

1.05

# COUNTER- PLANNING FROM THE KITCHEN

WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK  
A PERSPECTIVE ON  
CAPITAL AND THE LEFT

*The Women's Center*

by Nicole Cox  
and Silvia Federici





Cox

# Counter-planning in file box from the kitchen

JAN 13 1977

## The Women's Center

*This article was originally written in reply to an article that appeared in the magazine Liberation, entitled 'Women & Pay for Housework' by Carol Lopate. (1) Our reply was turned down by the editors of the magazine. We are publishing that reply because Lopate's article seems to state with more openness and crudeness than most not only the fundamental assumptions of the left, but its specific relation to the international feminist movement at this moment in time. We must add that by the publication of the two articles which appear in this pamphlet we are not opening a sterile debate with the left but closing one.*

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage labourer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage labourer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it . . . *Where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.* (2)

It is certainly not accidental that over the last few months several journals of the left have published attacks on Wages for Housework. It is not only that whenever the women's movement has taken an autonomous position, the left has felt threatened. It is also that the left realizes that this perspective has implications which go beyond the 'woman question' and represent a clear break with their politics, past and present, both with respect to women and with respect to the rest of the working class. Indeed, the sectarianism the left has traditionally shown in relation to women's struggles is a direct consequence of their narrow understanding of the way

capital rules and the direction class struggle must take and is taking to break this rule.

In the name of 'class struggle' and 'the unified interest of the class', the practice of the left has always been to select certain sectors of the working class as the revolutionary agents and condemn others to a merely supportive role for the struggles these sectors were waging. The left has thus reproduced in its organizational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class which characterize the capitalist division of labour. In this respect, despite the variety of their tactical positions, the left is strategically one: when it comes to the choice of revolutionary subjects, Stalinists, Trotskyists, Anarcho-Libertarians, old and new left, all join hands with the same assumptions and arguments for a common cause.

## They offer us 'development'

Since the left has accepted the wage as the dividing line between work and non-work, production and parasitism, potential power and absolute powerlessness, the enormous amount of wageless work women perform for capital within the home has totally escaped their analysis and strategy. Thus, from Lenin through Gramsci to Benston and Mitchell, the entire leftist tradition has agreed on the 'marginality' of housework to the reproduction of capital and, consequently, the marginality of the housewife to revolutionary struggle. According to the left, as housewives women are not suffering from capital, but are suffering precisely from the absence of it. Our problem, it seems, is that capital has failed to reach into and organize our kitchens and bedrooms, with the two-fold consequence that a) we presumably live at a feudal or at any rate pre-capitalist stage; b) whatever we do in these kitchens and bedrooms is at best irrelevant to any real social change. For obviously, if our kitchens are outside of capital, our struggle to destroy them will never succeed in causing capital to fall.

Why capital would allow so much unprofitable work, so much unproductive labour time, to survive is never questioned by the left, which is forever confident of capital's irrationality, mismanagement and planlessness. (Surely they can manage better!) Ironically, their profound ignorance of the specific relation of women to capital they have translated into a theory of women's political backwardness which can only be overcome by our entering the factory gates. Thus, the logic of an analysis which sees women's oppression as their exclusion from capitalist relations inevitably results in a strategy for us to enter these relations, rather than destroy them.

In this sense there is an immediate connection between the strategy of the left for women and their strategy for the Third World. In the same way as they want to bring women to the factories, they want to carry factories to the Third World. In both cases, they presume that the 'underdeveloped'—those of us who are wageless and work at a lower technological level—are backward with respect to the 'real working class' and can catch up only by obtaining more advanced capitalist exploitation, a bigger share of the work of the factory. In both cases, then, the struggle the left offers to the wageless, the 'underdeveloped', is not a revolutionary struggle, a struggle against capital, but a struggle *for* capital, in a more rationalized, developed and productive form. In our case they offer us not only the 'right to work' (this they offer every worker), but the right to work more, the right to be further exploited.

## A new ground of struggle

The political foundation of Wages for Housework is precisely the refusal of this capitalist ideology of the left which equates wagelessness and low technological development with political backwardness, with absolute lack of power and ultimately with a need for capital to organize us as a precondition for our getting organized. It is our refusal to accept that because we are wageless or work at a lower technological level (and these are deeply interconnected) our needs must be different from those of the rest of the working class. We refuse to accept that, while a male auto worker in Detroit can struggle against the assembly line, starting from our kitchens in the metropolis or from the Third World our goal must be that factory work which workers all over the world are increasingly refusing. Our rejection of leftist ideology is one and the same as our rejection of capitalist development as a road to liberation, or more specifically, our rejection of capital whatever form it takes. Inherent in this rejection is already a redefinition of what is capital and who is the working class, that is, a totally new evaluation of class forces and class needs.

Wages for Housework, then, is not a demand, one among others, but a political perspective which opens a new ground of struggle, beginning with women, for the entire working class. (3) This must be emphasized, since the reduction of Wages for Housework to a demand only is a common element in all the attacks of the left upon it, a way of discrediting it which gets them out of confronting the political issues it raises. In this sense, Lopate's article, 'Women & Pay for Housework' is just another, but a most extreme example, of reduction, distortion and avoidance. "Pay for Housework" misrepresents the issue, for it clearly ignores that a wage is not just a bit of money, but the

fundamental expression of the power relation between capital and the working class. It is in character that Lopate should invent a new formula to label a position that by its nature could never be stated in these terms, even before she attempts her analysis. But maybe this is due to the necessity she feels to be "hazy in our visions" (4), which she firmly espouses as our female lot in her final message to women.

A more subtle way of discrediting Wages for Housework is to claim that this perspective is imported from Italy and bears little relevance to the situation in the U.S. where women "do work" (5). Here is another example of total misinformation. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*—the only source referred to by Lopate—makes clear the international dimension out of which this perspective originates. But, in any case, tracing the geographical origin of Wages for Housework is irrelevant at the present stage of capital's international integration. What matters here is its *political* genesis, which is the refusal to see work—and therefore the power to destroy it—only in the presence of a wage. In our case, it is the end of the division between women 'who do work' and women 'who do not work' (they are 'just housewives'), which in Lopate implies that wageless work is not work, that housework is not work and, paradoxically, that only in the U.S. do most women work and struggle because so many here hold a second job. But there is a profound connection between this American exceptionalism and this anti-feminism. For not to see women's work in the home is to be blind to the work and struggles of the overwhelming majority of the world's population which is wageless. It is to ignore not only that American capital was built on slave labour as well as waged labour, but also that up to this day it thrives on the wageless work of millions of women and men in the fields, kitchens, prisons of the U.S. and throughout the world.

## The hidden work

Beginning with ourselves as women we know that the working day for capital does not necessarily produce a pay-check and does not begin and end at the factory gates. And we rediscover, first, the nature and extent of housework itself. For as soon as we raise our heads from the socks we mend and the meals we cook and look at the totality of our working day, we see clearly that while this does not result in a wage for ourselves, we produce the most precious product to appear on the capitalist market: labour power. Housework, in fact, is much more than house cleaning. It is servicing the wage earner physically, emotionally, sexually, getting him ready to work day after day for the wage. It is taking care of our children—the future workers—assisting them from birth through

their school years and ensuring that they too perform in the ways expected of them under capitalism. This means that behind every factory, behind every school, behind every office or mine is the hidden work of millions of women who have consumed their life, their labour power, in producing the labour power that works in that factory, school, office or mine. (6)

This is why to this day, both in the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries, housework and the family on which it is centred are still the pillars of capitalist production. For the availability of a stable and well disciplined labour force is an essential condition of production at every stage of capitalist development. The conditions of our work vary from country to country. In some countries we are forced into an intensive production of children, in others we are told not to reproduce, particularly if we are black, or on welfare, or tend to reproduce 'trouble-makers'. In some countries we produce unskilled labour for the fields, in others we produce skilled workers and technicians. But in every country our wageless slavery and the primary function we perform for capital are the same.

Getting a second job has never released us from the first. Two jobs have only meant for women even less time and energy to struggle against both. Moreover, a woman, working full-time in the home or outside of it as well, married or single, has to put hours of labour into reproducing her own labour power, and women well know the special tyranny of this task since a pretty dress and a nice hairdo are conditions for their getting the job, whether on the marriage market or on the wage labour market.

Thus we doubt very much that in the U.S. "schools, nurseries, day-care and television have taken away from mothers much of the responsibility for the socialization of their children", and that "The decrease in house size and the mechanization of housework has meant that the housewife is potentially left with much greater leisure time" (7).

Among other things, it is clear that day care and nurseries have never liberated any time for ourselves, but only time for additional work. As for technology, it is precisely in the U.S. that we can measure the enormous gap between the technology socially available and the technology that trickles into our kitchens. And in this case too, it is our wageless condition that determines the quantity and quality of the technology we get. "If you are not paid by the hour, within certain limits, nobody cares how long it takes you to do your work." (8) If anything, the situation in the U.S. is immediate proof of the fact that neither technology nor a second job is capable of liberating women from the family and

'housework, and that: "Producing a technician is not a less burdensome alternative to producing an unskilled worker if between these two fates does not stand the refusal of women to work for free, whatever might be the technological level at which this work is done, the refusal of women *to live in order to produce*, whatever might be the particular type of child to be produced." (9)

It remains to be clarified that to say that the work we perform in the home is capitalist production is not at all the expression of our wish to be legitimated as part of the 'productive forces', or in other words, a resort to moralism. It is only from the capitalist viewpoint that being productive is a moral virtue, not to say a moral imperative. From the viewpoint of the working class, being productive simply means being exploited. "To be a productive labourer is, therefore, not a piece of luck but a misfortune" (Marx). Thus we derive very little "self-esteem" (10) from it. But when we say that housework--still our primary identification as women--is a moment of capitalist production we clarify our specific function within the capitalist division of labour and, most important, the specific forms our attack against it must take. Our power does not come from anyone's recognition of our place in the cycle of production, but from our capacity to struggle against it. *Not production per se but the struggle against it and the power to withhold it have always been the decisive factors in the distribution of social wealth.* Ultimately when we say that we produce capital we are saying that *we can and want to destroy it*, rather than engage in a losing battle to move from one form and degree of exploitation to another.

We must also clarify that we are not "borrowing categories from the Marxist world" (11). We are not sociologists who have transformed Marx into a categorizing intellectual. Marx may never have dealt *directly* with housework. Yet, we freely admit that we are less eager than Lopate to liberate ourselves from Marx, to the extent that Marx has given us an analysis which to this day is irreplaceable for understanding how we, all of us, function for capitalist society. We also suspect that Marx's apparent indifference to housework might be grounded in precise historical factors. By this we do not mean simply that dose of male chauvinism that Marx certainly shares with his contemporaries (and not only with them). It is clear that at the time when Marx was writing, the nuclear family and housework which is its central function had yet to be massively created. (12) What Marx had before his eyes was the proletarian woman, who was fully employed along with her husband and children in the factory, and the bourgeois woman who had a maid and, whether or not she also worked, was not producing the commodity labour power. The absence of the nuclear family did not mean that workers stopped meeting and copulating. It meant, however, that it was



impossible to speak of family relations and housework when each member of the family spent 15 hours a day in the factory, that is, when the time and even the physical space were not available for 'family life'.

It was only after terrible epidemics and overwork decimated the working class, and most important, after waves of proletarian struggles through the 1830s and '40s brought England close to revolution, that the need for a more stable and disciplined workforce led capital to plan the nuclear family. A whole set of phenomena indicate that far from being a pre-capitalist structure, the family as we know it in the West is a specific creation of capital for capital, an institution that is supposed to guarantee both the quantity and quality of labour power and its control. Thus, "like the trade union the family protects the worker but also ensures that he *and she* will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial." (13)

## Our wagelessness as a discipline

The family, in fact, is essentially the institutionalization of our wageless labour, of our wageless dependence on men, and consequently, the institutionalization of a division of power which has successfully functioned in disciplining us and the men as well. For our wagelessness, our dependence in the home, has functioned to keep the men tied to their jobs, by ensuring that whenever they wanted to refuse their work they would be faced with the wife and children who depended on their wage. Here is the basis of those "old habits—the men's and ours" that Lopate has found so difficult to break. For unless we believe in free will, a liberal myth, we realize that it is no accident that it is so difficult for a man "to ask for special time schedules so he can be involved equally in childcare" (14). Not an insignificant reason that men cannot arrange for part-time hours is that the male wage is crucial for the survival of the family, even when the woman brings in a second wage. And if we "found ourselves preferring or finding less consuming jobs, which have left us more time for housecare" (15) it is because we were resisting an intensified exploitation, being consumed in a factory and then being consumed more rapidly at home.

Moreover, our wagelessness in the home is and has been the primary cause of our weakness on the wage labour market. It is certainly not an accident that we always get the lowest paid jobs or that whenever women enter a male sector the wages go down. They know very well that we are used to working for nothing and they know even better that we

are so desperate for some money of our own that they can get us at a very low price. In any case, since female has become synonymous with housewife, we carry that identity and the 'homely skills' we have acquired from birth wherever we go. Thus the nature of waged female employment is often an extension of our role in the home, which means that often that road to the wage has led us to more housecare. For the fact that housework is unwaged has given to this socially imposed condition a natural appearance ("femininity") which affects us all wherever we go, whatever we do. Thus we don't need to be told that "the essential thing to remember is that we are a SEX". (16) For years capital has told us we're only good for sex and making babies. This is the sexual division of labour and we refuse to eternalize it, as necessarily happens when we ask: "What does being female actually mean; what, if any, specific qualities necessarily and for all time adhere to that characteristic?" (17) To ask this question is to beg for a sexist and racist reply. Who is to say who we are? All we can find out now is who we are not, to the degree that through struggle we gain the power to break our capitalist identification. It has always been the ruling class, or those who aspire to rule, who have presupposed a natural and eternal human personality: it was to eternalize their power over us.

## **Glorification of the family**

Not surprisingly, then, Lopate's quest for the essence of femaleness leads her to the most blatant glorification of our wageless work in the home and of unwaged labour in general:

The home and the family have traditionally provided the only interstice of capitalist life in which people can possibly serve each other's needs out of love or care, even if it is often also out of fear and domination. Parents take care of children at least partly out of love . . . I even think that this memory lingers on with us as we grow up so that we always retain with us as a kind of utopia the work and caring which come out of love, rather than being based on financial reward. (18)

The literature of the women's movement has shown abundantly the devastating effects this love, care and service has had on women. These are the chains which have tied us to a condition of near slavery. We definitely refuse to retain with us and elevate to a utopia for the future the miseries of our mothers and grandmothers and our own misery as children! When the State does not pay a wage, it is those who are loved, cared for, wageless and even more powerless who must pay with their lives.

We also refuse Lopate's suggestion that asking for financial reward "would only serve to obscure from us still further the possibilities of free and unalienated labour," (19) which simply means that the quickest way to 'disalienate' work is to do it for free. No doubt President Ford would appreciate this suggestion. The voluntary labour on which the modern State increasingly rests is based on precisely such as Lopate's charitable dispensation of our time. It seems to us, however, that if instead of simply relying on love and care, our mothers had had a financial reward, they would have been less bitter, less dependent, less blackmailed, and less blackmailing to their children who were constantly reminded of their mothers' sacrifices. Our mothers would have had more time and power to struggle against that work and would have left us at a more advanced stage in that struggle.

It is the essence of capitalist ideology to glorify the family as a "private world", the last frontier where men and women "keep [their] souls alive" (20), and it is no wonder that this ideology is enjoying a renewed popularity with capitalist planners in our present times of 'crisis' and 'austerity' and 'hardship'. As Russell Baker recently stated it in the *New York Times* ('Love and Potatoes', Nov. 25, 1974), love kept us warm during the Depression and we had better bring it with us on our present excursion into hard times. Sir Keith Joseph in Britain makes the same point in a more moralistic form—rather like Lopate. The *New York Times* knew it was important and reprinted it. This ideology, which opposes the family (or the community) to the factory, the personal to the social, the private to the public, productive to unproductive work, is totally functional to our enslavement to the home, which, to the extent that it is wageless, has always appeared as an act of love. Thus this ideology is deeply rooted in the capitalist division of labour, which finds one of its clearest expressions in the organization of the nuclear family. But the way the wage relation has mystified the social function of the family is an extension of the way capital mystifies waged labour, and the subordination of all social relations to the 'cash nexus'.

Marx clarified a long time ago that the wage hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit. But measuring work by the wage also hides the extent to which all our social relations have been subordinated to the relations of production, the extent to which every moment of our lives functions for the production and reproduction of capital. The wage, in fact (and that includes the lack of it), has allowed capital to obscure the length of our working day. Work appears as one compartment of life, which takes place only in certain areas. The time we consume in the social factory, preparing ourselves for work, or going to work, restoring our "muscles, nerves, bones and brains" (21) with quick snacks, quick sex, movies, etc., all this appears as leisure, free time, individual choice.

## Different labour markets

In the same way, capital's use of the wage also obscures who is the working class and successfully serves capital's need to divide in order to rule. Through the wage relation, not only has capital organized different labour markets (a labour market for blacks, youth, women and white males), but it has opposed a 'working class' to a 'non-working' proletariat, supposedly parasitic on the work of the former. As welfare recipients we are told we live off the taxes of the 'working class'; as housewives we are constantly pictured as the bottomless pits of our husbands' pay checks.

But ultimately the social weakness of the wageless has been and is the weakness of the entire working class with respect to capital. As the history of the runaway shop continually witnesses, a reserve of wageless labour both in the 'underdeveloped' countries and in the metropolis has allowed capital to move from those areas where labour had made itself too expensive, thus undermining the power workers there had reached. Whenever capital could not run to the Third World, it opened the gates of the factories to women, blacks and youth in the metropolis or to migrants from the Third World. Thus, it is no accident that while capital is based on waged labour, more than half of the world's population is still unwaged. Wagelessness and underdevelopment, in fact, are essential elements of capitalist planning, nationally and internationally. For they are powerful means to make workers compete on the national and international labour market and ultimately to make us believe that our interests are different and contradictory.

Here are the bases for the ideology of sexism, racism and welfarism (to despise those workers who have succeeded in getting some money from the State) which are the direct expressions of different labour markets and therefore different ways of regulating and dividing the working class. If we ignore this use of capitalist ideology and its roots in the wage relation, we not only end up by considering racism, sexism and welfarism as moral diseases, a product of 'miseducation', a 'false consciousness', but we are confined to a strategy of 'education' which leaves nothing but "moral imperatives to bolster our side" (23).

We finally find a point of agreement with Lopate when she says that our strategy relieves us from the reliance on "men's being 'good' people" to attain liberation (24). As the struggles of blacks in the sixties clearly showed, it was not by good words, but by organization of their power that they made their needs 'understood'. In our case, trying to educate men always meant once again that our struggle was privatized

and fought in the solitude of our kitchens and bedrooms. There we could not find the power to attack capital acting against us directly or through men. Power educates. First men will fear, then they will learn because capital will fear. For we are not struggling for a more equal redistribution of the same work. We are struggling to put an end to that work, and the first step is to put a price tag on it.

## Wage demands

Our power as women begins with the social struggle for the wage, not to be let into the wage relation (for, though we are unwaged, we were never out of it) but to be let out, for every sector of the working class to be let out. Here we have to clarify the nature of wage struggles. When the left maintains that wage demands are 'economistic', 'union demands', they seem to ignore that the wage, as well as the lack of it, is the direct measure of our exploitation and therefore the direct expression of the power relation between capital and the working class and within the working class. They also seem to ignore the fact that the wage struggle takes many forms and it is not confined to wage raises. Reduction of work-time, more and better social services, as well as money—all these are wage gains which immediately determine how much of our labour is taken away from us and therefore how much power we have over our lives. This is why the wage has been the traditional ground of struggle between capital and the working class. And therefore, as an expression of the class relation the wage always has two sides: the side of capital which uses it to control the working class by trying to ensure that every raise is matched by an increase in productivity; and the side of the working class which increasingly is fighting for more money, more power, and less work.

As the history of the present capitalist crisis demonstrates, fewer and fewer workers have been willing to sacrifice their lives at the service of capitalist production; thus, less and less have any workers listened to the calls for increased productivity. (25) But when the 'fair exchange' between wages and productivity is upset, the struggle for wages becomes a direct attack on capital's profit and its capacity to extract surplus labour from us. Thus the struggle for the wage is at the same time a struggle against the wage, for the power it expresses and against the capitalist relation it embodies. In the case of the wageless, in our case, the struggle for the wage is even more clearly an attack on capital. Wages for Housework means first of all that capital will have to pay for the enormous amount of social services which now they are saving on our backs. But most important, to demand Wages for Housework is *by itself* the refusal to accept our work as a biological destiny, which is

an indispensable condition for our struggle against it. Nothing, in fact, has been so powerful in institutionalizing our work, the family and our dependence on men as the fact that not a wage but 'love' always paid for this work. For us as well as for the waged worker, the wage is not the price of a productivity deal. In return for a wage we will not work as before and more than before; we will work less. We want a wage to be able to dispose of our time and our energies, to struggle, and not be confined by a second job because of our need for financial independence.

MOREOVER, OUR STRUGGLE FOR THE WAGE OPENS FOR THE WAGED AND THE UNWAGED ALIKE THE QUESTION OF THE REAL LENGTH OF THE WORKING DAY. UP TO NOW THE WORKING CLASS, MALE AND FEMALE, HAD ITS WORKING DAY DEFINED BY CAPITAL—FROM PUNCHING IN TO PUNCHING OUT. THAT DEFINED THE TIME WE BELONGED TO CAPITAL AND THE TIME WE BELONGED TO OURSELVES. BUT WE HAVE NEVER BELONGED TO OURSELVES, WE HAVE ALWAYS BELONGED TO CAPITAL EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES. AND IT IS TIME THAT WE MADE CAPITAL PAY FOR EVERY MOMENT OF IT. In class terms this is to demand a wage for every moment we live at the service of capital.

## **Making capital pay**

This is the new ground of struggle for every sector of the working class. In fact this class perspective has expressed itself in the streets in the struggles of the sixties, both in the U.S. and internationally. In the U.S. the struggles of blacks and welfare mothers—the Third World of the metropolis—was the revolt of the wageless against the use capital has made of them and their refusal of the only alternative capital offers: more work. Those struggles which had their centre of power in the community were not for development, but were for the reappropriation of the social wealth that capital has accumulated from the wageless as well as from the waged. In this sense, they challenged fundamentally the capitalist organization of society that imposes work as the only condition of our being allowed to live. They also challenged the leftist dogma that only in the factories can the working class organize its power.

We never expected the left to base its analysis on the struggles of the working class. By its nature the left imposes goals which are "hard for workers to visualize" (26), after which they conclude that the working class is backward and doesn't know what it needs. If Lopate had been less busy 'conceptualizing' and 'communicating' to the workers what their needs should be (we had hoped that the women's movement had

helped us to eliminate this sort of elitism, but clearly vanguardism dies hard as its new appearance in the form of libertarianism demonstrates), she would have realized that you don't need to enter a factory to be part of a working class organization. When she says that "the ideological preconditions for working-class solidarity are networks and connections which arise from working together" and "These preconditions cannot arise out of isolated women working in separate homes" (27), she blatantly ignores the struggles these "isolated" women waged in the sixties (rent strikes, welfare struggles, etc.). She assumes that we cannot organize ourselves if we are not first organized by capital; and since she denies that capital has organized us already, she denies the existence of the struggle. In any case, to confuse capital's organization of our work—whether in the kitchen or in the factory—with the organization of our struggle against it is the quickest and surest road to our defeat. First, to struggle for work is already a defeat, and furthermore every new level of their organization of our work will be turned against us to exploit us and isolate us even more. For it is an illusion that capital does not divide us when we are not working in isolation.

In opposition to these divisions, which is how they have organized us, we have to organize according to the bonds of our needs. In this sense, Wages for Housework is as much a refusal of the socialization of the factory as a refusal of capital's rationalization and socialization of the home.

We do not believe, in fact, that the revolution can be reduced to a combination of a consumer's report and a time and motion study as in Lopate's proposal:

... we need to look seriously at the tasks which are 'necessary' to keep a house going . . . We need to investigate the time- and labour-saving devices and decide which are useful and which merely cause a further degradation of housework. (28)

It is not technology per se that degrades us, but the use capital makes of it, to maintain our social relations in the family and the rest of society. Moreover, 'self-management' and 'workers' control' always existed in the home. We always had a choice of Monday or Saturday to do the laundry, or the choice between buying a dishwasher or a vacuum cleaner, provided we could afford either. Thus we do not ask capital to change the nature of our work, but we struggle to refuse the work of reproducing ourselves and others *which becomes work precisely because we reproduce ourselves and others as workers*, as labour power, as commodities—as objects. An indispensable condition of moving towards this goal is that this work be recognized as work through a wage. Obviously as

long as wages exist so does capital. To this extent we do not say that achieving a wage is the revolution. We say, however, that it is a revolutionary strategy, for it undermines the role we are assigned to in the capitalist division of labour and consequently changes the power relations within the working class in terms more favourable to us and to the unity of the class.

As for the financial aspects of Wages for Housework, they are "highly problematical" (29) only if we take the viewpoint of capital—the viewpoint of the Treasury Department—which always claims poverty when it is replying to the working class. Since we are not the Treasury Department *and have no aspiration to be*, we cannot see with their eyes, and we did not even conceive of planning for them systems of payment, wage differentials, productivity deals. It is not for us to put limits on our power, it is not for us to measure our value. It is only for us to organize a struggle to get all of what we want, for us all, and on our terms. For our aim is to be priceless, to price ourselves out of the market, for housework and factory work and office work to be 'uneconomic'.

Similarly, we completely reject the argument that some other sector of the working class would pay for our eventual gain. According to this logic we could say in reverse that waged workers are now being paid with money capital does not give *us*. But this is precisely the way the State talks—Nixon, or post-Nixon. In fact, to say the demands for social welfare programs by blacks in the sixties had a "devastating effect on any long-range strategy . . . on white-black relations" since "workers knew that they, not the corporations, ended up paying for those programs" (30) is plain racism. If we assume that every struggle ends up inevitably in a redistribution of poverty rather than in an attack on capital's profit, we assume a priori the defeat of the working class. Indeed, Lopate's article is written under the sign of defeatism, which is nothing else than accepting capitalist institutions as inevitable. Thus Lopate cannot imagine that when capital tries to lower other workers' wages in order to give us a wage, those workers will be able to struggle to defend their own interest and ours too. She assumes also that "obviously, men would receive the highest wage for their work in the home" (31)—in short, that we will never win. She sees housewives only as poor victims incapable of any struggle, so that she cannot imagine that we could organize collectively to shut our doors in the face of any supervisor trying to control our work.

As wageless housewives, we have been forced to internalize capital's rules so well that we haven't needed a supervisor, because we have done automatically what we were expected to do. We have hated ourselves,



because we have been compelled to 'love and care' "out of fear and domination". (32) A wage for that work would give us the power to direct our hatred away from ourselves and towards the destruction of capital.

New York, November 1974

## Notes

1. *Liberation*, Vol.18, No.8, May/June 1974, pp.8-11.
2. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Falling Wall Press, 3rd edition, Sept. 1975, pp.27-28.
3. See Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework*, Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975.
4. "We may have to be hazy in our visions. After all, a total reordering of sex and sexual roles and relationships is not easy to describe." (p.11) No worker is ever paid for her/his work, only for a (decreasing) portion of it. That is the essential feature of waged labour and capitalist exploitation.
5. "The demand to pay for housework comes from Italy, where the overwhelming majority of women in all classes still remain at home. In the United States, over half of all women *do* work." (p.9)
6. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Community, Factory and School from the Woman's Viewpoint', *L'Offensiva*, Musolini, Turin, 1972: "The *community* is essentially the *woman's place* in the sense that women *appear* and directly expend their labour there. But the factory is just as much *the place where is embodied the labour of women* who do not appear there and who have transferred their labour to the men who are the only ones to appear there. In the same way, *the school embodies the labour of women* who do not appear there but who have transferred their labour to the students who return every morning fed, cared for, and ironed by their mothers."
7. Lopate, p.9.
8. Dalla Costa and James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, pp.28-29.
9. Dalla Costa, 'Community, School and Factory from the Woman's Viewpoint'.
10. Lopate, p.9: "... it may well be that women need to be wage-earners in order to achieve the self-reliance and self-esteem which are the first steps toward equality."
11. Lopate, p.11.
12. We are now working on the birth of the nuclear family as a stage of capitalist relations.

13. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, p.41.
14. Lopate, p.11: "Most of us women who have fought in our own lives for such a restructuring have fallen into periodic despair. First, there were the old habits—the men's and ours—to break. Second, there were the real problems of time . . . Ask any man how difficult it is for him to arrange part-time hours, or for him to ask for special time schedules so that he can be involved equally in childcare!"
15. Ibid.
16. Lopate, p.11: "The essential thing to remember is that we are a SEX. That is really the only word as yet developed to describe our commonalities."
17. Ibid.
18. Lopate, p.10.
19. Ibid: "The elimination of the one large area of capitalist life where all transactions do not have exchange value would only serve to obscure from us still further the possibilities of free and unalienated labour."
20. Ibid: ". . . I believe it is in our private worlds that we keep our souls alive . . ."
21. *Capital*, Vol. 1, p.572.
22. See Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class*, Falling Wall Press and Race Today Publications, 1975.
23. Lopate, p.11.
24. Ibid.
25. See *Fortune*, Dec. 1974.
26. Lopate, p.9: "But the attraction of 'pay for housework' is not unlike the attraction of union demands: better wages, shorter hours, increased benefits. All of these are far easier to conceptualize and communicate to workers than the demand to change the nature of work itself, a goal which, even when packaged as 'workers' control,' is comparatively utopian and hard for workers to visualize."
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Lopate, p.10.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.

# Capital and the left

With its traditional blindness to the dynamics of class movements, the left has interpreted the end of a phase within the women's movement as the end of the movement itself. Thus, slowly but surely, they are trying to regain the political terrain which in the sixties they had been forced to relinquish. Now that the ground appears to be clear, we increasingly see them drop their 'feminist' mask and pour out those dearest beliefs which, though stifled by the movement's power, were never really snuffed out. And first and foremost among these is the belief that *they*, not women, are in the best position to decide what we really need and where the women's movement should go.

In the sixties, when women were leaving the leftist groups in droves, the left had to espouse the validity of autonomy. (They had already gone through the painful experience of complete repudiation by the autonomous black movement.) Reluctantly, they had to concede that women too are part of the revolution. They even went so far as to beat their breasts over their newly discovered sexism. But, most important, they learned to speak in respectful and even subdued tones. Now in the midst of what they perceive as a feminist funeral, their voices are raised again and this time not only to utter the final word, but to pass judgement on our achievements and shortcomings. Their story strikes us with a familiar ring. In the words of one of these self-appointed 'feminists': "women also need a socialist movement . . . and no movement that is composed only of women can substitute for this" (1), which means it was all very well while it lasted, but ultimately we have to be led by them. And in order to do that, they want first to re-establish the correct political line.

## The same old story

This line, of course, is nothing new. Once again we are told that serious politics is not kitchen business, and that our struggle to liberate ourselves as women—our struggle to destroy our work in the home, our relations in the family, the prostitution of our sexuality—is definitely subordinate, or at best auxiliary, to the ‘real class struggle’ in the factory. Not accidentally most of today’s leftist polemics against the autonomy of the women’s movement are devoted to denying that Wages for Housework is the feminist and therefore working class strategy in our struggle against capital. They realize that Wages for Housework means less work, less dependence, less blackmail, in one word, more power for women—and they are afraid of it. Why is this so?

One possible answer is that the men are afraid of losing their male ‘privileges’: if women have more money of their own, one day men might find their kitchens and beds empty. True as this might be, there is a deeper reason which has escaped us so far only because years of indoctrination have made us believe that the left is on the side of the working class. The reason why the left is actively trying to prevent us from gaining more power is not only that the men are male chauvinists, but that *the left are totally identified with the capitalist viewpoint*. The left, in all its varieties, is not interested in destroying capital, the surplus labour we are forced to do, but in making it more efficient. Their revolution is a reorganization of capitalist production which will rationalize our slavery rather than abolish it. This is why when the working class refuses work they immediately worry about ‘who will clean the streets’.

And this is why they always choose their ‘revolutionary agents’ from among those sectors of the working class whose work is most rationalized. Supposedly, the workers who most directly contribute to the accumulation of capital will be those most equipped to manage it. As André Gorz bluntly put it: “Factory workers are revolutionary because they are not afraid that with the revolution they will lose their jobs”. (2) That is, workers are revolutionary not in so far as they are against their exploitation, but in so far as they are producers, not in so far as they refuse work but in so far as they work. How far the working class is from this ‘viewpoint’ can be seen by the amount of energy the left spends in reproaching workers for their lack of ‘class consciousness’, i.e. ‘production consciousness’. The left is horrified by the fact that workers—male and female, waged and unwaged—want more money, more time for themselves, more power, instead of being concerned with figuring out how to rationalise production.

In our case, one thing is clear. The left attacks every struggle that might give women real power, because as primarily house-workers, we do not measure up to the 'productive role' they have assigned to the 'working class'. What this means has been best expressed by Wally Secombe in *New Left Review*:

Revolutionary transformation is only possible because the proletariat is engaged directly in socialized labour and therefore bears as a class the pre-requisite of a socialist mode of production. While the labour of housewives remains privatized, *they are unable to prefigure the new order nor spearhead the productive forces in breaking the old.* (our italics) (3)

Quite magnanimously, Secombe concedes that in time of capitalist crisis (i.e. when capital is already falling apart, supposedly on its own, independently of us), "mobilizations of housewives" around appropriate demands (e.g. price-watching committees) can make a "contribution" to the revolutionary struggle. "In such circumstances, it is not uncommon that objectively backward layers be thrown forward". But the fact remains that "housewives still will not provide the decisive motive force of the women's struggle". (4) Since *internationally* the overwhelming majority of women work first and above all as house-workers, this actually amounts to writing off women from any revolutionary process, or, in other words, *to completely accepting our exploitation.*

## The 'Chinese model'

It is not the first time that after the end of a struggle 'revolutionaries' have sent us back to the kitchen (now with the promise of 'sharing the housework'). If this process today appears less clearly it is only because, in complete harmony with capital's plans, the same hand that pushes us back home is also trying to push us into the factories (5) to 'join them' in the class struggle, or, more accurately, to get ourselves trained for our 'future role in production'. The long-term arrangement they have for us is what they call the Chinese model: socialization and rationalization of housework and self-management, self-control in the factory. Or, in other words, a bit more of the factory in the family (higher efficiency and productivity of housework) and a bit more of the family in the factory (more individual concern, responsibility, identification with work). In both cases, the left is espousing long-cherished capitalist utopias.

Self-management and self-control express the attempt to have the working class not only exploited, but participating in the planning of its own exploitation. It is no accident that capital uses the word 'alienation'

almost as often as the left and offers the same palliatives: 'job enrichment', 'workers' participation', 'workers' control', 'participatory democracy'. As for the rationalization and socialization of housework (canteens, dormitories etc.), capital has often toyed with this possibility, for in terms of pennies such rationalization might be a saving for capital.

This was the plan in Russia, where speeding up the reproduction of labour power, i.e. housework, to 'free' women's arms for the factories was one of the top priorities after the revolution. As in the dreams of the left, the guideline that inspired the socialist planners was a 'society of producers' where everything would be functional to production. From this viewpoint, the "house-commune", with its collective kitchens, diners, lavatories, dormitories etc., seemed the perfect solution to save money, space, time and "raise the quality and productivity of labour". (6) It was only because of the "obstinate resistance of the working masses" (7) that these projects were increasingly abandoned. Anatole Kopp reports a women's assembly in Novosibirsk to demand "even a whole 5 square meters, provided it is individual space"(8); and by 1930 the Bolshevik urban planners had to recognize that:

... everybody is disillusioned with the so-called 'house-commune' ... the 'commune-con' where a worker's room is only big enough to sleep in ... The 'commune-con' which cuts down living space and comfort (see the lines at the sinks, toilets, dressing rooms, diners ... ) is beginning to rouse the dissatisfaction of the working masses. (9)

Since the thirties, the Russian State has upheld the nuclear family as the most effective organism for disciplining workers and ensuring the supply of labour power, and also in China, despite a certain degree of socialization, the State supports the nuclear family. In any case, the Russian experiment demonstrated that *once the goal is production, work, the socialization of housework can only be a further regimentation of our lives*—as the examples of schools, hospitals, barracks etc., continuously teach us. And this socialization by no means does away with the family, it simply *extends it*, for example in the form of 'political and cultural committees' which exist at the community and factory level, as in Russia and China. In fact, given the factory, capital needs the family, or more specifically, the discipline of the former is premised on the discipline of the latter, and vice-versa. Nobody is born into this world a worker. This is why, whether dressed up in star-spangled banners or in hammers and sickles, at the heart of capital we always find the glorification of family life.

In the West, capital has been rationalizing and socializing housework

for many years. The State has been planning the size, living conditions, housing, policing, education, drugging, and indoctrination of the family on an ever increasing scale. And if it has not succeeded more than it has, it is because of the revolt of the wageless in the family—women and children. It is this revolt which has prevented the family from being more productive, and has made it at times counter-productive.

The left has been crying about this capitalist failure to discipline the family for a long time. As comrade Gramsci saw as early as 1919:

... All these factors make any form of regulation of sex and any attempt to create a new sexual ethic suited to the new methods of production and work extremely complicated and difficult. However, it is still necessary to attempt this regulation and to attempt to create a new ethic . . . The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized. (10)

Today the left is more cautious but not less determined to tie us to the kitchen, whether in its present form or in a more rationalized, productive one. They do not want to abolish housework, because they do not want to abolish factory work. In our case they would like us to do both kinds of work. Here, however, the left reflects exactly the same dilemma that today troubles capital: where can women be most productive, on the assembly-line or on the baby-line? Capital needs us in the factories as cheap labour, to replace other workers who are too expensive, but they also need us at home to keep potential trouble makers off the streets. The seeming difference between the Trotskyist line—housework is barbarism i.e. all women to the factories—and the libertarian line—housework is socialism i.e. no work should be paid—is only a difference in tactics within an overall capitalist strategy.

The libertarians maintain that housework escapes any social-economic categorization: “women’s domestic labour under capitalism is neither productive nor unproductive”—Lisa Vogel (11); “We may have to decide that housework is neither production nor consumption”—Carol Lopate (12); and “Housewives are and are not part of the working class”—Eli Zaretsky (13). They place housework outside of capital and claim it is ‘socially necessary labour’ because they believe that in one form or another it will be necessary also under socialism. So Lisa Vogel claims that domestic labour “. . . is primarily useful labour, it has the power, under the right conditions, [sic] to suggest a future society in which all labour would be primarily useful . . .” (14). This is echoed by Lopate’s vision of the family as the last retreat where “we keep our souls alive” (15),

and culminates with Zaretsky's assertion that "housewives are integral the working class and to the working class movement: not because they produce surplus value but because they perform socially necessary labour" (16).

In this context, we are not surprised to hear from Zaretsky that "the tension between them [feminism and socialism] . . . will continue well into the period of socialism . . . with the establishment of a socialist regime class conflict and social antagonism do not disappear, but instead often emerge in a sharper and clearer form." (17) Quite so: *if this type of 'revolution' occurs, we will be the first to struggle against it.*

\* \* \* \* \*

When day after day the left proposes what capital proposes it would be irresponsible not to call a club a club. The charge that Wages for Housework would institutionalize women in the home has come from every left bank. Meanwhile they rejoice that we are being institutionalized in the factory. At the moment when the women's movement gave power to the women institutionalized in both home and factory, the left rushed to channel this subversion into yet another indispensable capitalist institution: the trade unions. This has now become the left wave to the future.

With this pamphlet we want finally to differentiate ourselves from the left by a class line. The knife that draws the line is feminist, but what it divides are not men from women, but the technocracy from the working class it aims to supervise. We have been shy and backward not to have spoken so plainly before, but the left has blackmailed us with the charge of redbaiting (of being for the State if we are not for them) in the same way as the American State has blackmailed the rebellious with the charge of communism and the Russian State has blackmailed the rebellious with the charge of Trotskyism.

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT.

New York, May 1975

## Notes

1. Eli Zaretsky, 'Socialist Politics and the Family', *Socialist Revolution*, Vol. III, No. 19, Jan-March 1974.
2. From a speech given at a *Telos* conference, Buffalo, Fall 1970.



3. Wally Secombe, 'The Housewife and her Labour under Capitalism', *New Left Review*, No.83, Jan-Feb. 1974, p.23.
4. *Ibid.*, p.24.
5. See *Workers' Fight*, No. 79, Dec. 1974-Jan. 1975: "... if men can be factory fodder, why not women? ... If we want to take our place in the world, to affect its history, we have to leave the safe confines of our homes and go out into the factories ... and HELP TO TAKE THEM OVER!"
6. Anatole Kopp, *Citta e Rivoluzione*, Milan, Feltrinelli 1972, p.147 (translated from the French, *Ville et Revolution: Architecture et urbanisme sovietiques des annees vingt*, Paris, 1967).
7. *Ibid.*, p.160.
8. *Ibid.*, p.128.
9. *Ibid.*, p.267.
10. Antonio Gramsci, 'Americanism and Fordism', *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971—quoted in the Introduction to *Selected Sex-Pol Essays 1934-37* by Wilhelm Reich & Karl Teschitz, London, Socialist Reproduction, 1973, p.33.
11. Lisa Vogel, 'The Earthly Family', *Radical America*, Vol. 7, No. 4/5, July-Oct. 1973, p.28.
12. Carol Lopate, 'Women and Pay for Housework', *Liberation*, Vol. 18, No. 9, May-June 1974, p.11.
13. Zaretsky, 'Socialist Politics and the Family', p.89.
14. Vogel, 'The Earthly Family', p.26.
15. Lopate, 'Women and Pay for Housework', p. 10.
16. Zaretsky, 'Socialist Politics and the Family', p.89.
17. *Ibid.*, pp.83-84.



