which the housewife performs above her own needs. Christine Delphy's answer is clear – it is the men who do so. But if this is true then children also 'appropriate' a large part of the housewife's labour, yet they can neither be assimilated to the adult men, nor legitimately be regarded as a non-labouring exploiting class on their own. The strictly feminist argument of males being exploiters would in fact lead to the implausible conclusion that one should distinguish between different children: a month old baby boy would be an exploiter, a month old baby girl would not.

There are additional difficulties if we follow Delphy in characterising husbands as an appropriating class. In empirical terms there can be no doubt that in the majority of marriages the husband is a 'non-labourer' as far as housework is concerned. But outside the home the husband is usually a labourer, since through selling his labour power he also contributes to the means of his family's subsistence. Therefore he too, in Delphy's terms, performs some 'surplus labour' which is 'appropriated' by his wife and children. Does this turn *them* into *his* exploiter's? Such improbable conclusions are inescapable given Delphy's definition of exploitation discussed earlier.

[11] The concept of non-labourer is misleading because it implies that the exploiting class has no involvement in the process of production, whereas whether they do or not (and many do) has little bearing on the main question which is whether they

Harrison circumvents these problems by not really discussing the position of men in the family mode at all. Whether men are included in the class structure of the domestic mode is unclear, although the implication is that it contains only one class, that of housewives. Yet if women can belong to two classes, why cannot men? The answer may be that to locate men within the domestic mode may take Harrison too close to Delphy's conclusions, for it immediately poses the question of the relation of *men to housework and to women*, rather than of men to capitalism. In any event, his silence on this question is symptomatic of a more general avoidance of the issue of relations between the sexes.

For Harrison, the agency appropriating women's surplus labour is capital and therefore lies outside the domestic mode. Yet here is a further departure from Balibar's conception since in the latter the non-labourer is an invariant element of the concept mode of production which does not, strictly speaking allow for this external appropriation. Even if we accept that subordinate modes may be characterised by an external agent of appropriation there still remains the problem of what is being appropriated and whether its creation constitutes production. In the case of housework, as we have seen, the application of these concepts is questionable and at the very least requires further theoretical substantiation than is given in the literature.

Problems in the Domestic Labour Debate

It is important to recognise that the Domestic Mode of Production thesis absolves Delphy and Harrison from committing two errors frequently reproduced in much of the domestic labour literature and which we shall now consider: that of assimilating housework into the *capitalist mode of production* and that of placing housework in a wholly functional relation to capitalism.

The attempt to assimilate housework into the CMP has often been justified on the grounds that since there is no systematic analysis in the works of Marx and Engels of women's domestic labour, it is necessary to elaborate this theory for them. The absence of a theory of the relation between domestic labour and capitalism has been attributed by some authors to a sexist oversight on the part of the founders of historical materialism.[12] Others argue that even within the central subject matter of the theory, many of Marx's concepts remain undeveloped and are in need of further elaboration; this particularly applies to concepts relevant to the analysis of domestic labour. But whilst it is true that a great deal of work remains to be done to develop Marxist theory, it should not immediately be assumed that everything which remains under, or untheorised in *Capital* can be, or should be, integrated into the theory of capitalist production. It is necessary, in particular, to question rather than assume whether domestic labour can,

[12] L. Vogel 'The Earthly Family' and I. Gerstein 'Domestic Work and Capitalism' in

as one writer hopefully puts it, be made to 'fit into' the concept of the capitalist mode of production.[13]

One major problem is that many writers confuse the level of abstraction of the mode of production with that of the social formation. These problems can be avoided if we first establish what level of abstraction we are dealing with in the case of domestic labour.[14] For it is one thing to produce a Marxist analysis of domestic labour, and quite another to attempt to assimilate domestic labour into the concept of the capitalist mode of production and the laws of motion of the capitalist economy. As these concepts are concerned specifically with commodity production and with the valorisation process, domestic labour, as privatised individual labour not subject to the law of value, *lies outside the theory of the capitalist mode of production*. In Marx's familiar formulation, the labourer 'belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions *outside the process of production*' so that the capitalist may therefore 'safely leave (the labourer's own reproduction) to (his) instincts of self-preservation and of propagation'.[15] In other words, at this level of abstraction capital as such is not 'interested' in the domestic sphere. However, it may well be that, at another level, that of concrete social formations, the form of organization of the domestic sphere and the social relations within it do play an important role in the reproduction of given formations. Nevertheless, whatever the relations between the domestic sphere and the requirements of social reproduction, they are not established simply because of their functionality for capitalism.

This leads directly to the second problem, that of functionalism. The debate on domestic labour and the family has been suffused with what can best be described as functionalist assumptions. Housework is, for instance, variously refered to as 'crucial', 'necessary' or 'essential' to capitalism; for its part, capitalism is sometimes seen as having 'created' housework, and in some formulations even 'depends' on it for survival. We have already stated our objections to the notion that housework is crucial to capitalism, and the same reservations must be made in respect of the present form of organisation of the family. In the domestic labour literature, this too is seen as functional and there is no recognition that however beneficial the domestic sphere might be in a given conjuncture, it might also be undergoing profound changes as a *result* of capitalism's expansion or of the class struggle, and might also generate contradictory effects for capital. The logical conclusion entailed by this posited dependency of capitalism on housework and the family is, as some writers have suggested, that their abolition will bring about the downfall of capitalism. This apocalyptic view is not well substantiated theoretically, but it is often tagged onto the end of otherwise cautious analyses (Benston's for example). It probably arises out of a desire to demonstrate the revolutionary character of the women's movement by clearly defining it as part of the anti-capitalist struggle; yet this can surely be argued without claiming that the subordination of women is necessary for the survival of capitalism, equivalent to the exploitation of the proletariat.

Monism and Economism

Although Delphy and Harrison on the whole avoid the above problems, there is one major limitation which they share with the domestic labour debate and that is its exclusive emphasis on the *economic* analysis of housework. The principal questions addressed by the debate have been whether domestic labour creates value or not, whether it produces the commodity labour power or not; whether it is subject to the law of value, whether it is productive or unproductive – and so on. This may have been inevitable given that the original concern of the debate as it developed within Marxism was, as we have seen, to ground an analysis of female oppression in a 'materialist analysis of women's labour'. Initially this was welcomed as a necessary counter to the idealism of some feminist analyses which hypothesised a universal and ahistorical 'patriarchal oppression' and of some Marxist analyses which saw the family purely in terms of ideological relations. But the domestic labour approach was limited not just by its economism but also by its narrow concentration on housework and on housewives, at the expense of analysing the ensemble of women's economic (and non-economic) activities and the relations within which they were inscribed. Thus even on its own limited terms it failed to provide a *comprehensive* theory of the political economy of women.[16]

It is interesting to note that where this narrowness of focus combined with economism it had the effect of *displacing* the feminist critique of domestic labour from the analysis altogether, as evidenced most strikingly in the argument concerning the depressive effect of housework on the value of labour power. This argument is only concerned to show how housework benefits capital; it does not show, indeed is quite unable to show something perhaps more important, namely why *housework* is performed by *housewives* and how it is linked into the structures of female subordination. Moreover the crucial labour for capital is usually seen as that involved in the everyday reproduction of the (male) worker rather than, for instance, the labour involved in women's childrearing activities. Finally, there is nothing in the theory which explains why this labour cannot simply be equalised between men and women, or even performed by single wage workers themselves. The unavoidable conclusion is that the ending of housework as a women's responsibility and the removal of this form of female oppression could occur with no loss to capital whatsoever. It is worth remarking in this context that with the notable exception of Delphy

[13] This formulation is found in W. Seccombe 'The Housewife and her labour under Capitalism', NLR No 83, January 1974. Himmelweit and Mohun (op cit) give expression to a similar view when they call for domestic labour's integration into the CMP.

[14] Mode of production is an abstract analytical concept which specifies the fundamental social and economic relations which govern determinate social formations, the latter being conceived as the broader entity, corresponding to determinate

[16] J. Gardiner 'Womens Domestic Labour' and Coulson *et al* 'The Housewife and her labour under Capitalism' NLR 89, 1975 escape this limitation by asserting the

many contributions to this debate avoid discussing the relations between the sexes altogether; these are rarely seen as in any way antagonistic because the aim is to show that it is primarily *capital*, rather than, for instance men, which benefits from women's subordination. In sum, in focussing exclusively on what housework contributes economically to capital, a concern which developed from a feminist perspective, feminist issues were, albeit unintentionally, displaced from the discourse.

A Double Displacement

In order to go beyond the housework debate a double displacement from its main concerns to date is required. First, if the main theoretical object is to conceptualise the material significance of the domestic sphere, then the emphasis must be shifted from the level of the capitalist mode of production to the level of *determinate social formations* and their reproduction. In addition, instead of narrowly concentrating on domestic *labour*, the analysis could usefully be expanded to include consideration of the broader significance of the household and the relations within it for the wider society, without losing sight of the specific position of women within these structures.

Secondly, if instead a theory of women's subordination is required, then as a first step the question of the relation between women's subordination and the economy must be posed at a more general level than has hitherto been the case in this debate. Neither an understanding of women's subordination, nor the politics for overcoming it, can be derived from the analyses of domestic labour alone. Indeed, the restricted platform of the 'wages for housework' campaign is in many ways a natural and logical outcome of such approach. The political economy of women is a crucially important area of research but the terms of debate have to be broadened and an attempt has to be made to analyse the complex combination of material relations through which women's subordination is mediated; such an analysis would include, in addition to an examination of the domestic sphere, consideration of the sexual division of labour, reproduction, the labour market, changes and variations in the value of male and female labour power and the role of the state in maintaining women in a dependent position within the family.[17] However, an understanding of women's subordination cannot be reduced to economic or material factors alone, even when these are conceived in the broadest terms; it also entails consideration of the important work currently being carried out in the field of psychoanalysis, sexuality, language and ideology. It therefore involves, by extension, an analysis of inter-sexual and inter-familial relations.

A recognition of the complexity of the relations through which women's subordination is mediated warns against the kind of economic reductionism which informs some of the political conclusions found in the literature on domestic labour. The answer to the question of whether women are going to join in the struggle for socialism or not does not lie in a conceptualisation of domestic labour's relation to capitalism; it is contingent on the political conjuncture in which women find themselves, and, in particular, on the ability of a socialist movement to articulate feminist issues in a manner that is convincing and confronts the specificity of women's subordination.

It remains here to indicate what answers are currently being formulated to three central questions concerning the role of housework under capitalism. These questions are: How can we conceptualise the position of women in the household? What is the relation between women's position in the home and the capitalist economy? And what political measures are required to end this form of subordination? As answers to these questions are as yet relatively undeveloped the following remarks are only intended to indicate areas where further work and research is required.

Women and the Home

We have argued above that the relation women home is not an invariant one and is not to be seen as essential to the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. Instead this relation must be understood as the result of a complex combination of determinations the effects of which will vary according to the specificity of determinate social formations. With this caveat in mind it is possible, at a more general level, to suggest how some of these determinations are manifested in the advanced capitalist countries at the present time. Of these, four can be singled out for special mention:

1. *The Wage Form.* This relates in a number of important ways to the position of women and to their place in the home. As we have argued, the existence of full-time housewives is made economically possible by the provision of an adequate male wage and, to a lesser degree, by supplementary benefits from the state which accrue through child-rearing and marriage. The existence of the 'family wage', that is, a wage level sufficient to support, if meagrely, an unemployed wife and children, is like all wage levels, the result of a variety of different determinations. It may even include the conscious or pre-conscious struggle of male workers for this form of wage calculation and by extension for this form of female dependency, for to surrender the family wage would be to risk a fall in the value of labour power. But there can be little doubt that the form of female dependency that this involves is largely beneficial to men and detrimental to women, and as we shall see has certain important implications for women's overall position. But before going on to consider these, it should be emphasized that a concomitant of the privileged male wage is the underprivileged female wage; while certain categories of male workers can secure a family wage, it is rare, given the present sexual division of labour, for women's labour power to attain this value; and it is even rarer for women to struggle, as men have done, for a family wage. On the contrary, women's wages are generally seen as supplementary to those of a male wage earner even by many women workers themselves. The conflict of interests between men and women which these differentials mar-

[17] See especially M. McIntosh 'The State and the Oppression of Women' in A

give rise to. It therefore needs to be given adequate recognition and their implications for political practice drawn.

2. *The Sexual Division of Labour.* The allocation of a family wage to men tends to be justified in terms of the sexual division of labour and this is conventionally seen as effecting a fair distribution of responsibilities between the sexes such as to render them complementary. However the sexual division of labour is more than a mere technical division in that it helps to enforce relations of domination and subordination creating structures of privilege and discrimination. For women it has both domestic and external effects which are closely intertwined. Women are allocated the burden of responsibility in the home and this is so even when they work in the wage sector; and if they do work in the wage sector the majority are distributed to the most poorly paid and static jobs. The combination of domestic duties and unrewarding employment is a powerful obstacle to women working outside the home, and can discourage them from doing so. Thus the labour market itself complements and reinforces women's reproductive roles establishing a direct link between their place in the domestic sphere and their extra domestic presence. It is therefore erroneous to see women's position in society as determined exclusively by their position in the domestic sphere; the weak position of women on the labour market has an effect of re-inforcing their subordination in the home.

3. *High unemployment and especially high female unemployment.* In periods of recession it is often women's labour that is the first to be dispensed with in non-segregated employment situations. This is often compounded by the fact that it is the enterprises employing mainly female labour which are the least able to survive in such times. But where a mixed labour force is employed it tends to be women rather than men who are laid off first during these crises and this is frequently justified on the grounds that the family income must be provided by the economic activity of the 'head' of the family; i.e. the husband. In other words female unemployment is in part justified by invoking the 'family' wage even where this wage form is *not* generalised.

4. *The premium placed by most societies on women's reproductive role.* This militates against women entering the labour force on an equal footing with men; a simple biological division of labour (childbearing) comes to be embedded in a complex matrix of largely restricting social relations. Throughout their early lives it is to marriage, and specifically to the role of mother within marriage, to which women are directed by the media, education, and family expectations. Moreover it is assumptions concerning 'mothering', bolstered by naturalist or essentialist arguments that help determine women's inferior position on the labour market. In other words these ideologies have a material effectivity, because women are expected to become housewives and mothers, or at best part-time workers earning 'pin-money', their formal and informal education in terms of skills and expectations is generally oriented to these perspectives. This is reinforced by the sexual division of labour which tends to allocate women to jobs designed to utilise their supposed 'natural' capacities for enduring tedious, delicate [illegible] this is, at the same time, less well paid than analogous work performed by men. Such an unequal situation arises in part because women's employment is seen as secondary to their main role as mothers, and in part because for many women it *is* secondary at least while they have domestic responsibilities. The lack of adequate provision of child care centres removes that element of choice for most of them.

We can now consider some of the effects of women's customary condition which generally, accrue to the advanced capitalist state as benefits—bearing in mind that they do not always obtain and are not *necessarily* beneficial for all capitalist social formations as the functionalist argument implies. The confinement of women to the domestic sphere may be advantageous in some circumstances but not in others; during periods of rapid accumulation, or acute labour shortage as in war time, the state may be required to intervene to socialise domestic labour in order to release sufficient female wage labour onto the market. Another point to bear in mind is that what is true of the 'general interests' of capital may not be true for specific capitals. Whilst in a given formation it may be state policy to discourage women's entry into the labour force, the survival of determinate capitals may *depend* on the cheaper labour offered by women.

As the domestic labour debate has rightly emphasised, the household is not just a unit of consumption, although it is that too. It is also the locus of the production of use values in the form of goods and services which are needed for the reproduction of the labour force. Whilst this work of reproduction is necessary in all societies its locus is not always the family and may be undertaken by extra-familial agencies; under capitalism many of the goods and services necessary for the day-to-day reproduction of labour power have become available on the market, or through the agency of the state. However, the contribution of the domestic sphere to reproduction is still of considerable importance and generally entails two forms of activity: the first and least important for *capital* involves servicing the day to day needs of *existing* wage earners; the second involves servicing the needs of *future* agents of production i.e. children. This includes at one level, similar tasks to those performed for the wage earner; but it involves, in addition, greater work and overall responsibility especially where young children are involved, a responsibility which normally devolves onto women. At another level, the reproduction of the next generation's agents of production entails primary education —i.e. 'socialising' those who will eventually develop different qualities of gender and class which bear on the place they will occupy either inside or outside the labour market. Here women's work is supplementary to that of other agencies such as educational establishments but it is still of considerable importance.

Of these two reproductive activities (in their concrete forms housework and child-care) it is the work of child-care which constitutes the most entrapping material relation for women and which at the same time is of the most benefit to the capitalist state. For while the burden of housework can potentially be reduced to a minimum and then equalised between the adult members of a household, the solution to child-care

requires a social restructuring of a major kind involving at the very least the socialisation of this work through the provision of adequate child-care agencies. Thus unlike housework, the solution to childcare requires a major allocation of resources and the assumption of responsibility for this area by the state or by other organised agencies.

The cost to the state is undoubtedly one reason why capitalist societies have tended to resist providing nurseries, but it is not the only reason. Under the conditions of advanced capitalism where high unemployment prevails it would be extremely problematic, without a change to a radical interventionist state, to create the conditions which would help to free women from the domestic sphere because the labour market provides an insufficient number of jobs to accommodate them. In this sense the 'family wage' and the 'housewife syndrome' help to conceal high unemployment – specifically high female unemployment, and in certain ways to legitimise it. Women can be seen as constituting a specific stratum of the reserve army,[18] called upon in times of war or rapid accumulation, but returned to their 'place' in the family if these jobs contract or the men return to them. Because this 'place' exists and because of women's supposed 'natural' pre-disposition towards it, women's unemployment is potentially less politically and socially problematic; and, as indicated above, it also performs a useful function in providing a childcare service at minimal cost to the capitalist state.

This however, is not to be taken as the 'cause' of women's subordination or as being in any simple sense functional to capitalism. For it is double edged. Strictly speaking it is in the economic interests of capital to proletarianise as many workers as possible in order to reap the dual benefits of an increased mass of surplus value and a fall in the value of labour power that accompanies the mass entry of labour into production. Thus women's position in the home, whilst beneficial in certain ways to some capitalist states, has contradictory effects.

In addition to these two aspects there is a third advantage to capital, namely the provision of a *cheap* labour force for those sectors of capital and periods of accumulation which require it. Whereas the value of male labour power can be established at a level which includes the cost of reproduction of the family, it is rare for women's labour power to attain this value, except in desegregated occupations where the presence of women is minimal or in the rare cases where feminisation of the labour force has not depressed the value of labour power. Thus the sexual division of labour crystallises differentials not only in pay and work conditions but also in career opportunities, which are in turn legitimated by the fact that a) women's work is seen as secondary to their role in reproduction and b) is seen as subordinate to a privileged male income. The phenomena of poorly paid work, part-time work and outwork, which are so advantageous to some capitalist enterprises, exist precisely because of the contradictory position of women, caught as they are between the spheres of production and reproduction, and assumed, as they are, to be in a relationship of dependency on another income. In general, the difficulty of organising successfully against these forms of capitalist exploitation, coupled with the passivity, or even resistance, of the male dominated trade union movement[19] to women's full equality, has meant that despite progressive legislation designed to erode some of the worst discriminatory practices against women workers, these often continue in a modified form.

Women's subordination is therefore mediated through different levels of the social formation and is inscribed within a number of distinct relations; it is not reducible to any simple causality and is certainly not reducible just to the problem of domestic labour. What measures are required to end this subordination?

The battle must be fought, and is being fought, on two main fronts, the domestic and the public, attacking the structures of oppression within the home and removing the discriminatory barriers outside it. In both areas this means above all confronting the sexual division of labour and its social effects in particular by demonstrating the linkages between the domestic and public spheres. The orthodox socialist position and that of most socialist states today – that of urging women to participate in employment and politics – is, on its own, inadequate precisely because it concentrates only on the external front, and generally ignores the need simultaneously to restructure relations within the home on an equal basis. For such an equalisation to take place there is a need for two types of measure; equalisation of the domestic labour load, which in the case of childless households may be sufficient, plus, in the case of children, a socialisation of this part of the traditional realm of domestic labour. The provision of adequate nurseries both inside and outside the workplace is the most urgent, obvious and essential aspect of this. A further need is a re-organisation of work hours and a shortening of the working week to make it possible for parents to share the responsibility of childcare if they wish. Recent technological innovation begins to make this a realistic demand for the first time under capitalism. The success of these measures will, of course, be limited if they are not accompanied by changes in the public sector designed to remove discrimination against women. Domestic equality requires that women can work on equal terms to men, with a resultant increase of employment opportunities for women and the dissolution of female dependency on a privileged male wage.

[18] See V. Beechey for an elaboration of this argument 'Female Wage Labour'.

[19] Jane Humphries has suggested on the basis of historical evidence that trade union resistance to women's entry into employment can be seen to derive from a desire to maintain the family wage by restricting the supply of labour to capital. The entry of women into employment not only threatens to lower the value of male labour power but also to depress the standard of living of the working class in general. This is an interesting, if problematic argument; whilst it is true that some working class men may have a stake in maintaining the nuclear family it does not follow that keeping women out of employment is necessarily beneficial to the working class as a whole, since such a view assumes what must be more convincingly established, that the interests of working class men and women *are the same* on every issue. J. Humphries 'Class Struggle and the Persistence of the Working Class Family' *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol 1 No. 3, 1977.