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Crit Sociol 1999 25: 196

DOI: 10.1177/08969205990250020901

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CONSTRUCTING A THEORY OF CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY AND SOCIALIST FEMINISM

ZILLAH EISENSTEIN

I. *Introduction*

Radical feminists and male leftists, in confusing socialist women and socialist feminists, fail to recognize the political distinction between being a woman and being a feminist. But the difference between socialist women and socialist feminists needs to be articulated if the ties between radical feminism and socialist feminists are to be understood. The commitment of this paper is to make these important distinctions by articulating the growing efforts of socialist feminists to understand the mutual dependence of patriarchy and capitalism, an effort they are alone in making.

Although there are socialist women who are committed to understanding and changing the system of capitalism, socialist feminists are committed to understanding the system of power deriving from capitalist patriarchy. I choose this phrase, capitalist patriarchy, to emphasize the existing mutual dependence, of the capitalist class structure and male supremacy. Understanding this "interdependence" of patriarchy and capitalism is essential to the political analysis of socialist feminism. It becomes necessary to understand that patriarchy (as male supremacy) existed before capitalism and continues in post-capitalist societies. And yet to say that, within the present system of power, either patriarchy or capitalism causes the other is to fail to understand their present mutually reinforcing system and dialectical relationship, a relationship which must be understood if the structure of oppression is to be changed. Socialist feminism in this sense moves beyond singular Marxist analysis and isolated radical feminist theory. The capitalist class structure and the hierarchical sexual structuring of society are the problem.

Power is dealt with in a dichotomous way by socialist women and radical feminists. In these analyses, they see power as deriving from either one's sex or one's economic class position. The critique of power as it is rooted in the male/female distinction focuses most often on patriarchy. The critique of power as it is rooted in the bourgeoisie/proletariat distinction focuses on capitalism. One studies *either* the social relations of production *or* the social relations of reproduction,¹ domestic

or wage labor, the private *or* public realms, the family *or* the economy, ideology *or* material conditions, the sexual division of labor *or* capitalist class relations, as oppressive. Even though almost all women are implicated in both sides of these activities, “woman” is dealt with as though she were not. Such a conceptual picture of woman hampers one’s understanding of the complexity of her oppression. Dichotomy wins out over reality. I will attempt here to replace this dichotomous thinking with a dialectical approach.²

The synthesis of radical feminism and Marxist analysis is a necessary first step in formulating a cohesive feminist political theory. This new formulation, Socialist Feminism, is not a mere adding together of these two theories of power. It is rather a real mix of the interrelationships between capitalism and patriarchy as expressed through the sexual division of labor. To define capitalist patriarchy as the source of the problem is at the same time to suggest that socialist feminism is the answer. My discussion uses Marxist class analysis as the thesis, radical feminist patriarchal analysis as the antithesis, and from the two evolves the synthesis of socialist feminism. I will argue that the recognition of class analysis, patriarchal theory, and the dialectical method are supremely important in constructing socialist feminist theory.

II. *Thesis: Woman as Class*

a) *Marx: Revolutionary Ontology and Women’s Liberation*

The importance of Marxist analysis to the study of women’s oppression is two-fold. First, it provides a necessary class analysis for the study of power. Second, it provides a method of analysis which is historical and dialectical. Although the dialectic (as method) is most often connected to the study of class and class conflict, it can also be used to articulate the patriarchal relations of women’s existence and hence their revolutionary potential.

One can use the dialectic to clarify this potential because Marxist analysis provides the tools for understanding all power relations, and there is nothing about the dialectical and historical method which limits it only to understanding class relations. What I do here is utilize Marx’s analysis (class conflict), but also extract his method and apply it to dimensions of power relations to which he was not sensitive. In this sense I am using Marx’s method to expand our present understanding of material relations in capitalism to include material relations in capitalist patriarchy.

These relations are illuminated by Marx's theories of exploitation and alienation. I am particularly interested here in the method of analysis rather than in the content of Marx's discussion of alienation. By not reducing the analysis to class and class conflict, we can extend the dialectical method present in the theory of alienation to the particular revolutionary potential of women. This means that although the theory of alienation is inclusive of exploitation it should not be reduced to it.³

What is crucial for the application of Marx to the "woman question" is a way of thinking, which does not limit people's capacities to what society may force them to be. In his theory of alienation, expressed through his conception of "species being," Marx poses a revolutionary method of analysis. "Species beings" are those beings who ultimately reach their human potential for creative labor, social consciousness, and social living, through the struggle against capitalist society, and who fully internalize these capacities in communist society. This basic ontological structure defines one's existence alongside one's essence. Reality for Marx is thus more than mere existence. It embodies within it a movement toward human essence. This is not a totally abstract human essence, but rather an essence we can understand in historical contexts. "Species being" is the conception of what is possible for people in the unalienated society and which exists only as essence in capitalist society.

When extended to women, this revolutionary ontology suggests that the possibility of their freedom exists alongside their exploitation and oppression. This conflict between existence and essence lays the basis for revolutionary consciousness and activity. It allows an internally critical appraisal of any particular moment. Women's existence and essence have not merged in this society. But what she is today does not *determine* the outer limits of her capacities or potentialities. This analysis is the same for the alienated worker. While the worker is cut off from his/her creative abilities, s/he is still a creative being in terms of potential.

This contradiction of existence and essence lies both, therefore, at the base of the revolutionary proletariat, and the revolutionary woman. One's class position defines consciousness for Marx, but, if we utilize the revolutionary ontological method, it need not be limited to this. If we wish to say that women are defined in terms of their sex as well, patriarchal relations define their consciousness and have implications for their revolutionary potential as a result. The method—of posing revolutionary potential as it reflects conflicts between people's real conditions (existence) and their possibilities (essence)—can be extended to understand the patriarchal relations inhibiting the development of human

essence. The reality of social relations involves both capitalist class *and* patriarchal relations. In this sense, the conception of species life points to the revolutionary potential of men and women for Marx.

However, the social relations defining the potential for woman's revolutionary consciousness are more complex than Marx understood them to be. A more complex set of relations made species life unavailable to women, and that hence its actualization could not come through dismantling the class system alone. As a result, Marx's statements on women are limited in depth, since he never questioned patriarchy as the hierarchical sexual ordering of society. But his writings on women are important because of his commitment to uncover the tensions between species life and capitalist alienated forms of social experience for all human beings.

b) *Women's Exploitation in History*

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels discuss the division of labor in early pre-capitalist society in familial terms.

The division of labor "imposed by the family" is spoken of as natural; it is not reflective of the economic society which defines and surrounds it, but rather at this early historical stage it structures the society and its division of labor.

The first division of labor is the "natural" division of labor in the family through the sex act. The activity of procreation develops a division of labor, and it is through this act that the first appearance of property arises within the family. For Marx and Engels, this is when wife and child become the slaves of the husband

There are here seeds of an early, albeit crude, insight into the sexual division of labor. What weakens and finally limits the insight is that, for Marx and Engels, this division of labor deriving from the sex act is coincidental and *identical* with the birth of private property, i.e., "division of labor and private property are moreover identical expressions. . ."⁴ There is no notion here that inequalities might arise from the sex act itself. The family has no existence outside of the series of property relations. *The German Ideology* presents, then, a skeletal analysis of women's condition as it changes through material conditions. Although reproduction is acknowledged as the first source of the division of labor, it never receives any specific, examination in terms of its relationship to the capitalist division of labor. Reproduction and production are seen as one, as they come to be analyzed in relation to the capitalist division of labor in society.

According to Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the social organization of society is determined by production and the family.⁵ He repeats here the theme developed in *The German Ideology*: the “first division of labor is that between man and woman for child breeding.”⁶ And the first social antagonism arises with the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage.⁷ This latter point is apparently obvious to Engels. But what this antagonism is based on is never made clear. His claim is that the first class antagonism *accompanies* (arises with) the antagonism between man and woman. Ultimately he speaks of the conflict between man and woman as class conflict; the man is the bourgeoisie within the family, the wife the proletariat.⁸ But these (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) are positions of power deriving from one’s relation to the economic means of production, not the sex act of reproduction. The relations of reproduction are subsumed under the relations of production. It appears contradictory that Engels acknowledges male/female relations within the family as defining the division of labor in society, and yet completely subsumes them under categories of analysis related to production. He offers no explanation that could resolve this dilemma because it stands outside the terms of his analysis.

Thus the categories of analysis explaining the slavery of the woman in the family derive entirely from the relations of production. The family comes to be defined by the historical economic modes, rather than itself taking part in defining the economy as well as society. The flow has been reversed. The family is no longer spoken of as a source of the division of labor coincident with economic relations. Economic existence comes to determine the family.⁹ Hence Engels assumes that the family will disintegrate with the elimination of capitalism, instead of analyzing how the family itself comes to support an economic mode.

Most of the time Engels works from his simple equation: oppression equals exploitation. Class existence defines powerlessness for Engels, although he has the core for understanding that woman’s oppression is more complex than the system of exploitation. Even though Engels recognized that the family conceals domestic slavery, he believed at the same time that there were no differences (in kind) between domestic slavery and wage-slavery of the husband. They both were derived from capitalism.

The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production of a large-social scale and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time.¹⁰

The real equality of women will come for Engels with the end of exploitation by capital and the transference of private housework to public industry. Given the lack of understanding of the sexual division of labor, however, even if domestic work were made public, it most probably would remain, for Engels, woman's work.

In conclusion, then, we can see that the analysis sketched by Marx and Engels reveals their belief that the family, at least historically, structured the division of labor in society, and that in some sense this reflects the division of labor in the sex act.

This analysis is lost however through the discussion of the family in capitalist society, where the family comes to be viewed as just another part of the superstructure, totally reflective of class society. The relations of reproduction become subsumed under the relations of production. The point to be made is not that the family does not reflect society, but that through both its patriarchal structure and its patriarchal ideology the family, and the need for reproduction, structure society as well. This reciprocal relationship, between family and society, production and reproduction, defines the life of women. The study of women's oppression, then, must deal with both the sexual and economic material conditions if one is to understand oppression rather than merely understand economic exploitation.

While these criticisms are important in assessing the particular contribution of Marx and Engels, they by no means should prompt one to reject either their class analysis, or their ontological and historical method. The point rather is that the historical materialist method must be extended to incorporate women's relations to the sexual division of labor and society as producer and reproducer, as well as to incorporate the ideological¹¹ formulation of this relationship. Only then will her existence be understood in its true complexity and will species life be available to her too.

III. *Antithesis: Woman as Sex*

a) *Patriarchy and the Radical Feminists*

Although radical feminism is conventionally dated with the recent Women's Liberation Movement, around 1969–70, it has important historical ties to the liberal feminism¹² of Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Harriet Taylor Mill, who understood in their own fragmented way that men have power as men in a society organized into "sexual spheres." But while they spoke of power in caste terms,

they were only beginning to understand the *structure of power* enforced upon them through the sexual division of labor and society. And the necessary connections between sexual oppression, the sexual division of labor and society, and the economic class structure were not made.

Radical feminism today has a much more sophisticated understanding of sexual power than its feminist forebears, one that has replaced the struggle for the vote and legal reforms with the revolutionary demand for the destruction of patriarchy. It is the biological family, the hierarchical sexual division of society, and sex roles themselves which must be fundamentally reorganized. The sexual division of labor and society expresses the most basic hierarchical division in our society between masculine and feminine roles. It is the basic mechanism of control for patriarchal culture. It designates the fact that roles, purposes, activity, one's labor, are *determined* sexually. It expresses the very notion that the biological distinction, male/female, is used to distinguish social functions and individual power.¹³

In much the same way that radical feminists have found the analysis of Wollstonecraft, Stanton, and Taylor incomplete, they have found the politics and theories of the left insufficient. The existing radical analyses of society failed, in their view, to relate the structure of the economic class system to its origins in the sexual class system. Economic class did not seem to be at the center of their lives. History was perceived as patriarchal, and its struggles have derived as such from sex conflict. The battle lines are drawn between men and women, rather than between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The determining relation is to reproduction, not to production.

Radical feminism offers a criticism of patriarchy through the analysis of sex roles themselves. Patriarchy is defined to mean a sexual system of power in which the male role is superior in possession of power and economic privilege. Patriarchy is the male hierarchical ordering of society. Although the legal institutional base of patriarchy used to be more explicit, the basic relations of power have remained intact. The patriarchal system is preserved, via marriage and the family, through the sexual division of labor and society. Sex roles themselves are understood to be units of power and oppression. Woman's position in this power structure is defined as derived, not from the economic class structure, but from the autonomous patriarchal organization of society. As a power structure, patriarchy is rooted in biological reality rather than in an economic or historical one. Manifested through male force and control, the roots of patriarchy are located in women's reproductive selves.

Through this analysis, radical feminists bridge the dichotomy of the personal/public. Sex, as the personal, is the political as well. Women share their position of oppression because of the very politics of the society. And this is a sexual politics which gives privileges to men and oppresses women. The structuring of society through the sexual division limits the realm of activity, work, desires, and aspirations of women. "Sex is a status category with political implications."¹⁴

IV. *Synthesis: Socialist Feminism*

a) *Exploitation and Oppression*

Marxist analysis seeks an historical explanation of existing power relationships in terms of economic class relations, and radical feminism deals with the biological reality of power. Socialist feminism, on the other hand, analyzes power in terms of its class origins as well as its patriarchal roots. In such an analysis, capitalism and patriarchy are not simply autonomous systems but neither are they one and the same thing. They are mutually dependent.

As a socialist feminist, my argument here is that oppression and exploitation are not equivalent concepts as they were for Marx and Engels. Exploitation speaks to the economic reality of capitalist class relations whereas oppression refers to power as it is defined within patriarchal and capitalist relations. Exploitation is a descriptive assessment of men and women workers in the labor force in capitalist society; women's oppression reflects her exploitation if she is a wage-laborer within capitalism but at the same time reflects the relations which define her existence in the patriarchal sexual hierarchy which defines her as mother, domestic laborer, consumer. Power, or the converse—oppression—derives from both sex and class, and this is manifested through both the material and ideological dimensions of patriarchy and capitalism. Oppression is inclusive of exploitation but reflects a more complex reality. It reflects the hierarchical relations of the sexual division of labor and society.

This system of oppression, which connotes the *mutual dependence* of capitalism and patriarchy as they are presently practiced, is what I have chosen to call capitalist patriarchy. It is the contemporary expression of the relationship between these two systems, although the historical development of capitalist patriarchy can be dated from the mid-18th century in England and the mid-19th century in America. Both of these periods reflect the developing relationship between patriarchy and the

new industrial capitalism. Capitalist patriarchy, by definition, breaks through the dichotomies of class and sex, private and public, domestic and wage labor, family and economy, personal and political, ideology and material conditions.

Marx and Engels saw man's oppression existing in his exploited position as worker in capitalist society. They assumed that woman's existence was parallel to this. They equated the two when suggesting that domestic slavery was the same, in nature and essence, as wage-slavery.

Today, especially with the insights of radical feminism, we see not only that the equation of exploitation and oppression is problematic, but also that, if one uses Marx's own categories of productive labor as wage labor, domestic slaves are not "exploited" in the same way as wage-slaves. They would have to be paid a wage for this to be true. Women as domestic laborers have no direct relation to wages even if the basic stealing of one's labor (though this takes different forms) is parallel between the two.

The reduction of oppression to exploitation within Marxist analysis rests upon the equation between the economic class structure and the structure of power in society. I, however, differ with this assessment in that I believe that women's oppression is rooted in more than her class position (her exploitation), and that one must address as well her position within patriarchy—both structurally and ideologically—to fully understand woman's oppression. It is the particular relation and operation of the hierarchical sexual ordering of society within the class structure, or the understanding of the class structure within the sexual ordering of society, which focuses upon human activity in capitalist patriarchy. They exist together and cannot be understood when falsely isolated. It is important to note here that in dealing with these questions, one breaks down the division between material existence (economic or sexual) and ideology. This is because the sexual division of labor and society, which lays the basis for patriarchy as we know it, has both material form (sex roles themselves) and ideological reality (the stereotypes, myths, and ideas which define these roles). They exist in an internal web.

If women's existence is defined by capitalism and patriarchy through their ruling ideologies and institutions, then an understanding of capitalism alone (or patriarchy in isolation) will not deal with the problem of women's oppression. As Juliet Mitchell has written, "the overthrow of the capitalist economy and the political challenge that effects this do not in themselves mean a transformation of patriarchal ideology."¹⁵ The overthrow does not necessitate the destruction of patriarchal institutions,

either. Although practiced differently in each place, the sexual division of labor exists in the Soviet Union, in Cuba, in China. As we can see, patriarchy is cross-cultural by definition though it is actualized differently in different societies via the institutionalizing of sexual hierarchy. The contours of sex roles may differ societally but power has and does reside with the male.

Today patriarchy,¹⁶ the power of the male through these sexual roles in capitalism, is institutionalized in the nuclear family. Juliet Mitchell ties this to the "law of the prehistoric murdered father."¹⁷ In finding the certain root of patriarchy in this mythic crime among men at the dawn of our life as a social group, Mitchell risks discussing patriarchy more in terms of the ideology patriarchy produces, rather than in terms of its connection to its material formulation in the confrontation between man and woman. She roots the Oedipus complex in the universal patriarchal culture. Culture however is defined for her in terms of an exchange system which primarily exists in ideological form today. For Mitchell, patriarchy precedes capitalism through the universal existence of the Oedipus complex.

I contend, however, that patriarchy precedes capitalism through the existence of the sexual ordering of society which derives from ideological and political interpretations of biological difference. In other words, men have chosen to interpret and politically use the fact that women are the reproducers of humanity. And arising from both this fact of reproduction and the political control of it, we have the relations of reproduction arising in a particular formulation of woman's oppression. Although there is a patriarchal culture which is carried over from one historical period to another to protect the sexual hierarchy of society, I question whether the Oedipus complex is the tool by which really to understand this culture. Today the sexual division of society is based on real differences that accrue from years of ideological pressure. Material conditions define necessary ideologies and ideologies in their turn have impact on reality and alter reality. There is a two-way flow here. Women are products of their social history, and yet women can shape their own lives as well.

In socialist feminism, historical materialism is not defined in terms of the relations of production without understanding its connection to the series of relations that arise from woman's sexuality which are tied to the relations of reproduction.¹⁸ And the ideological formulations of these relations are key here. An understanding of feminist materialism must direct us to an understanding of the particular existence of women in

capitalist patriarchy. The general approaches of both Marxists, in terms of class, and radical feminists, in terms of sex, obfuscate the reality of power relations in women's lives.

b) *Pioneers in Feminist Materialism: de Beauvoir and Mitchell*

Simone de Beauvoir confronts the interrelationship between sexuality and history in *The Second Sex*. She states that "the division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history."¹⁹ And yet she goes on to say "that we must view the facts of biology in the light of an ontological, economic, social, and psychological context."²⁰ She understood that women were defined by men and as such cast in the role of the "other", but she also realized that the sexual monism of Freud and the economic monism of Engels²¹ were inappropriate for the full analysis of women's oppression.

De Beauvoir's initial insights were further developed by Juliet Mitchell in her *Woman's Estate*. In this important book Mitchell²² offered a rigorous criticism of classical socialist theory, criticizing it for locating woman's oppression too narrowly in the family and in an undifferentiated manner. She rejects the reduction of woman's problem to her incapacity to work,²³ which stresses her simple subordination to the institutions of private property.²⁴

What Mitchell does instead is to define four basic structures in which woman's powerlessness is rooted. These "structures" of (a) production, (b) reproduction, (c) sexuality, and (d) socialization of children define the four-dimensional existence of women in capitalist society. To be able to cope with the series of oppressions women experience, Mitchell thinks it first necessary to differentiate among them. Reproduction is the "natural" role in producing children. The biological function of maternity is a universal, atemporal fact²⁵ which has come to define woman's existence. Woman is socializer in that "woman's biological destiny as mother becomes a cultural vocation in her role as a socializer of children."²⁶ The causal flow which Mitchell constructs of woman's oppressive existence derives from woman's capacity as reproducer and its connected consequences for her social and economic activity. Woman's biological capacity defines her social and economic purpose. Maternity has set up the family as an historical necessity, and the family has become woman's world. Hence woman is excluded from production and public life, which results in sexual inequality and in woman's resulting powerlessness.

The four structures are meant to be inclusive of women's activity. Production or work is activity which exists both within and outside the

family. Reproduction most often takes place within the family structure, whereas the structure of sexuality affects women in all areas of life. The socialization of children which is done by mothers is located within the family, although socialization takes place at all times. Mitchell locates woman's oppression through structures which, though not limited to the family, do not exclude it. Both the family and society in general are implicated in woman's oppression. Thus Mitchell is led to conclude that, by focusing on the destruction of the family, one does not necessarily substantially alter woman's situation. For Mitchell, "socialism would properly mean not the abolition of the family but the diversification of the socially acknowledged relationships which are forcibly and rigidly compressed into it."²⁷

Mitchell analyzes the family in capitalism as a supportive pillar to woman's oppressive condition, in terms of its support both of capitalism and of the sexual division of labor and society. According to her, capitalism sees conflict and disruption as very much a part of people's lives. The family provides the affection bonds and a medium of calm for life to be maintained amidst the disruption. The family supports capitalism economically in that it provides a productive labor force at the same time that it supplies the market with an arena for massive consumption.²⁸ The family also performs an ideological role in that it cultivates the notions of individualism, freedom, and equality basic to the belief structure of society, albeit they are at odds with social and economic reality.²⁹

The importance of Mitchell's analysis consists in her picturing of the different dimensions of woman's activity without denying her sexuality or her class oppression. She focuses on the very powerlessness that women experience because they are reproductive beings, sexual beings, working individuals, and socializers of children. She makes it clear that woman's oppression is based in part on the support the family gives the capitalist system in trapping woman in sexual and class oppression via these different structures. In this analysis, power is seen in its more complex reality. We are still left, however, with the basic problem of clarifying the relationship of the family and the political economy in capitalist patriarchal society.

c) *The Sexual Division of Labor and Society in Capitalist Patriarchy: Towards a New Feminist Theory*

One of the critical problems in trying to construct a persuasive argument about the interconnections of patriarchy and capitalism is that the language at hand (the family vs. the economy) treats them as separate

systems. In order to avoid this false separation I will discuss how patriarchy and capitalism operate within the sexual division of labor and society, rather than within the family. As the most basic definition of people's activity, purposes, goals, desires, and dreams, according to their biological sex, the sexual division of labor and society is at the structural and ideological base of patriarchy and capitalism. It divides men and women into their respective hierarchical sex roles and structures their related duties in the family domain and within the economy.

This statement of the mutual dependence of patriarchy and capitalism not only assumes the malleability of patriarchy to the needs of capital but assumes the malleability of capital to the needs of patriarchy. In other words, when one states that capitalism needs patriarchy in order to operate efficiently one is really noting the way in which male supremacy, as a system of sexual hierarchy, supplies capitalism (and systems previous to it) with the necessary order and control. As such, this patriarchal system of control is necessary to the smooth functioning of society and of the economic system, and hence should not be undermined. This argument is to underscore the importance of the system of cultural, social, economic, and political control that emanates from the system of male supremacy. To the extent that the concern with profit and the concern with societal control are inextricably connected (but cannot be reduced to each other), patriarchy and capitalism become an *integral process*, with specific elements of their own system necessitated by the other.

Capitalism uses patriarchy . . . and patriarchy is defined by the needs of capital. This statement does not undermine the above claim that, at the same time that one system uses the other, it must organize around the needs of the other in order to protect the specific quality of the other. Otherwise the other system will lose its specific character and with it its unique value. If I were to state this as simply as possible I could say that patriarchy (as male supremacy) provides the sexual hierarchical ordering of society for political control, and as a political system cannot be reduced to its economic structure; while capitalism, as an economic class system driven by the pursuit of profit, feeds off the patriarchal ordering. Together they form the political economy of the society; not merely one or another, but a particular blend of the two.

There are problems with this oversimplified statement. Mainly it severs relations which exist within both spheres. For instance, capitalism has a set of controls which emanate directly from the economic class relations of society and their organization in the work place. Moreover,

this example it seems to assume a harmony between the two systems at all points, whereas an uneasy relation between the two systems seems to be appearing as we move further into advanced capitalism. This conflict appears in some sense in the conflicting pulls on women between their employers and their husbands. The role of women in the labor force does seem to undermine some of the control of patriarchal relations, as the double day becomes more obvious. The ghettoization of women in the labor force, however, does maintain a system of hierarchical control of women, both sexually and economically, which leaves the sexual hierarchy of society intact. And deference to patriarchal hierarchy and control is shown in the very fact that the search for cheap labor has not led to a full integration of women into all parts of the labor force. Although women's labor is cheaper, the system of control which maintains both the necessary order of the society and, with it, the cheapness of women's labor must be protected by segregating women in the labor force. The *justification*, however, for women's double day and unequal wages is less well protected today.

Although the sexual division of labor and society antedates capitalism, it has come to be further institutionalized and specifically defined through the nuclear family in terms of the needs of advanced capitalism. It now has much more form and structure than it did in pre-capitalist societies.³⁰ In pre-capitalist society, the home was defined as the producing economic unit. Men, women, and children worked together in the home, the farm, or the land to produce the goods necessary for their lives. Women still were procreators and child raisers, but the necessities and organization of work *limited the impact* of this sexual role distinction. This is not to say that sexual equality existed, but rather to point to the importance of understanding the specific structure and use of the sexual division of labor today.

With the rise of industrial capitalism, men were brought out of the home into the wage-labor economy, disrupting the earlier organization of labor. Women became relegated to the home and viewed as non-productive. They were now viewed *solely* in terms of the previous loosely defined sex roles. Although women were "mothers" before industrial capitalism, this was not an exclusive role, whereas with industrial capitalism women became "housewives." "The housewife emerged, alongside the proletariat—the two characteristic laborers of developed capitalist society."³¹ The work that women continued to perform in the home was not conceived of as work. Productive labor was now defined as wage-labor. It was labor which produces surplus profit—capital.

In sheer quantity, household labor, including child care, constitutes a huge amount of socially necessary production. Nevertheless, in a society based on commodity production, it is not usually considered “real work” since it is outside of trade and the market place.³²

The conditions of production in society, then, define and shape production, reproduction, and consumption in the family. So, too, the family mode of production, reproduction, and consumption affects commodity production. They work together to define the political economy. Within a capitalist patriarchal economy—where profit, which necessitates a system of political order and control, is the basic priority of the ruling class—the sexual division of labor and society serves a specific purpose. It stabilizes the society through the family while it organizes a realm of work, as domestic labor, for which there is either no pay (housewives), or limited pay (paid houseworkers), or unequal pay (in the paid labor force). This last category shows the ultimate connection of women as affected by the sexual division of labor within the class structure. Her position as a paid worker is defined in terms of being a “woman,” which is a direct reflection of the hierarchical sexual divisions in a society organized around the profit motive.

All of the processes involved in domestic work help in the perpetuation of the existing society. (1) Women stabilize patriarchal structures (the family, housewife, mother, etc.) by fulfilling their very roles. (2) Simultaneously, women are reproducing new workers, for both the paid and unpaid labor force. They “care” for the men and children of the society. (3) They work as well in the labor force, for lesser wages. (4) They stabilize the economy through their role as consumers. And this role is perpetuated very specifically through patriarchal institutions and ideology. If the other side of production is consumption, the other side of capitalism is patriarchy.

It is important to note the discrepancy between patriarchal ideology and the material reality of women’s lives. Although all women are defined as mothers (and non-workers) as a group, close to 45% of the women in the United States work in the paid labor force, and almost all labor in the home. Today 38.6 million women hold jobs in the labor force.

Because women, however, are not defined as workers within the ruling ideology, women are not paid for their labor, or are paid less than men. The sexual definition of woman as mother keeps her in the home doing unpaid labor, and/or enables her to be hired at a lower wage because of her sexual definition of inferiority. Given high unemployment rates, they either do not find jobs or are paid at even a lower rate. The sexual division of labor and society remains intact even with women in

the paid economy. Ideology adjusts to this by defining women as working mothers. And the two jobs get done for less than the price of one.

The bourgeoisie profits from the basic arrangement of women's work, as do all individual men, who benefit in terms of labor done for them in the home. All men, regardless of class, benefit, although differentially, from the system of privileges they acquire within patriarchal society. This could not be organized as such if the ideology and structures of sex roles were not basic to the society. It is this which largely protects the sexual division of labor and society along with the artificial needs that have been created through the class system.

When the ruling class desires the preservation of the family, this reflects its commitment to a division of labor which not only secures the greatest profit, but which also hierarchically orders the society culturally and politically. Once the sexual division of labor is challenged, particularly in terms of its connection to the capitalist order, one of the basic forms of the organization of work will be challenged. This challenge endangers a free labor pool (which infiltrates almost all aspects of living) and a cheap labor pool, and also endangers the fundamental social and political organization of the society, which is sexual hierarchy itself. The very order and control which derive from the arrangements of power implied in the sexual organization of society will be destroyed.

If we realize that there are basically two kinds of work in capitalist society, wage labor and domestic labor, we realize we must alter the way we think-about workers. What is really needed at this point is further work on what class analysis specifically means for women. What does it mean to say that a middle class woman's life is different and easier than a working class woman's life when her status is significantly different from her middle class male "equivalent"? What of the woman who earns no money at all (as houseworker) and is termed middle class because her husband is? Does she have the same freedom, autonomy, or control over her life as one attributes to the middle class man who earns his own way? How does her position compare to a single woman with a poorly paying job?

I do not mean by these questions to imply that class labels are meaningless, or that class privilege does not exist among women, or that housewives (houseworkers) are a class in themselves. What I am suggesting is that we must develop a vocabulary and conceptual tools which deal with the question of differential power among women in terms of their relation to men *and* the class structure. Only then will we see what effect this has on our understanding of organizing women.

Categories for Feminist Class Analysis

	Reproduction	Child Rearing	Maintenance of home	Sexuality	Consumption
Unemployed women					
Welfare women					
Houseworkers (housewives)					
Working women outside of home—non-professional					
Working women outside of home—professional					
Wealthy women who do not work (even in their own home)					

A feminist class analysis must begin with distinctions drawn among women in terms of the work they do within the political economy as a whole (the family and the paid labor force). This would involve making distinctions among (1) working women outside the home, distinguishing professional from nonprofessional; (2) houseworkers, distinguishing housewives from wealthy women who do not work; (3) women who are houseworkers (housewives) and also work outside the home; (4) welfare women; and (5) unemployed women. Whether a woman is (a) married, (b) single, or (c) divorced also is important in analyzing how her work defines her class position. These class distinctions need to be further defined in terms of the issue of race.³³

We then need to study how women within these categories relate to the major activities of women in terms of the shared experience of women (rather than in terms of the class differentiations among them)—reproduction, child rearing, sexuality, consumption, maintenance of home. What we will discover in this exploratory feminist class analysis, then, is a complicated and varied pattern, whose multi-gridded conceptualization mirrors the complexity of sex and class differentials in the reality of women's life and experience (see chart).

The model with which we would be working would direct attention to class differences within the context of the basic relationship between the sexual hierarchy of society and capitalism. Hopefully, the analysis of socialist feminism can continue to explore the relationships between these systems, which in essence are not separate systems, and hence need to be dealt with in their internal web. Hopefully, also, such an examination should serve one overriding objective of the liberation of woman. It should seek to realize her potential for living in social community, rather than in isolated homes; her potential for creative work, rather than alienating or mindless work; her potential for critical consciousness as opposed to false consciousness; and her potential for uninhibited sexuality arising from new conceptions of sexuality.

d) *Some Notes on Strategy*

What does all of the preceding imply about a strategy for revolution? It implies that the existing conceptions of revolutionary strategy are inadequate and need rethinking. First, the existing conceptions of a potentially revolutionary proletariat are inadequate for the goals of socialist feminism. Second, there are severe problems with this potential, as defined in classical Marxian terms, ever becoming real in the United States. And although I think the development of theory and strategy should be interrelated, I see them as somewhat separate activities. Theory allows you to think about new possibilities. Strategy grows out of the possibilities.

This paper has been devoted to developing socialist feminist theory and I am hesitant to develop statements of strategy from it. Strategy will rather have to be fully articulated from the political attempts at using the theory. When one tries abstractly to define strategy from new and developing statements of theory, the tendency to impose existing revolutionary strategies on reality is too great. Existing formulations of strategy tend to limit and distort new possibilities for organizing for revolutionary change.

The importance of socialist feminist strategy, to the extent that it exists, is that it grows out of women struggling with their daily existence—production, reproduction, children, consumption, jobs. The potential for revolutionary consciousness derives from the fact that women's lives under capitalist patriarchy are being squeezed from the most intimate levels, such as how they feed their children, to the more public levels of their monotonous, tiring, low-skill, sex-defined, low-wage jobs. Women are working in the labor force, and for less, and they are

maintaining the family system, having less to make do with. This is the base from which consciousness can develop. Women need to try organizing political action and developing political consciousness about our oppression within the hierarchical sexual division of society and from an understanding of how this connects to the capitalist division of labor. Or consciousness will develop then from our everyday lives. I agree with Nancy Hartsock when she states:

Thus the power of feminism grows out of contact with everyday life. The significance of contemporary feminism is in the reinvention of a mode of analysis which has the power to comprehend and thereby transform everyday life.³⁴

One has to ask whose everyday life we are speaking about. Although there are real and severing differences among women's everyday lives, there are also points of contact that lay a basis for cross-class organizing. These differences must be acknowledged and struggled with for a sense of political *priority*. The commonality among women derives from the particular roles women share in patriarchy. From this commonality begins the feminist struggle.

Many of the socialist feminist women I have worked with in the women's movement were radical feminists first. They first felt their oppression and women and then, as they came to understand that capitalism was fully implicated in this system of oppression, became committed to socialism as well. Similarly, there are more and more women as housewives who are coming to understand their daily lives as part of a much larger system. Women working outside the home, both professional and unprofessional, who bear the pressures and anxieties about being competent mothers, and caretakers of the home, are becoming conscious of their "double day" of work.

Male leftists and socialist women often say that women, as women, cannot be organized because of their isolation in the home, the privatization of their lives, their commitments to their husbands' class. But a strategy to reach all women, regardless of class, has never been tried in a self-conscious manner. That its implementation will be difficult goes without saying. But a beginning is already in process as women try to take some control over their lives.

Notes

The original version of this article appeared in *The Insurgent Sociologist* 7:3 (Summer, 1977), pp. 3–17.

1. Sheila Rowbotham, in *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), makes clear that the social relations of production as well as reproduction need to be dealt with in any revolutionary theory.

2. For our purposes here, dialectics helps us focus on the *processes* of power. Hence, in order to understand power, one needs to analyze the *relations* which define power rather than treating it as a thing abstracted from the real conditions of society. Any “moment” embodies the relations of power which define it. The only way to understand what the “moment” is, is to understand it as a reflection of the processes involved in it. By definition, this requires one to see “moments” as part of other “moments” rather than as cut off from each other. Seeing things in separation from each other, as part of either/or options, reflects the dichotomous thinking of positivism. By trying to understand the elements defining the synthesis of power embodied in any moment, one is forced to come to terms with the conflict embodied within it, and hence the dialectical processes of power. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, ed. by Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), and Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

3. I do not think the Althusserian dichotomized view of the “early Hegelian Marx” and the later “materialist Marx” is a helpful distinction. Rather, I think the theories of alienation and exploitation are integrated throughout Marx's work although they are given different priority in specific writings. The *Grundrisse* stands as persuasive proof of this position. See Marx, *Grundrisse*, *op. cit.*, and David McLellan's discussion of the importance of the *Grundrisse* in his *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York, Harper & Row, 1973).

4. Marx, *German Ideology*, *op. cit.* pp. 21, 22.

5. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1942). Engels' analysis differentiates three historical periods—savagery, barbarism, and civilization—within which he traces the evolution of the family. The form of marriage coincident with savagery is group marriage. The family here is a group and the only limitation on it is the prohibition of sexual activity between parents and children, and between children. With such an arrangement one can be certain only who the mother is, and hence the line of inheritance is through the mother. This is termed the era of mother right. In the second period of barbarism the pairing marriage develops. The male line becomes more important and the defeat of mother right is imminent. With civilization comes monogamy; marriage and the family are based on private property.

The transition through these stages involved, according to Engels, catastrophic transformation in the lives of women. It saw the “overthrow of mother right which was the world historic defeat of the female sex” Engels, “Early Development,” *op. cit.*, p. 75). Woman was relegated to the private household and the breeding of children. Parallel to this was the increase of wealth in society, which “made the man's position in the family more important than the woman's and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow in favor of his children, the traditional order of inheritance” Engels, *Origins*, *op. cit.*, p. 14. For Engels, history has been the retrogression of women's power from mother right in primitive communism to her subordination in the second stage of barbarism. However, for all that Engels explains *how* and *why* the switch from group sex to monogamous sex happens, it could be the structuring element of history as much as the relations of private property are. He really asserts rather than argues his position that private property relations necessitate monogamy.

6. Engels, “Early Development,” *op. cit.*, p. 65.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

8. Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, *op. cit.*

9. See Eli Zaretsky, "Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life," *Pants I and II, Socialist Revolution*, Nos. 13-14 (pp. 69-125) and 15 (pp. 19-70), January-April and May-June, 1973, for a discussion of the historical and economic changes in the family.

10. Engels, *Origin of the Family*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

11. Ideology is used in this paper to refer to the ruling ideas of the society (see Marx, *German Ideology*, *op. cit.*). In this sense it is seen as a distortion of reality and as protective of existing power arrangements. More specifically, ideology is the ideas which protect both male and capitalist power arrangements. It is important to note here that although material conditions often do create the conditions for certain ideologies, I also see ideology and material conditions in a dialectical relationship. They are both involved in *partially* defining the other. For instance, the "idea" that women are weak and passive is both a distortion of women's capacities, and a partial description of reality—a reality *defined by* the ruling ideology.

12. The definition of liberal feminism applies to the reformist understanding of the sexual division of labor. It is a theory which reflects a criticism of the limitations of sex roles but does not comprehend the connection between sex roles and the sexual division of labor and capitalism. Limited by the historical boundaries of the time, early liberal feminists were unable to decipher the capitalist male power structure and instead applauded values which implicated them further within it. They were bound not only by the material conditions of the time (lack of birth control, etc.), but also by the liberal ideology of the time, which presented segmented, individualistic conceptions of power.

13. For classical versions of the sexual division of labor see J.S. Mill, *On the Subjection of Women* (New York: Fawcett, 1971), and J.J. Rousseau, *Emile* (London: J.J. Dent & Sons, 1911).

14. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 24.

15. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 414. Within the women's movement today there is a varied dialogue in progress on the dimensions and meaning of Socialist Feminism. In some sense, the appropriate questions are still being formulated. Juliet Mitchell spoke to this issue in *Woman's Estate* (New York: Pantheon, 1971) when she said, "we should ask the feminist questions, but try to come up with some Marxist answers" (p. 99), in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, *op. cit.*, she still is trying to define the "important" questions. "It seems to me that 'why did it happen' and 'historically when?' are both false questions. The questions that should, I think, be asked in place of these are: how does it happen and when does it take place in our society?" (pp. 364-365). In other words, we can start by asking how does it happen now?

16. Sheila Rowbotham, in *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), defines patriarchal authority as "based on control over the woman's productive capacity and over her person" (p. 17). Juliet Mitchell sees patriarchy as defining women as exchange objects based on the exploitation of their role as propagators (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 407-408). Hence, she states, "it is not a question of changing (or ending) who has or how one has babies. It is a question of overthrowing patriarchy" (*ibid.*, p. 416).

17. See Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, *op. cit.*

18. See Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, *op. cit.*, for the usage of this model of historical materialism in the study of history.

19. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1952), p. xix.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

22. Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," Free Press pamphlet, and *Woman's Estate*, *op. cit.*

23. Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," *op. cit.*, p. 4. It has been pointed out that Mitchell herself did not fully understand women's essential role in society as

workers. She termed them a marginal or reserve labor force rather than viewing them as necessary to the economy, both as domestic laborers and as wage laborers.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 28. It is interesting to note that Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, *op. cit.*, focuses on the relationship *between* families as key to understanding women in patriarchal culture. It is the relationship between families which distinguishes human society from other primate groups (p. 374). "The legally controlled exchange of women is the primary factor that distinguishes mankind from all other primates, from a cultural standpoint" (p. 372). It is hence socially necessary for the kinship structure to have exogamous exchange. The psychology of patriarchy that Mitchell constructs is based on the relations of the kinship structure.

28. Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

30. See Linda Gordon, "Families," Free Press pamphlet; A. Gordon, M.J. Buhle, and N. Schrom, "Women in American Society," *Radical America* 5:4, July–August 1971; Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, *op. cit.*; Mary Ryan, *Womanhood in America* (New York: Viewpoints, 1975); R. Baxandall, L. Gordon, and S. Reverby, *America's Working Women* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); and Zaretsky *op. cit.*

31. Zaretsky, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

32. Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," New England Free Press pamphlet, p. 15.

33. Although I have not dealt specifically with the issue of race in this paper, it is in integral part of the analysis of socialist feminism. The question of race has fallen outside the scope of this particular paper, in its examination of the relationship between sex and class, but I think that the question of race is absolutely fundamental to an understanding of woman's class and sexual identity. To the extent that this paper does not include the discussion of race, it is an incomplete study of the specificity of women's oppression.

34. Nancy Hartsock, "Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy," unpublished manuscript, Johns Hopkins University, 1976, p. 19. Portions of this paper appeared as "Fundamental Feminism, Process and Perspective," *Quest* 2, Fall 1975, pp. 67–79.